

## Episode Twelve: Dinotopia by James Gurney

### **Brandon**

Welcome to My Dog Ate My Book Report, a podcast where two weirdo thirtysomethings take turns introducing each other to a formative book from childhood the other has not read. I'm Brandon (he/him).

### **Wren**

I'm Wren. Let's go with "they." You never know.

### **Brandon**

Follow your heart. Even if your heart changes its mind sometimes.

### **Wren**

The heart doesn't know. Sir, is there a pronoun for just...just no?

### **Brandon**

I mean, I do know at least one person who just chooses not to use pronouns.

### **Wren**

Yeah, they feels fine. They is the best option there is for me right now. Dinosaurs!

### **Brandon**

Dinosaurs! So this time we are talking about one of my picks. Probably the pick that I had decided on earliest once we started crafting this podcast even though it obviously was not the first one that I did. For this week, we are talking about Dinotopia by James Gurney. And it is hard for me to overstate how influential this book was and is to just my everything.

### **Wren**

I personally am completely, utterly baffled as to why I did not know it existed until about a year ago.

### **Brandon**

That does sound like the worst timeline.

### **Wren**

I don't think I can overstate how dinosaur ridiculous I was in this exact time period when this book came out. Like I wasn't just like a casual, wearing-a-Jurassic-Park-t-shirt-to-school-in-the-90s kind of dinosaur person. I had a dinosaur documentary. It was like a six hour long dinosaur documentary that I watched almost weekly. I had facts memorized. I had a favorite dinosaur like, like people have a favorite dinosaur. But like I had very strong opinions and judged other people's favorite dinosaurs. I...

### **Wren**

You had a favorite dinosaur that was born out of like knowing about dinosaurs. Not just, "I saw a stegosaurus once and it kind of seemed neat."

**Wren**

Okay, stegosaurus are really neat.

**Brandon**

I mean, yeah, but like they're also kind of basic.

**Wren**

Why are they basic? Just because they have knife tail?

**Brandon**

No, just because they're popular. The basic dinosaurs are: T-Rex, stegosaurus, brontosaurus, triceratops, saber-toothed tiger... Wait, no, no, I'm listing zords from Power Rangers.

**Wren**

Pterodactyl!

**Brandon**

Pterodactyl, which isn't a dinosaur...

**Wren**

Mastodon!

**Brandon**

...but it's also a basic dinosaur.

**Wren**

No, I feel you. I just had to object because I personally really liked stegosaurus. It's not it's not my favorite, but I don't think he's basic. I think the basic answer is, "I like a T-rex."

**Brandon**

Yeah, like T-rex is the most basic...and, like, raptor, these days. Post-Jurassic Park, velociraptor's also pretty basic. If you loved raptors pre-Jurassic Park, then I kind of feel like you were ahead of your time. But if you loved raptors after Jurassic Park, do you even dinosaur, bro?

**Wren**

The point is, I have no idea how I missed this book. So thank you for bringing this to my life.

**Brandon**

I mean, once upon a time, it was kind of easy to miss books if you didn't know they existed, which actually kind of plays into my personal history with the book.

**Wren**

Well, let's let's do like the brief synopsis of like, what is the book? We've spent six minutes talking about how we feel about dinosaurs and pronouns.

**Brandon**

Right. Oh, what pronouns do...do dinosaurs have different pronouns?

**Brandon**

So Dinotopia is...it's the first non-prose, strictly, thing that we've done. I hesitate to say like children's book or picture book because those might technically be true, but they make it sound like something it's not. But it is a a book of lavish illustrations with a with a fun story about a mid-19th century Bostonian and his son who get shipwrecked on an island where dinosaurs never went extinct and in fact, have built a civilization alongside other humans, and everything is very nice and utopian and there are dinosaurs there, ergo Dinotopia. Arthur and Will Denison spend some time learning about this new place, especially once they hear that it can't really be escaped because of like currents and stuff and a reef. The book follows them as they kind of acclimate to living in Dinotopia and get to witness its wonders, and stuff. And this is all couched in sort of a thing where it's written like it is Arthur Denison's science journal, in a very sort of 19th century kind of way, if you've read like, travelogues that were popular in the 19th century. Kinda like that, but like, not racist, like actual 19th century travelogues are.

**Wren**

Yeah, it's just like a, like a naturalist's point of view, so there's a lot of sketches and stuff. It's really something.

**Brandon**

There's just a very brief foreword, where it's like James Gurney found it in like the university's library, amongst sort of their, like, old book collections, and is just sort of presenting it to us. So it's hard to pin down a specific like plot necessarily, but there are a lot of just like, chunks of the things that Arthur and Will are going and doing and learning and exploring, and a lot of it is really just Arthur unpacking what different parts of Dinotopia are like and what different cultural things are there.

**Wren**

It's basically...so I started taking down like, little notes on cool world building I thought he was doing and then I had to stop. Because basically, the book is a all world building.

**Brandon**

Yeah, it is definitely a book that like, if you go in wanting to be able to identify the specific story that is being told from like a plot beat perspective, it would be tricky. It's kind of picaresque, which, again, is sort of like in keeping with some of the, like 19th century style, though, I guess picaresque was maybe a little more 18th century...

