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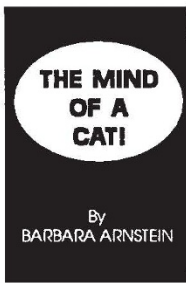
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CAT**

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Henry Gee

The Dicynodonts: A Study in Palaeobiology. By Gillian King. *Chapman and Hall*: 1990. Pp. 233. £35, \$69.95.

THE Total Perspective Vortex, writes Douglas Adams in *The Hitch-Hikers' Guide to the Galaxy*, is a place where the traveller is granted an instantaneous glimpse of the entire and unimaginable vastness of creation, together with a small plastic sticker that reads 'you are here'. The shock is lethal to anybody with a sense of proportion. The Vortex is constructed on the premise that any event in the Universe, however small, has an effect on everything else. Thus, one might suppose, one could in principle read the complete history of the cosmos from a small piece of fairy-cake.

This idea appeals greatly to palaeontologists, who are on occasion carried away by the urge to re-create entire ecosystems from very small pieces of bone. No wonder that the first view of a fossil site by one raised on big-screen dinoramas can be a chastening experience.

Gillian King is a palaeontologist who habitually carries a hatpin for the expressed purpose of deflating such puffery. *Dicynodonts* is ostensibly a modest work on the evolutionary history of a fossil group. But it contains a hatpin wielded on the very last page, exploding the yarn set out on the previous 199. The effect is appropriately deflating.

The dicynodonts were a group of animals, distantly related to mammals, that lived between about 260 and 230 million years ago. Although possessed of physiognomies of unremitting ugliness, they were the first really successful land herbivores, and have a relatively well-explored fossil record. Dozens of forms are known, mostly from southern Africa. King describes everything that is known about most of the important ones, concen-

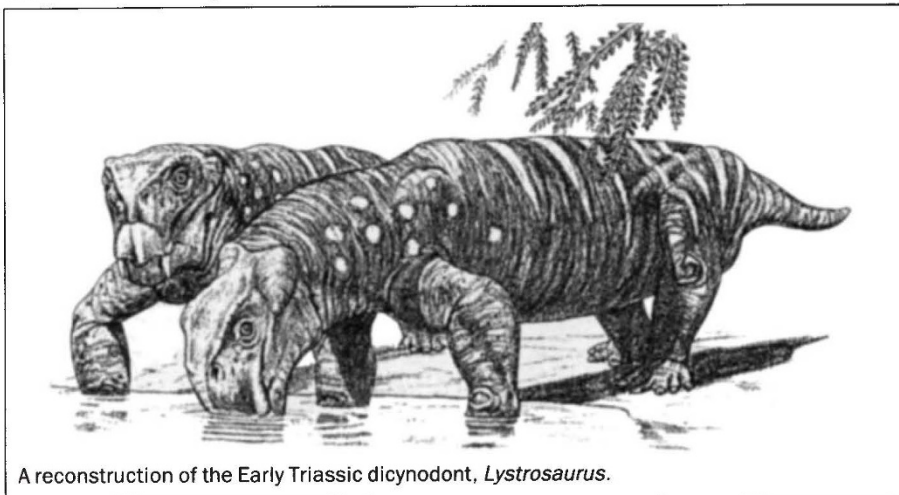
trating on how the reconstructed skulls can be used to infer jaw mechanics and, from this, what the animals ate.

For most of the book, King darts unevenly from topic to topic, veering from rigorous and detailed anatomical work-outs to wide-eyed ecological speculation with jarring effect. But everything becomes clear in the last chapter, in which she discusses what we know about how dicynodonts lived, as real flesh-and-blood animals, for which purpose she perforce descends almost totally into the conditional perfect. Dicynodonts "may have" lived like this, in a world that "may have" been like that, eating plants that "may have" been like something else.

Even though the fossil record of dicynodonts is excellent, this excellence is still only relative: a chilling fact of which King is well aware and is at pains to point out. In the very last paragraph of the book (even the penultimate sentence) she reminds us that "any fossil group keeps far more information to itself than we are ever likely to be able to discover" and then — almost by way of apology — "but that should not stop our trying". The hidden message is that for groups whose fossil records are not even as fine as that of the dicynodonts, ecological reconstructions could all too easily be small triumphs of interpretation over data. Palaeontologists should take note.

My mother once had a book about poultry containing instructions for strangling a chicken. First, it said, one must stretch the neck to its fullest extent. Then stretch it nine inches further. That final nine inches is the measure of the Total Perspective Vortex school of palaeontology, the myth that King explodes, poignantly, with the fossil group of whose interpretation she is one of the world's leading exponents. The book is a lesson to us all, and shows that when faced with the inestimable caprice of geological time, it pays to adopt a sense of proportion. □

Henry Gee is an assistant editor of Nature.



A reconstruction of the Early Triassic dicynodont, *Lystrosaurus*.