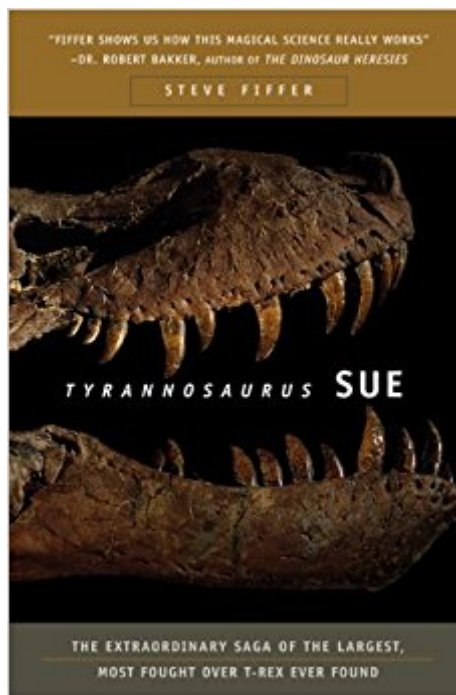




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Tyrannosaurus Sue: The Extraordinary Saga Of The Largest, Most Fought Over T-Rex Ever Found



Synopsis

Over 65 million years ago in what is now South Dakota, a battle-scarred Tyrannosaurus rex matriarch -- perhaps mortally wounded in a ferocious fight -- fell into the riverbed and died. In 1990 her skeleton was found, virtually complete, in what many have called the most spectacular dinosaur fossil discovery to date. And then another battle began -- a "survival of the fittest" free-for-all involving commercial dinosaur hunters, gun-toting law officers, an ambitious federal prosecutor, a Native American tribe, jealous academics, an enterprising auction house, major museums, and corporate giants, all making their claim for the dinosaur named Sue. Before it was over, there would be claims and counterclaims; charges of checkbook-polluted science, criminal larceny, and vengeful prosecutions; and devastating prison terms. And the gavel would come down on the largest-ever (\$8.36 million) auction price tag for a fossil, paid by Chicago's Field Museum, with help from Disney and McDonald's. Capturing the whole range of characters and issues embroiled in the fight for Sue, Steve Fiffer communicates both the excitement over Sue's discovery and the motivations, maneuverings, and absurdities of the various forces attempting to control her destiny.

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Customer Reviews

How much is that T. Rex in the window? Journalist Steve Fiffer looks at the most contentious paleontological find ever in Tyrannosaurus Sue. This scientific, sociological, and legal study is entertaining and insightful, highlighting the personalities of the researchers, attorneys, and tribal and federal authorities who struggled for years over the ownership rights to the best-preserved Rex specimen yet found. From its discovery in South Dakota in 1990 by Susan Hendrickson and Peter

Larson through the tortuous court cases to decide its fate to the final auction at Sotheby's, Fiffer finds just the right words to describe the action, a difficult task given the conflicting reports of contesting witnesses. Professional jealousy and academic elitism (or concern for valuable scientific material and Indian property rights) led to accusations of illegal collecting and the seizure of the skeleton by federal agents shortly after its move to Larson's Black Hills Institute. Suits, countersuits, and indictments escalated the struggle into an all-out war with vast sums of money and professional reputations at stake. In the end, Larson was imprisoned as an example to illegal collectors despite his sincere belief that he had worked within the law, and Sue was awarded to property owner Maurice Williams and purchased for \$8 million by Chicago's Field Museum with the assistance of the McDonald's and Disney corporations. *Tyrannosaurus Sue* is a riveting tale, well-written and just unsettling enough to provoke thought and discussion. --Rob Lightner