**Wren**

You are gonna have to define "picaresque" for me, sorry.

**Brandon**

Yeah, picaresque, it's a kind of story that is essentially just kind of like episodic, little incidents. That's an oversimplification, but it was certainly at one time, a popular form. I think definitionally they might also be like, theoretically tied together by a theme or something. I remember some that I read during my English degree experience, where it was kind of like, here's a few characters who are going to travel around the world, and there's not really an overall plot, there's a lot of like, little adventures they get on, but all those little adventures are meant to show that God's divine providence will will save you if you're a good person. It's that kind of story where there's there's maybe a thematic through line, more than a plot through line.

**Wren**

I really loved the conceit of this book. There was one moment where I was sort of like, I guess, taken out of the immersion of it just a little bit. When in the in the latter half of the book for, I don't know, a couple...they're not really chapters, but...a chunk of the exposition switches and it's Will taking over the journal. And I'm like, well, why does will have the same handwriting? Why is will also an expert painter? Also, how is the father making these lavish oil paints when he just has like, a pen, and some scraps of paper? But that aside, I think it was a really cool way to frame the story.

**Brandon**

I think you could maybe assume that the paintings are meant to be done by Gurney within the fiction based upon Denison's sketches, perhaps? I don't know. I've never thought about it that hard.

**Wren**

Interesting.

**Brandon**

But yeah, because like it's not like journeys himself a character. It's literally just like a few paragraphs of foreword that says where he found it in in the University Library. He doesn't even say what university, actually. And he doesn't really say much about what he does, but so it just kind of leads us to assume that the James Gurney who, quote, "finds" Arthur Denison's journal in a library is essentially the real guy.

**Wren**

That makes sense.

**Brandon**

But yeah, they they wash up on shore, they are saved by dolphins, which is kind of how you get to Dinotopia basically, is your ship get some trouble, and then some dolphins choose you to save. And over a series of years covered by the journal, they travel around Dinotopia and see all of these interesting locations and make friends, both human and dinosaur. They find that dinosaurs are intelligent, though not all of them can speak human languages and vice versa. So some characters have to kind of be the translators for all of the dinosaur characters. And there's a bunch of humans who are...belong to families who have been on Dinotopia for many, many generations, and there's some that are like, recent-ish, additions to Dinotopia as population because of a shipwreck or something or

their grandfather or something was like the one who came to Dinotopia so they're natural born Dinotopian but the time where their family arrived is still within living memory.

**Wren**

Yeah, they had a cool sort of term for that it was like, X number of mothers and then origin country. So like, there was a character that was like, four mothers Irish or something like that. And it meant that like, for generations past...

**Brandon**

Yeah.

**Wren**

I tried to think of some content warnings for this, but I...I couldn't. I think this is might be the first book I've read in a long time that didn't have racist tropes or sexism or stuff like that. I just, like...it was just really pleasant.

**Brandon**

I mean, Denison does hit Bix with a rock.

**Wren**

Okay, yes. Content warning: a small amount of not very aggressive human-on-dinosaur violence.

**Brandon**

And then Bix lies to a T-rex. Maybe she deserved it.

**Wren**

I love Bix. Can we just have like a Bix appreciation moment?

**Brandon**

We can appreciate Bix the entire episode, if you like.

**Wren**

The first dinosaur they meet is this eternally scared parrot-looking dinosaur. I forgot to write down...

**Brandon**

She's a protoceratops.

**Wren**

Right. And because they just washed up on the shore, and there's this, you know, massive lizard coming at them, they try to scare it off with a rock. So they just toss a rock at this thing and it hits her in the leg. And she whines and whines and carries on. And he's just like, I didn't even hit her that hard. Why is she like acting like I killed her? And she just milks this so hard that even after like her bruise or whatever heals, for months and months, she still wears a bandage as like a badge of honor that like she sustained an injury. And it's hilarious. She's such a weirdo.

**Brandon**

Her dramatics over the rock related injury are such that even before Arthur Denison has learned that dinosaurs on this island are intelligent, he kind of picks up on the fact that she's playing it up. He's just like, I've met this...I've just met this animal (I'm assuming), and the thing I know about this animal is that this animal is a drama queen. They quickly are joined by other dinosaurs and humans. They get in touch with somebody who speaks English or or speaks close-enough English, so they can have things explained to them. And away we go. They spent a lot of time in a hatchery, which is near where they washed up. And they travel to some towns and ultimately Waterfall City, which is the best place in the entire place in the entire world and all of the firmament and all the multiverse. Waterfall City.

**Wren**

No.

**Brandon**

Yes.

**Wren**

No.

**Brandon**

Yes.

**Wren**

No.

**Brandon**

Which one is, then?

**Wren**

I have to look at the map. I forget precisely...Treetown. Treetown, obviously,

**Brandon**

Treetown's okay, but I'd rather live in Bilgewater if I was going to be in a wooden place, but you didn't get to see Bilgewater because it's not in this book.

