

Nothdurft, William, with Josh Smith
THE LOST DINOSAURS OF EGYPT
Random House (240 pp.)
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A mildly captivating, but ultimately scattered, account of the vicissitudes of bone hunting.

One might ask what fills a book about something that is not there? The answer is not to be found here. And how, one might also ask, can a book with a sure-fire title that sounds like cynical marketing to teenage boys for a movie matinee with both dinosaurs *and* mummies fall so short of the target for either audience? That question, at least, is answered herein: this book has all the earmarks of having been written by committee. There's even a camel or two, and a large cast of co-authors. In addition to Nothdurft are a plethora of doctoral candidates in paleontology and geology, a professor, and a lab scientist. It reads, finally, less like an account of their collaboration and more like a meticulous accounting of their tiresome confabulations. The lack of focus has to do with the book's trying to do two things at once, neither of them well. It was conceived in part as a tribute to long-forgotten German aristocrat and scientist Ernst Freiherr Stromer von Reichenbach whose initial explorations of the Bahariya Oasis in Egypt's Western Desert yielded the first fossils of huge sauropods in what was once a lush mangrove forest. But the authorial committee devotes the better part of a chapter, a sixteenth of the book, to describing the RAF mission which laid waste to Munich's *Bahnhof* and, collaterally, the *Alte Akademie* which housed the collection of Stromer's finds. The second story, of the contemporary scientific team who set out to restore Stromer's legacy and register their own contributions, is even more diffuse. Observations such as fossil lab head Jason Poole's remark that "it was like Bahariya was playing games with us," and geologist Jennifer Smith's that "these dinosaur guys... go up and down like they're on a roller coaster," do nothing to advance the reader's understanding. In fact, if this were a term paper, which is about the length of material here, the authors might rightly be accused of padding it.

The true meat of this account is buried beneath gravy and garnishes, and all the reader is left with are the bones.