Everyone seems to love dinosaurs, and almost everyone loves to watch big public fights, especially when they involve piles of money, the FBI and jail. Journalist Fiffer (*Three Quarters, Two Dimes and a Nickel*) has therefore found the ideal topic for a short, racy nonfiction narrative, one that combines the history of a science (dinosaur paleontology) with the dramatic twists of a legal thriller. In 1990, the diligent, scrappy South Dakota fossil-hunters Sue Hendrickson and Peter Larson dug up an exceptional *T. rex*--only the 12th tyrannosaur ever found, and the biggest and best-preserved to date. Larson paid rancher Maurice Williams (on whose land the beast was found) \$5,000 for the fossil--nicknamed "Sue"--and announced his plans to build a museum around it. Williams then said he still owned the find, while a nearby Sioux tribe claimed it did, since Sue had perhaps been unearthed from tribal land. Larson awoke to find federal agents carting away all his papers, along with his giant prize fossil--arguably jeopardizing a priceless discovery, and certainly angering nearby South Dakotans. The ensuing legal, political and scientific imbroglio set Native Americans against the federal government, the government against itself, the feds against established scientists and the world's great research universities against independent operators like Larson. Fiffer's thorough account should prove irresistible to readers with even a marginal interest in the legendary lizards--or in the less-sexy topics raised by this particular find, from Upper Midwest tribal disputes to pretrial publicity and the conduct of prosecutions. Agent, Gail Hochman. Author tour. (May) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I was quite excited to read this book, as I am a big fan of dinosaurs and wanted to learn more about them, especially Sue. I have to say, although it is probably a great book, I couldn't get into it. It's

relatively short, but there is a lot of information packed in there. I just felt like the author was very quickly mentioning people and occurrences and events. It became difficult to remember who is who and why and what is going on. Just crammed all that information in too quick. I couldn't keep up!

Very interested book. I would recommend it to friends to read.

serve the purposed well, little pricy

was in very good shape

When I purchased this book, it was listed as used in "good condition." I would hate to see what they think is fair or poor condition. The book's cover was held together by tape! I purchased this for my father who likes getting used gifts, but I couldn't even give him this one. I would avoid this seller in the future.

Discovered by Sue Hendrickson and Peter Larson (president of the Black Hills Institute of Geological Research) in the wastelands of South Dakota, the largest T-Rex had survived millions of years, Sue's last meal was some kind of platypus. She was also the subject of multiple lawsuits and a Sotherby's auction. (She sold for millions and Larson could only participate from his house where he was under house arrest.) Larson wound up in prison, Sioux Indians claimed ownership, the government claimed ownership. Larson had paid the land owner on which Sue was found about \$5,000. It was a mess. Henrickson is a field paleontologist (she's also the world's leading procurer of amber) who was searching near Faith, South Dakota. She's somewhat of an Indianette Jones and has a real knack for finding things. Of the six butterflies in amber in the world, she found 3 of them. Larson's problems began soon after the world learned of the discovery and monetary valuations were proposed, many ranging as high as \$1 million. The Sioux claimed the skeleton had been stolen from their land, Williams, the land owner, insisted the \$5,000 was only for the right to dig, not for anything found, Hill City, South Dakota was building its hopes for economic revival on the presence of a museum in their little town, famous mostly for a large drug store. Because the owner, Maurice Williams, had put his land into a federal trust, the feds got involved. Soon after Williams claimed ownership, the FBI showed up with a warrant to seize all the bones. (I can just imagine the care with which a couple of black shirts treated the bones.) That really pissed off Hill City, an area in which most of the federal government is treated with more than a little

suspicion. Soon there was a battle royale among the academicians, the feds, and commercial fossil hunters. The academics argued that the commercial hunters were interested only in money, not science, should never be allowed on federal land, and didn't know what they were doing. The commercial types pointed out that most of the great finds were found by those wanting to profit from their finds and that if it were left to the professoriate, most of the great finds of the past two hundred years would never have been retrieved. Not to mention that many well-known paleontologists lauded the fossil hunters for the care and expertise they showed in handling rare fossils. Cynics took the position that each side just wanted to retain all the rights for themselves. Throw in a D.A. who was thinking of running for office and needed the publicity and you have all the ingredients for a nasty fight. Larson was eventually convicted of custom's violations (on the intake form the charge is formally listed as -- "failing to fill out forms" -- and served two years in federal prison in what has to be one of the great travesties and wastage of money. The trial itself was the longest in South Dakota history. Williams was awarded ownership (screwing the Indians again) and he sold Sue to the Field Museum in Chicago for \$8.5 million. One interesting, if perhaps depressing element, of the trial was that according to a Supreme Court decision, judges could use evidence presented at trial in sentencing even if the defendant had been acquitted on charges related to that evidence. That's spooky. So Larson was convicted only on failing to report travelers' checks in excess of \$10,000 when he returned from Peru into the United States, a misdemeanor. But because the judge was able to use all the evidence presented, he decided that Larson was part of a largely criminal conspiracy to steal fossils and therefore could be subject to much harsher sentencing. **Feiffer relates a substantial number of stories and events related to the history of palaeontology. Including some famous hoaxes. I particularly enjoyed reading about the Cardiff Giant. Feiffer identifies the culprit as an agnostic farmer (the Wikipedia says it was George Hull, a NY atheist tobaccoist) who was infuriated by local Methodist revivals claiming giants once walked the earth as noted in Genesis. He build a giant man, let it age for a year, then had it buried on his cousin's farm and later arranged to have it "discovered" while digging a well. He set up an exhibit and started charging admission. Christian preachers declared its validity and a validation of the Bible. Most scholars declared it a fake but that did not detract from its curiosity and Hull sold his interest in the statue for \$23,000. P.T. Barnum wanted in on it and offered the new owners \$50,000, a huge sum at the time. They turned him down so he created a replica and declared it the "real" Cardiff Giant. Soon Barnum and the Cardiff syndicate accused each other of having fakes. Hull revealed his hoax and a judge ruled that each could not be sued for calling a fake a fake. The two fakes are now in small town museums, each accusing the other of having the wrong (fake?) fake. Priceless.**I believe the case