**Wren**

They specify that they have a hard time keeping their books well, because everything's just always wet in Waterfall City, and that already just made me feel like I don't want to stay here. But then they said, because of erosion, they constantly have to like rebuild the foundation of Waterfall City. It's basically like, constantly under threat of washing away. And I just don't want to be there.

**Brandon**

But...

**Wren**

At all.

**Brandon**

But...it has water slides. And the dinosaur that collects clocks.

**Wren**

Okay, that is a very cool dinosaur. I love their clocks.

**Brandon**

I've been thinking about how to communicate the effect of this book, uh, in an audio form. because, you know, most of the other things we've talked about are have been prose. Some of them had some illustrations, right, but like, they're not the main delivery vehicle for the thing that's happening. But in Dinotopia so much is these extremely detailed illustrations and so much of it is, like, all of these just little details of life in Dinotopia. There's all kinds of things about little tools they have, all sorts of different kinds of musical instruments, toys, games, clocks...their unique clocks, because they have opinions about time. There's all this stuff. And like, it's not, it's not because like, the clock is plot important, or whatever. It's just all of these layers of world building and these little details that just are what got me so hooked on this that, like, I kinda feel like Dinotopia might be the thing that made me want to write things.

**Wren**

I feel like we're kind of both, probably so into this, that we're just a little bit just throwing out all of these things and being a little excited, and I'm kind of like tripping over my words about how excited I am. So I want to really just, like, emphasize maybe, just how weird and cool this is by quoting the book a little bit, because I feel like you, dear listener, might be: "What is up with these two and this book?" So, okay, I have I have one part that I that I really liked. So the main character asks the the sort of timekeeper man about the clock and, and he's all like, "Okay, so what time is it?" And the guy's just like, "Yeah, no." And now I quote: "Time for kentrosaurs to hatch. Time to plant the millet. Time for the magnolia buds to open. Professor Denison, I'm afraid you persist in thinking of time as numbers." And then you look at the picture of this clock, and it's just this spiral that clearly has all these like little things on it. So they don't keep time by numbers. They keep time by all of these little events and things. And then he hands him a pocket watch with just this really neat, little illustration of like a miniaturized version of this little text spiral, and I just could not get over how creative that was.

**Brandon**

Yeah. I just love little things like that. And like he also has a bunch of other timepieces because he collects them. Malik is his name, he's a Stenonychosaurus. Like he's clearly also collected timepieces that have come to Dinotopia via various other means, including he has, prior to meeting Arthur, acquired Arthur's pocket watch, which he had bartered away earlier on. Malik talks about how you in the West think of time as a circle, and...er, sorry, a line...and your Eastern compatriots think of it as a circle, and we kind of know that it's both things.

**Wren**

I mean, all I can really say is that if you are a just like a world building nerd, like, I think kind of we both maybe are a little bit...

**Brandon**

Oh, yeah.

**Wren**

...this book is just gonna give you so much.

**Brandon**

I'm such a huge world building nerd. It's probably this book's fault.

**Wren**

And from a lot of different angles, too, because, you know, while Brandon comes at this from the aforementioned English major, I always come at stuff from just like a wildly different background, being sciency and stuff and just, you know, spending years working at a zoo. And I know that one of the first things especially that children asked me about animals, it's about their poop. And he devotes like four pages to talking about how they deal with the massive amount of dinosaur poop. That would be, you know, on the streets of these dinosaur civilizations. The...I forget what they're called, but the the like, poop cleaner upper folks are like, high up in society, it seems.

**Brandon**

Copra carriers.

**Wren**

Oh, gosh, that's brilliant, as just like this incredibly important job. And I just...I just died, because I knew...like, I could tell, from a naturalist's point of view, how much he must have researched and thought about, like, actual biological elements of of this whole society. But also, I know, he must have spent some time with some naturalists who always...we just always end up getting a little hung up on poop. It's really absurd. But it's something that gets asked all the time.

**Brandon**

A lot of the story takes place traveling between locations because they have to walk everywhere at at least dinosaur pace. And they just go to all of these different towns and they all just feel so specifically unique and like, built around the kind of people and dinosaurs that live there. You know, you mentioned Treetown. Waterfall City is not the capital but one of the bigger cities, which is kind of like a very Renaissance-era city. But Treetown has like a lot of buildings in trees with a bunch of like sauropods with long necks and they'll fling human children into the air. For fun.

**Wren**

Well, so the framing of this travel is just expertly done by Gurney, I think, because the closest sort of town or settlement where they get shipwrecked is the Hatchery. So basically, the way he framed it as they go to the Hatchery first, so they see where dinosaur life starts. And then they go to sort of a



learning city. And then they go to a city where they have to do some sort of like trials, but then there's also this entertainment aspect with the sort of like dinosaur Olympics of sorts. And then they go to another city where they have to, like, continue on with their training. Because the kid, his son, starts out as 12, and he's probably about 15 by the end of the book; they stop writing dates down at a certain point. And so the kid goes on after going to the second city, Waterfall City, he decides since he's all in on this, what he wants to do when he grows up in Dinosaur Land is become the...what are they called again?

**Brandon**

A Skybax rider.

