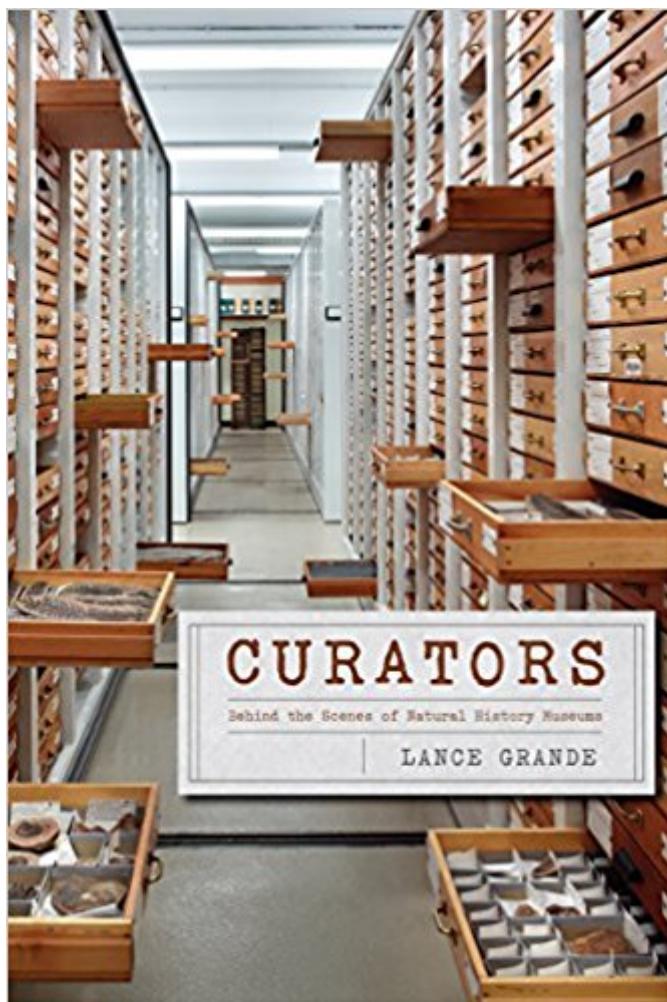


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# Curators: Behind The Scenes Of Natural History Museums



## Synopsis

Over the centuries, natural history museums have evolved from being little more than musty repositories of stuffed animals and pinned bugs, to being crucial generators of new scientific knowledge. They have also become vibrant educational centers, full of engaging exhibits that share those discoveries with students and an enthusiastic general public. At the heart of it all from the very start have been curators. Yet after three decades as a natural history curator, Lance Grande found that he still had to explain to people what he does. This book is the answer—and, oh, what an answer it is: lively, exciting, up-to-date, it offers a portrait of curators and their research like none we've seen, one that conveys the intellectual excitement and the educational and social value of curation. Grande uses the personal story of his own career—most of it spent at Chicago's storied Field Museum—to structure his account as he explores the value of research and collections, the importance of public engagement, changing ecological and ethical considerations, and the impact of rapidly improving technology. Throughout, we are guided by Grande's keen sense of mission, of a job where the why is always as important as the what. This beautifully written and richly illustrated book is a clear-eyed but loving account of natural history museums, their curators, and their ever-expanding roles in the twenty-first century.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 432 pages

Publisher: University Of Chicago Press (March 21, 2017)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 022619275X

ISBN-13: 978-0226192758

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.8 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 2.9 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 12 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #107,877 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #21 in Books > Business & Money > Industries > Museums #29 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Museum Studies & Museology #117 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History

## Customer Reviews

"Curators is both an autobiography and a hymn to some of Grande's more remarkable