referred to but not cited is *United States v Watts*: "the Court held that a jury's verdict of acquittal does not prevent a sentencing court from considering a defendant's conduct underlying the acquitted charge, so long as that conduct has been proved by a preponderance of the evidence. Justices Antonin Scalia and Stephen G. Breyer concurred. Dissenting, Justice John Paul Stevens argued that the additional offense should have been required to have been proved beyond a reasonable doubt for sentencing purposes, where a defendant's sentence was lengthened. Justice Anthony M. Kennedy, also dissenting, expressed the view that the cases should have been set for full briefing and consideration." (see [...]) This, of course, gives a great deal of power to the judge, but I suspect we would all have applauded such power if used to reverse jury acquittal verdicts in lynching cases decades ago. Some reviewers thought the legal details to be boring. I thought the book was a nice mixture of science, law and mystery.

Although "Tyrannosaurus Sue" takes a while to get rolling, eventually author Steve Fiffer does get into the trial over the bones, and, as a lawyer, he does an excellent job of clarifying that mess. In a foreword, dinosaur researcher Robert Bakker says, "There's a lot of Roshomon in Sue's story." By that I take it he means that there is a shortage of certainty about who the villains are, although Bakker and Fiffer are sympathetic to Peter Larson and his friends, who dug up Sue. The fossil equivalents of Yankee tinkers, the Larsons were self-taught and entrepreneurial. As such, predictably, they raised the hackles of academic researchers. One complaint by the academics against the Larsons can be disposed of: that commercial bone collecting interferes with proper study of fossils. Surely the information to be gleaned from the bones is more valuable than the money people (or the Field Museum) will pay for the bones -- millions -- so interference with proper study is a serious matter. However, although Fiffer does not go into it, the record of academic bone hunters in the western states has frequently been scandalous, with illegal collecting, faked documentation, slovenly curation and failure to publish. As a good businessman, Larson was, at least, not inclined to the last two of those. While some of the academic critics may have been sincere and even have had legitimate concerns, the leading lights come off very poorly in "Tyrannosaurus Sue." Part of the reason Fiffer's book starts slowly is his evident intent to build up suspense -- generally, as here, an irritating approach -- but he also has the more reasonable goal and task of setting the finding of Sue in context. This means going back to the Bone Wars of the 19th century. Much of this is already plowed ground, but Fiffer's explanation of a legitimate (as it seems to have been) commercial paleontological enterprise was new and interesting to me. Once all that is finally taken care of, "Tyrannosaurus Sue" races to an exciting conclusion, with a lively courtroom drama, a tense

auction, some corporate struggles and a not entirely satisfactory (to me) outcome. It's a complex story, made even more so by a factor I have not mentioned so far: the fact that Sue was found on Indian land that was under lease to an Indian rancher. That added extra layers of legal uncertainty to an already uncertain story. Fiffer also explores, without suggesting much in the way of remedy, the national government's confused, confusing and probably self-defeating legislation concerning fossils on public lands.

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