**Wren**

Yes. So then the journey turns into, you know, him learning how to do that and learning a trade. But just because the first place they go is the Hatchery, they get all of this sort of like base information to us, the readers, about dinosaur life, and I just thought that was so well done.

**Brandon**

And it kind of comes around later on when this venerable Triceratops mentions that Will has "cracked his shell," which is to say, kind of gone from somebody who's sort of a newbie to Dinotopia, and doesn't really understand things to a person who has proven themselves as like, part of this society. And really, the closest thing that we have to consistent character arcs going on in the story is that at the beginning, Arthur is like, oh, this place is neat, but I do kind of want to go back to Boston eventually. And Will is just sort of with him. And then over the course of things, Arthur decides, nope, stay in here, and Will like, comes into his own to do his own thing, because Arthur has no interest in being a Skybax rider. He wants to continue to be an academic, and Will's heading for this more adventurous and like physically demanding life, with his girlfriend, Sylvia. It's, it's good stuff. I like it. And it's just like, everywhere they go, just I want to go to all of the places, even if I do like some better than others.

**Wren**

Back to like my, you know, zookeeping background: there was a scene at the nursery where humans were helping hatch the eggs, and they used dinosaur puppets and shielded their face so that they wouldn't imprint on the wrong species. And as someone who did wildlife rehab, and sometimes you have to do that sort of thing, like wear a mask or like, you know, do sort of like surrogate puppetry stuff, he definitely did his research and I appreciate that so much. Also, back to the nursery still, I know I'm hung up on this, but there's like a little sketch of an Oviraptor, and he has it - there's just chunks of the book that are written in handwriting text, to show that it's like a note with a sketch - and so there's a sketch of an Oviraptor, and it makes a note to say that they're not Oviraptors here, they are Ovinutrix, which is like "egg nurse" instead of "egg thief," because they wouldn't be called egg thieves in this particular society because there's no need for them to do that here. I thought that was so good. However, that did make me start thinking like, what? Are there no predators? Are they totally absent? Because they start establishing that all of the humans are vegan, basically, or pescatarian. Later, it reveals that there are a lot eat some fish. But the humans can't eat the data source that would be like super wrong. So I was really hung up on the predators, and they only meet a predator once. So I'm really curious to know whether or not there's like predator clashes in further books.

**Brandon**

Yeah. Who knows? They do encounter dinosaurs who are naturally carnivorous, I believe, but yeah, like they've they've presumably eschewed predation, save for maybe fish.

**Wren**

Yeah, there's, there's several like raptor types they just like hanging out with and they don't mention anything about what these creatures might eat. But they say specifically that the T. rex is have no stomach for greenery. Like, clearly they couldn't convert to veganism or whatever.

**Brandon**

Well, and I think the note also is that, like, they don't really have any interest in society, like being part of society. And the only real brief interaction that we see with a T. rex is when they're traveling through an area called the Rainy Basin, which is where a lot of these predators live. And they've brought a bunch of fish and when a T. rex shows up, Bix is like, you can have our fish if you let us through, and and he's like, okay. And Bix also lies to him about a another convoy coming through the following day, presumably on the basis that she assumes that he'll be like, okay, I'll eat those dinosaurs, that'll be so much better. So like, the predators are still invested with the level of intelligence that the, like cultured dinosaurs have, they just don't want to live that way.

**Wren**

Yeah, but life with them is managed to such a degree that they have a pretty intense system of population control, egg wise, which is really neat.

**Brandon**

The thing that I really remember about Dinotopia, in my childhood: it was the world that so grabbed me that I wanted to, like, really scrutinize all of the spots on the map, especially the ones that the books don't travel to Wonder what their stories were, like, try to like maybe draw inference from what their names are. Because there's a map of Dinotopia at the front of the book, and the story does not visit all the places on the map. And you know, that's an experience that I think a lot of fantasy fiction fans have is there's some some book or books that that map in the front, like really sucks you in, right, like I know a ton of people. That's how they talk about, say, Middle-earth. I kind of feel like...that feeling that I get from people who are like huge Lord of the Rings fans and are really drawn in to Middle-earth by the level of worldbuilding in those books and stuff...that's kind of how I feel about Dinotopia. I wanted to go to all the places. I wanted to know all of the details, all the like maybe the unspoken details that Gurney probably maybe figured out, but that didn't ultimately get into books and things like that. You know, there's lots of languages, there's writing and numbering systems. There's all of these disparate cultures. You see hints of a lot of different human cultures as well, because clearly, Dinotopia has sucked in people from all over the world. And then all of these ways in which they're mixed in with the dinosaur stuff.

**Wren**

I know I definitely read the whole thing with my finger tucked into the map page, so that I could keep flipping back and looking at it and seeing like, oh, they went this far. Oh, they went that far. I love a good map.

**Brandon**

It's great. And there's all of these places that have such compelling names, and I wanted to know what all of them were. And the book also has some of that element of there are times that you see things that suggest the deeper history and stuff of Dinotopia that doesn't get really explained more than beyond...more than just Arthur kind of noting it. Maybe he's sketching or painting it. Ancient statues and stuff that have clearly been here for a long time.

