

From Gavin Bradley: *Jurassic Park* and Making Space for Your Art

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The question that every dinosaur paleontologist gets asked more than any other is, undoubtedly: “*could Jurassic Park really happen?*” I’ve been in the field for about 10 years now, first as a graduate student fresh off the plane from my home in Northern Ireland, and now as the enthusiastic instructor of our big, undergraduate MOOC¹-based paleontology classes for the past five years. You might remember me from such courses (Paleo 200, 201, 202, 203 & 204). During that time, I’ve heard it hundreds of times from students, colleagues, friends, family— and most frequently from grade school students, when I do outreach talks for groups like our Science Summer Camps. You would think, by now, I’d be tired of it.

The thing is, though, it’s a *really* good question.

I mean, who doesn’t want to know if we could one day pop around the Edmonton Valley Zoo and check out the *Tyrannosaurus* paddock, or pet a baby *Chasmosaurus*? Maybe even go down to the humane society and adopt an *Ankylosaurus*?

Unfortunately, for those who are wondering, the short answer is no. We can’t resurrect dinosaurs (at least not in the “mosquito fossil with dino blood” method in *Jurassic Park*). However, every time someone asks me that question, I get to introduce them to concepts that I love teaching about, like deep geological time, the atomic clock, or the fossilization process, and point them towards some revolutionary fields where researchers approach the problem from a different direction. Like Evolutionary Developmental Biology, where they are attempting to “reverse engineer” modern birds into dinosaurs.

Another thing that I like about that question? *Jurassic Park* is, to me, a perfect blend of art and science. The science is present enough that people ask themselves “*could* that actually happen?”, and the fiction is engrossing enough that people wonder “*what if* that actually happened?”

As a writer of poetry and fiction in my non-academic life, I have been balancing art and science since my undergraduate degree and was lucky enough to publish my first book of poems, *Separation Anxiety*, in 2022. Poetry and paleontology might seem like polar opposites, but to me, they are simply two sides of the same coin. Both are ways of understanding the world around us, both give you an unusual vocabulary, and both require an imagination.

You see, no matter what data we gather from the dinosaur fossil record, we can never go back in time and see these incredible animals as they were in life. Although we can interpret the Dry Island *Albertosaurus* bonebed as evidence for social behavior in tyrannosaurs, we can’t see the pack work together to take down large prey. Although we can recreate the sound that *Parasaurolophus* made through its hollow head crest, we can only picture the effect a cacophony from a whole herd of the giant herbivores would have had on an approaching carnivore! At the end of many long days in the field and even longer nights in the lab working with fossils, a paleontologist still must rely, at least a little bit, on a touch of creative thought to connect the present to the past.



Paleontology aside, any undergraduate program in science is demanding, and when you're in the thick of it there's a temptation—maybe even a pressure— to focus on your subject and only that for the duration of your studies. During grad² school I was so worried about what my new lab mates and supervisor might think of my creative writing that I published my first poems under a pseudonym. I was already a gangly, red-headed Irishman with a cartoonish accent, coming from a totally different academic background— I didn't think I needed another reason not to be taken seriously! Despite that, as I kept writing and publishing, and met more scientists with interests in the arts— musicians, visual artists, actors —I became less and less worried about what people thought. I was more and more convinced that my hobby was making me a better-rounded scientist. In fact, when I got my first job out of grad school writing and editing content for the paleontology MOOCs, it was as much for my ability as a writer as it was for my expertise in fossils. The truth is, in the great, big scary question mark that comes after graduation, the more strings you have to your bow, the more appealing and unique your application will be for employers or grad schools.

More important than helping your future job prospects, though, is the art of doing something in your free time that has nothing to do with your program, simply *just to do something that has nothing to do with your program*. This time of year is rough, and part of self-care is making space in your life for things you enjoy and that give you satisfaction beyond school.

Part of self-care can be making space for your art.

This doesn't mean you have to become a poet. Maybe you pick up the guitar you've neglected for a while. Open your old sketch book and do some tracing. Finish crocheting that scarf you started in your first week of undergrad. Watch the film you've been meaning to see, or read the book a friend recommended, or go dancing, or pottery-making or just go belt out Disney songs at RATT³ karaoke. When you make space for your art, regardless of whatever art you choose, you're able to give the rest of your brain a break and recharge yourself for whatever comes next.

The fact that you, busy undergraduate students, have found the time to create *Eureka* is an incredible achievement, and a testament to your ability and determination to make the most of your time here. But somewhere between studying, working, and putting together undergraduate science journals, I hope you make some time to pick up an old hobby or discover a new one; perhaps it'll bring you a "*Jurassic Park*" blend of your own.

Cheers,

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¹ MOOC – Massively Open Online Course

² Graduate

³ RATT – Room At The Top