

Dance of the Tiger

By Björn Kurtén

Reviewed by Dean Madden, National Centre for Biotechnology Education, UK

Teachers and many older school students will enjoy *Dance of the Tiger*, a very unusual fictional story written by a scientist about his own subject.

The author, Swedish/Finnish palaeontologist Björn Kurtén, did not create the literary genre 'palaeofiction', but he was certainly one of its better writers. As Stephen Jay Gould said in his introduction to Kurtén's novel (first published in Swedish as *Den Svarta Tigern* in 1978, and then in English in 1980), well-informed fictional accounts are often equally as valid as Rudyard Kipling's 'Just So' stories created by evolutionary biologists. By presenting such stories in a fictional setting, however, their speculative status is made clear. Could such fiction, on screen as well as in print, have a role in science education?

Shortly after their remains were first discovered, the Neanderthals became popular subjects for fiction. Often they were wrongly portrayed as stooped, brutish creatures of low intelligence — due in part to a flawed interpretation of early fossil evidence which has coloured popular perception of Neanderthal man ever since.

However, sympathetic literary portrayals of Neanderthals are also common, such as in the novel *The*

Inheritors by Nobel Prize-winner William Golding or Kurtén's more serious treatment, *Dance of the Tiger*. The novel challenges the reader to speculate about possible reasons for the Neanderthals' extinction, with clues to three possibilities scattered throughout the text. At the end of the story, Kurtén reveals the answers, as well as the research findings that inspired several aspects of the story.

Although Kurtén's 1978 work predates modern molecular studies, it highlights a possible method of teaching students about evolutionary processes in an entertaining manner.

Details

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