**Wren**

Yeah, yeah. On page 31, there's just a lost city they encounter. And they're just kind of casually like, I wonder what the deal is with that. And they move on. And I'm just like, what? Excuse me, what? And also, there's this, this tablet on page 73, which just has like the Dinotopia like code. But the last line is broken off. And it just says, Don't letter-P dot dot dot. And they make a little joke, that it's like, it's for humans. It's like, "Don't pee in the water," or something like that. Don't pee in the bath rather. And I'm just like, No, no, no. What is that don't p? Don't p what? Don't p what? James Gurney, why aren't you telling me what don't p is? This is not fair.

**Brandon**

I think it's Nallab, who is talking with Arthur about that, mentions that that tablet was excavated somewhere, or found somewhere...like there's some amount of lampshading. Like it's not, it's not this thing that has been in the square in Waterfall City for all this time and one day some stuff broke off; it seems to be a thing that existed long enough to be misplaced, and then found again later, damaged. Because the whole notion is - and there's a little bit of brief explanation about this - is that the dinosaur population of Dinotopia is descended from dinosaurs, who, when the extinction event that killed off the dinosaurs occurred, went into subterranean tunnels beneath Dinotopia, with a bunch of food and stuff, and were there until they could come back outside again. So, you know, there have been dinosaurs, if not necessarily intelligent ones, on Dinotopia for millions of years, right? They don't really get super specific about if the dinosaurs at that time were of human level intelligence, or whatever. Or if it was just like, some dinosaurs decided that hiding in caves felt right to them.

**Wren**

I...yeah, there's, there's so much here and James Gurney has got to have secrets.

**Wren**

I know you're gonna get into it, but how...I know there's at least one sequel that's like this size in this format.

**Brandon**

Gurney has written four Dinotopia books, all of which are that the same form factor - two sequels and a prequel - and various other Dinotopia-related things have happened with varying levels of his involvement, which actually also plays into my experience with Dinotopia.

**Wren**

Yeah, let me let you talk, and then I have a pinned note in my brain about a dolphin conspiracy, and hat appreciation. So keep going.

**Brandon**

You might think that with how like vital this is to my entire being, I would vividly remember when I first laid eyes upon Dinotopia, but I don't. I genuinely don't know when I got the book. I can't remember how I got the book. I can't remember if I bought it or if it was given to...it almost certainly was given to me because I knew I was in...

**Wren**

It magically appeared into your life because fate knew that you needed it.

**Brandon**

The thing that I am pretty sure that I recall is I think that I first learned that Dinotopia was a thing, because in my elementary school library, they had a magazine shelf. It was like these shelving units that were kind of slanted, like for magazine kind of thing, so they're facing out...anyway, that's not really the point. They had a shelf with magazines on it. And I mostly didn't care about the other magazines, so I can't really tell you what the other magazines were, but there was a copy of the Smithsonian, with a piece from James Gurney on the cover. It's not one of the pieces from Dinotopia. It might be one of the pieces from The World Beneath, the sequel, but it's a long neck dinosaur ascending a steep city street, and I liked dinosaurs, because I was a child and that's the law. And I think that that magazine, I was like, Oh, that's a dinosaur. I'm going to look at this. And so I learned that there was this thing out there. And I think that it took me a while to locate it. But eventually I did. And the rest is history. Once I had gotten ahold of Dinotopia, myself and several of my friends who lived on the same street as me, we devoured them, we devoured a lot of the tie-in books that were written around that time as well. There's a line of like, YA books written by a variety of authors who you would recognize if you had been reading a lot of franchise fiction in the 90s. And we just had like this really exhaustive knowledge of all of these parts of this world. And like, what areas were exciting, but also what areas were still big question marks, because they hadn't been explored. And that's the first time that I remember getting into a thing in that way. Everything that I can remember, like being a fan of prior, it was like, about like specific characters or about like, exciting scenes or whatever, right? Like Power Rangers was cool, because they used you know, martial arts to fight monsters, right? It's not because the world of Power Rangers was so deeply rendered that I just really wanted to live in it. But Dinotopia, it was definitely a love for the world. Much more so than like, specifically, thinking Bix was cool, although she is. Yeah, so you want to talk about like hats and stuff. Then also the other thing you said.

**Wren**

Okay. I have a note. Here's some ASMR or something for my note paper,

**Brandon**

I mean, page turning is legit an ASMR trigger for people.

**Wren**

Okay, my note says: do the dolphins deliberately seek out new humans to bring to the island? And I say this because of several dolphin-related things that are said in the book specifically, how...so Arthur says, "Oh, are those the dolphins that have been following us since Hong Kong?" And then, the ship got wrecked, and the dolphins carry them to the island. And everyone was clearly super excited, because they need new humans on the island every now and then. And I think the dolphins knew bad weather was coming, so they followed them so they could get some new humans for their dinosaur friends.

**Brandon**

The dolphins are implied to also be in communication with Dinotopia. So I think that it's a perfectly reasonable theory to ask what the dolphins' motives are.

