nytimes.com ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Some Things Should Be Dead

by DWIGHT GARNER • APRIL 12, 2012

Richard Fortey's "Horseshoe Crabs and Velvet Worms" begins, as all serious books of science should, at an orgy. Specifically, the author is observing the nighttime mating ritual of thousands of clacking horseshoe crabs in spring along the Delaware coast. "I am there," he writes, "with my notebook and a fluttering heart."

My notebook and a fluttering heart — what a phrase, and one that captures the quality Mr. Fortey offers in almost everything he writes. It should be the title of his biography, when someone gets around to writing it.

Mr. Fortey is a British paleontologist who worked for many years at the Natural History Museum in London. (He retired in 2006.) His urbane and erudite books include "Trilobite! Eyewitness to Evolution" and "Life: A Natural History of the First Four Billion Years of Life on Earth."

Paleontologists, of course, study prehistoric life. They stare intently at fossils. They obsess over long-dead things. "Horseshoe Crabs and Velvet Worms" is thus a departure for Mr. Fortey. It's a book about living creatures, about the old-timers, the survivors, the organisms and ecologies that, he writes, have survived many mass extinction events and are "messengers from deep geological time."

In this book the author travels the planet, looking at life forms that, as Darwin wrote, "may almost be called living fossils." These include not just horseshoe crabs and velvet worms, which live in dead trees, but algae mats, lungfish, musk oxen, various herbs, sponges, jellyfish, clams and cockroaches. The life forms nothing can seem to kill. Upon Keith Richards, alas, he does not stumble.

Mr. Fortey is writing about lungfish, but he could also be speaking about all the creatures in this book when he declares, "As an American might say, they take life real slow."

The good news about "Horseshoe Crabs and Velvet Worms" is that Mr. Fortey is as vivid and charming

about live things as he's long been about dead ones, perhaps even more so. Reading this book is like stepping into the field with a man who's equal parts naturalist and poet, let's say equal parts E. O. Wilson and Paul Muldoon. The Wilson in him wields the notebook; the Muldoon flutters. It's a bewitching combination.

At that orgy on the Delaware beach Mr. Fortey delivers real science, reminding us, for example, that horseshoe crabs aren't crabs at all. Like trilobites, they are arthropods, "animals with jointed legs and all the muscles and tendons tucked inside an exoskeleton." He dilates on their history, their character and what threatens them still.

But he also describes them, wonderfully, as resembling "inverted colanders." The sharp spines on their head shields remind him of "the perky eyebrows I associate with clerics of a certain age." He describes their hue as "the kind of color I used to get as a kid when I mixed all my powder paints together."

Can I quote Mr. Fortey on horseshoe crabs a moment longer? Noting the pincers at the bottom of one, he says, "I am reminded of the manual toolkit owned by the eponymous hero of the movie 'Edward Scissorhands.' " When he flips a stranded horseshoe crab over, it moves away with "the slow progress of a confused old lady on a walker."

You begin to love Mr. Fortey as much as he loves horseshoe crabs. You want to throw him over your shoulder, like a big stuffed animal won at a fair, and lug him home to explain the mysteries of your backyard.

As he jets across the planet — you imagine red lines crisscrossing a globe, that movie shorthand for flights — he also functions as a gentle yet mordant travel critic. Sipping a gin and tonic at the Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone National Park, with a view of the geyser, he can't help reflect on declining standards.

"Once a decidedly smart destination," he writes, "the Inn has regrettably seen better days: having to drink that gin and tonic out of a plastic beaker, while huddled deeply into my overcoat, seemed to symbolize a certain decline."

He is observant about his colleagues. About Lynn Margulis, the American biologist and groundbreaking theorist of evolution who died late last year, he says: "I know of no other professor who would, or indeed could, quote the poet Emily Dickinson at length in a supermarket." He also liked

her “embroidered waistcoats and pleated skirts”; she looked “as if she were about to take part in a folk festival.”

There is no denying that, as “Horseshoe Crabs and Velvet Worms” moves on, there are numbing moments. Your enthusiasm about sponges, for example, will not equal his. He is not utterly immune to cliché.

Yet his book is not only well built and witty but emotionally profound too. It’s the work of a survivor appraising other survivors. “The inescapable truth is that luck for old-timers will eventually run out,” he writes. “It always does.”

What angers Mr. Fortey is the way humans are hastening not just their own end but that of everything else on earth. “The extinction event that is happening right now is the first one in history that is the responsibility of a single species,” he declares. “There’s no meteorite this time, no exceptional volcanic eruptions, no ‘Snowball Earth,’ just us, prospering at the expense of other species.”

In the meantime Mr. Fortey’s book is an inducement to be as awake and observant as possible. A wallflower at life’s orgy, he’s delivered a book that’s a squirming eyeful.