**Wren**

Well, they have a whole political faction in their government system. They just couldn't be represented at the meeting because they couldn't be there on land.

**Brandon**

Because the meeting is in the Rainy Basin somewhere, and that is not on the coast.

**Wren**

It just seemed really suspicious that these particular dolphins had been following this boat.

**Brandon**

And there is the element that like once they reach Waterfall City, you know, Arthur discovers - and this is glossed over pretty fast - he discovers that like the expectation is that he'll spend some time teaching others about like the developments in the outside world specifically like scientific ones.

**Wren**

Yeah, there was they need need new humans periodically to like refresh stuff. And you know, that combined with the dolphins has been following them just made me think like, oh my gosh, these dolphins have an ulterior motive!

**Brandon**

They're suspicious.

**Wren**

Yes, I'm very suspicious of the dolphin.

**Brandon**

I mean, I'm already suspicious of dolphins by default.

**Wren**

Yeah, so I don't have a whole lot to go on. But that's my gut feeling. Maybe the don't p is like don't...

**Brandon**

"Don't piss off the dolphins."

**Wren**

Don't piss off the dolphins.

**Brandon**

"Don't pry into the business of dolphins."

**Wren**

Yes, that's the don't p. That one. That one right there.

**Brandon**

And then there's another note under that, which is DON'T PRY INTO THE BUSINESS OF DOLPHINS in capital letters. I don't know...I don't think the script has capital letters, but maybe they invented some for specifically that note.

**Wren**

It's hard for us to discuss...it's hard for me, I think, at least, to discuss some elements of this book in an audio format because of how much of this book is visual. Sketches, and pictures of the written language and such, and illustrations. Just like gorgeous illustrations. There are some some pages that are just like the full two page spread is just a painting. But I did...just...there's a lot of little pieces of world building that I thought were my favorite as I kept going. And there's, there's one piece that really still stands out to me. But it's hard to explain because it's a picture. So, page 55 has what I think is in the running for me one of my favorite pieces of world building. And it's about music and communication with these different types of dinosaurs that have huge crests and horns that create different sounds, and when they sort of like put out a call, everything goes quiet, and the the other dinosaurs that have, you know, the matching crests, will, will speak back in the correct tone. But on page 55, there are pictures of three different dinosaurs, with their corresponding human communication companions that have specialized horns that have been created to - and by horns, I mean, like, instruments, like brass instruments - specially configured and designed to replicate that exact sound. But not only do they have these horns, which are an incredible piece of art on their own, these these special communication horn humans wear hats that match the type of horn crests that these dinosaurs have. And I just, I need this picture to be somewhere in our show notes because it's incredible. These hats match these crests. They're just such weird shapes. I can't explain it. But this is going on our social media for sure.

**Brandon**

While I was reading, I, you know, I'm normally reading the stuff that we do for the show in ebook format, and just make notes in the app. But I already had a physical copy of this. And like, I suspect, you probably can get an ebook format somehow, if you've got, you know, a nice color display, but um, I wouldn't want to. So I was using these little sticky note flags, actually, the ones you gave me, to just sticky note flag the pages that had things on them that I was like, Wow, that's great. And then I realized,

marking all the pages that have like pieces of art I specifically really love does not help anybody but me. Let me...I'm gonna hold hold one up to my microphone and I'll see if you can like tell what it is.

**Wren**

It's the page...

**Brandon**

Yeah, it's right in front of microphone now.

**Wren**

Yeah, you're definitely...absolutely, I am listening to the page about poop carts.

**Brandon**

No.

**Wren**

Damn.

**Brandon**

It was actually the lineup of the habitat partners.

**Wren**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Oh, that's good stuff. What page is that?

**Brandon**

88, at least in my copy, where it's like all of these different habitats that are on the island, they have like a human and dinosaur companion. Not only is it just fun seeing like all of these dinosaur human pairs, who kind of have like, matching outfits. And this, this outlining of like these different habitats that they define, but the ones on the end, who I think are the savanna are this guy, Draco, and this Struthiomimus whose name is Highjump. And I just want to know their story.

**Wren**

I want to know everything about Highjump.

**Brandon**

Because Highjump is such a great name for a Struthiomimus, but - really for anything, but like especially a Struthiomimus. I love it.

**Wren**

Highjump is also like, I think the nonbinary flag colors.

**Brandon**

Yeah, maybe.

**Wren**

He's like, striped.

**Brandon**

Well, I'm sure we can gush about art indefinitely. I as you might be able to tell my experience rereading Dinotopia - and this is not the first time I've reread it. I don't know how many times I've reread it. It's been a couple years since last time I reread it. I still love it. I feel like every time that I come back to it, it just takes me to such a happy place. I just I feel so inspired to create things. But I still love it. I think the things that I pick up on are different than they were as a kid. But this is definitely a book that has the sort of depth that you can come back to it years apart and there's things you won't have noticed or things that you will understand differently. And I've I've never felt like I've wasted my time returning to Dinotopia. So how was it for you reading this?

**Wren**

It was incredible. I...well, I've had a hell of a weekend, so this right now is the weekend where it went down to negative 40 real feel here in Boston. And my power died. Not my power. My heat died in my house. So I just had very little motivation to do anything. So I picked up the book, and I'm like, I'm gonna sit here, and I'm gonna read like an hour of this book, and then I'm gonna go play a video game, because that's what I really want to be doing right now. And instead, I read the whole thing in one sitting. I just couldn't...I couldn't stop,

**Brandon**

Which isn't nothing. Even though it is a book with a lot of pictures, there is a surprising amount of like, text in it.

**Wren**

I was just so compelled. And I, I cannot imagine the magical experience that this would have been had I read it when it came out. I would have been like eight. I think I would have just had like a religious experience. It had it all. Other than the parts where I felt like I had to make fun of the suspension of disbelief a little bit, it was like a perfect experience.

**Brandon**

It's one of my most treasured, like pieces of media, just full stop.

**Wren**

I kind of wonder if I read this as a child, if I would have been able to be like a more creative person, if I would have felt like I had more outlets for creativity with my interests, rather than just going into the sciences, which...hey, going into the sciences is great. It led me to a lot of unfulfilling career moments, personally, and a constant sense of feeling that I had nowhere to put creative energy and that I was incredibly stifled in that regard. But science is very important. I just wish I had read this.

**Brandon**

There is a short video on James Gurney's YouTube, that talks a little bit about the behind the scenes of doing Dinotopia. But it's called Dinotopia: Art, Science and Imagination. And he's always been...when



I've seen him talk about Dinotopia, like that imagination part has always been also there. Next to obviously the like, incredible technical skill he has, as an artist. Next to, as we discussed, the amount of like deep research and stuff that has to have gone in to rendering the world this way. And there's even there's a line in the book, where Arthur is talking to, again, I think it's maybe Nallab, the librarian, about how he doesn't really understand how a place like this, where it's like, it's all peaceful and nice. And humans and dinosaurs live together. You can't imagine how that kind of place would exist. And the person who's been on Dinotopia for a while. It's like: "it can exist, but you have to imagine it." And I think that's a good thought.

**Wren**

I wasn't sure how to take that line. I wasn't sure if it was like...that idea that you have in your head of the perfectness of Dinotopia is only an imagination that you're having and you will eventually see sort of like, the less perfect parts.

**Brandon**

I see the potential for a cynical reading there, but I don't think it's the one that's intended. I think I take it - and I think this is probably how it's meant based upon my experience with the rest of Dinotopia and reading some stuff Grinia has said about it over the years - I think the intended reading is that you have to...you have to allow for the possibility that such a thing could exist, even though you can't see it, for it to ever exist, you know? You have to imagine that a thing like that could exist to be able to know how to get there.

**Wren**

I like that reading better, yeah.

**Brandon**

That at least is my read. And I like things like that.

**Brandon**

You want to hear a little bit about James Gurney?

**Wren**

Yeah, I do!

**Brandon**

This background is going to be relatively short. He came from a line of engineers. His father, grandfather and great-grandfather, were all mechanical engineers of one kind or other. The reason that he kind of brings us up - and this is mostly from the video that I mentioned earlier, Art, Science, and Imagination - is that in those figures, he kind of learned an appreciation for how drawing something can help you figure out how it works. Because while they weren't necessarily artists, they valued putting a thing to paper to figure out the engineering puzzle. And I think you can see a lot of that influence in how he conceives of things.

**Wren**

Oh, yeah, there's a lot of like, engineering drawing in this book that we didn't even touch on about how how things work in these cities that is really impressive.

### **Brandon**

Gurney himself studied archaeology and anthropology and illustration. He, early in his career, freelanced to do like book covers, and some like backgrounds for a Ralph Bakshi movie, I think, and also, he did some gigs for National Geographic doing illustrations of essentially like ancient culture. So the kind of stuff that you'll see in like a National Geographic or whatever that is a realistic rendering of what, based upon the archaeology that we have, what daily life might have looked like in an ancient civilization.

### **Wren**

Oh, I always love that sort of art.

### **Brandon**

It was doing that kind of art that made him kind of stop and like, say, hey, I could do something a little different with this skill of like, rendering these civilizations that we have incomplete data on in this realistic form. And so that was kind of the nugget for Dinotopia. The first piece he did was Waterfall City, probably the best known image from Dinotopia, the iconic two page spread of like the first time that we get to see Waterfall City from afar. That was inspired by Niagara Falls. And then he started to think about more notions of like dinosaurs and humans living together. And this was at a time in...this would have been like, during the late 80s, when the science of dinosaurs was changing, like the notion that dinosaurs are closer to modern birds than modern reptiles was starting to, like really penetrate and become apparent and that dinosaurs probably weren't the just huge, plodding, slow reptiles that, like older depictions of dinosaurs are, and probably lived lives that would look more like birds in a lot of cases.

### **Wren**

Yeah, he does mention the Crystal Palace in this, just like a slight little nudge, like about how wrong the Crystal Palace depictions are, which I appreciated.

### **Brandon**

And so that set him to thinking about, well, if they're like birds, you know, maybe they're warm blooded, they'd be more active. That also maybe means that they would be more social, more intelligent, etc, on the basis of you know, how real birds behave. And so that's kind of where like, wedding dinosaurs and people into a setting came from. The second piece he did was the Dinosaur Parade, which is the spread that's in Sauropolis, near the end of the book, and then a little after that made the first map of Dinotopia itself, which kind of is what cemented those two pieces as like pieces of a world and not just like two paintings he decided to do. And then the rest of stuff began talking to experts, sketching and doing studies of skeletons, learning what we think they might look like, you know, with flesh, and things like that. He also used maquettes quite a bit. So definitely go like check out his YouTube channel and stuff, because you'll see some cool maquettes that he uses to figure out light and poses.

### **Wren**

What's a maquette?

**Brandon**

It's a little model of a thing. I don't know what makes it a maquette specifically. It's the kind of thing that you see, mainly with film, I think? I don't actually know exactly when a thing is a maquette and when it's not. They're particularly useful for you know, making a small poseable reference model for say, a character that's going to be animated or something like that. Like he has a little Bix maquette. James Gurney's YouTube channel, which I think is just under the name James Gurney, has some cool things, because in more recent years, he's also just released more stuff that's like art education. Like you know, here's here's how to do some of these things. Here's how to capture this stuff in your art. So so there's lots of good stuff out there if you check out his his YouTube, his site, which I think is Gurney Journey.

**Wren**

That's cute.

**Brandon**

From there Dinotopia: A World Apart from Time, the first book, came out in '92. The follow up, The World Beneath, came out in '95. They both won Hugos for best artwork. A series of young reader novels in the mid-90s followed, written by a lot of different people. I read a bunch of those. They're not all a series. They are numbered, but like they're different, essentially, episodic tales, which did allow me as a kid to sort of dig into certain areas of Dinotopia that aren't as featured in the books themselves, in the the main books. A couple adult novels came out, both by Alan Dean Foster. And yeah...Gurney has continued to release some stuff from time to time. First Flight, the prequel, came out in '99, and Journey to Chandara, the second sequel, came out in 2007. I hope I hope there's more. I don't know if there's more, but I always, I always would love to see if he has more stuff. There was a TV version.

**Wren**

Oh, no.

**Brandon**

In 2002, there was a TV miniseries made by Hallmark.

**Wren**

Oh, no.

**Brandon**

I watched at the time, I was dubious. And it was it was it existed. I recall it being disappointing, but not like, offensively bad. It wasn't the Sci-Fi miniseries based on Earthsea, which is offensively bad. It was just kind of bleh. And then there was a live action show that followed the miniseries that I actually did not know existed until years later, and only aired six of its 13 episodes. There was also an animated movie that I think was direct to video, which I didn't see there was a video game for the Gameboy Advance, I believe, based on that ish, which I never played. All of those things like took various liberties with the setting. None of them strictly adapt the story of the book. Like none of them are about Arthur

and Will, though the miniseries, at least, there are characters that appear in the books, but the the miniseries is set some decades later. There was at one point talk of possibly a live action film as early as the mid-90s. In fact, controversially, George Lucas was apparently very briefly in a room talking about a DDinotopia project that didn't end up happening, and then when Episode I came out, people were like, "Theed looks like Waterfall City. And the Gungan parade at the end of the movie looks like Dinotopia." So there was a little bit of just like fan hubbub. Gurney himself has always been like chill about it. So that's...that's the most drama that I could find about Dinotopia.

**Brandon**

So the time I think has come. I'm at five giant peaches.

**Wren**

Me too.

**Brandon**

I think I've waffled on like what five means. I think five means Dinotopia. I think Dinotopia is the bar.

**Wren**

I can't really imagine being as invested in many of the other books that we've read so far. So...

**Brandon**

Oh, one last Gurney fact that I'm glad I put in the outline because I forgot it in my brain, but then I looked at the outline and it's there: he has a dinosaur named after him.

**Wren**

Yikes! That's awesome.

**Brandon**

Torvosaurus gurneyi.

**Wren**

Gurney-ee.

**Brandon**

Yes. Gurney with an i at the end. I guess to make it...

**Wren**

Gurney-eye!

**Brandon**

...look Latin. It's a mid-to-late Jurassic theropod. Approximately ish in the size range of the T. rex. Was named in 2014. Found in Portugal. Currently largest named theropod in Europe. Yeah. Wow. Will any other thing score 10 total giant peaches?

**Wren**

Find out next time! Probably not next time.

**Brandon**

What are we doing next time?

**Wren**

Hoo, boy. Well, as promised, we are reading a book. Another book that I read in fifth grade that was assigned to me by a teacher that uh, I'm just really excited to revisit. It is called Z for Zachariah. It is post-ap. It's by Robert C. O'Brien. I assume the C does not stand for Chief. And it's about a girl in the apocalypse. And that's what I got.

**Brandon**

My Dog Ate My Book Report is hosted and produced by Wren and Brandon, and edited by the fabulous Derrick Valen.

**Wren**

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**Brandon**

Dat otter. Dat otter tho.

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**Brandon**

We'd be super excited to know what books you loved growing up!

**Wren**

Thanks for listening!