predecessors and colleagues. He is generous in their praise. . . . Sadly, the importance of science centred on museum collections is losing traction. . . . This is tragic. Creeping philistinism values only the bottom line, and there is little money to be made in (say) fish evolution. Maybe Grande's book will help to reverse the trend." (Richard Fortey *Nature*) "In *Curators*, one of our leading paleontologists, Lance Grande, takes us behind the scenes of a great museum. Their precious collections and hidden corridors hold tales of adventure, debate, and global exploration all in the search for knowledge. *Curators* reveals the national treasures that are our natural history museums and tells the stories of how they hold secrets of our past, but also keys to the future." (Neil Shubin, author of *Your Inner Fish*) "Think of natural history museums, and spectacular displays of monstrous dinosaurs, gorgeous minerals and archeological finds pop into our minds. But few people realize what goes on behind the scenes: Who collects those specimens? Who gets them ready to be put on display? Who interprets what the specimens mean? Without the scientists on staff of the larger natural museums, none of this would be possible. In *Curators*, Lance Grande, a veteran paleontologist at the Field Museum in Chicago, vividly brings the lives, times and hard work of the scientists of his and other natural museums out into the open. It is must reading for all of us who love these wonderful caverns dedicated to understanding the history of life and of the earth itself." (Niles Eldredge, emeritus curator, American Museum of Natural History) "Lance Grande has lived his life as a natural museum curator, a profession that emerged in the nineteenth century. His memoir shines a bright light on this profession, its roots, and its place in the twenty-first century. Through the lens of his own experience as an expert on fossil fish, Grande has crafted a narrative that grows, along with his career, to encompass the breadth of Chicago's fabled Field Museum and to argue for the relevance of natural history in our time. Blasting through dusty stereotypes, he passionately shows just how interesting it can be to live the surprisingly splendid life of a curator." (Kirk Johnson, director, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History)

Lance Grande is the Negaunee Distinguished Service Curator at the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, where he conducts research on fishes, paleontology, and evolutionary biology. He is the author of more than one hundred books and scientific articles, including *The Lost World of Fossil Lake: Scenes from Deep Time* and *Gems and Gemstones: Timeless Natural Beauty of the Mineral World*.

I enjoy travel and museums around the world. I picked this book up recognizing the authors name from the Chicago Field Museum and half expected a dry but educational read about both of these

interests. I quickly realized how much more it was. I was drawn from the start into the interesting and, dare I say it, exciting world of the curator. Lance Grande has a talent for storytelling with both humor and intrigue far beyond what you would expect from a paleontologist. Who knew! It would not surprise me to find this on the required reading list of high schools and colleges in the near future and by that means spark the interest in a whole new crop of up and coming curators. I hope Dr. Grande writes a follow up with more tales from his life and that of his fellow curators.

With this book, Lance Grande accomplishes a difficult but vital service: he presents science in an accessible way that will be thoroughly engaging to a wide audience. He focuses on people and through their fascinating stories he shares his passion (and theirs) for exploring the mysteries of nature. Just one of many examples involves the last days of a former Field Museum curator Karl Schmidt. A herpetologist, Schmidt was examining a live snake in the museum when he was bitten. Always the scientist, Schmidt recorded in great detail the effects of the bite that soon led to his death. Curators is a celebration of Schmidt and the other curators who facilitate our understanding and appreciation of nature.

As other reviewers have noted, this book is genuinely engaging and easy to read: It is chock full of engaging stories and richly interwoven with the author's personal insights into the individuals and historical events that have shaped our perspectives on science itself. I greatly appreciated the insight into the true work of museums - the laborious, highly personal process involved in the creation of the world of "known knowns" - which is undertaken by brilliant people who have so utterly consecrated themselves to their work. It also struck me that this book does a very good job of (gently) making a broader point that natural history museums are a largely under-appreciated resource, and their collections and knowledge are increasingly relevant to our lives as we face climate change, the rising use of genetic modification, the proliferation of invasive species, the long-term effects of having so many billions of humans on the planet, etc. A marvelous, thought-inducing read, highly recommended.

So few people understand the behind-the-scenes at natural history museums - this book paints this picture. Dr Grande speaks of "a series of chance circumstances and personally influential people" who helped him get into this career. I wish everyone would read this book - especially to the young - to look a career choices and a great story of how to pursue your passion. The description of the internal workings and scientific politicking of museums is fascinating and the chapter on the

quarrying of fossils in Wyoming was eye-opening. I am still smiling about the Fish Rodeo - who knew? And the inside story of Sue the dinosaur is another bonus. I will stop and not give any of it away - Dr Grande does a great job at exposing the inside of museum work. I wish it was on every neighborhood library shelf for many to enjoy.

Not at all what I expected! This book is full of vignettes from the life of a fascinating character and nuggets of information that are entertaining to consume. A great read, far from a stuffy scientific tome.

World renowned paleontologist Lance Grande takes us behind the scenes of a major natural history museum, telling stories about the people behind the science. The stories are well-written and highly entertaining. This is a fun book for all those interested in natural history.

A great discussion of what goes on behind the scenes in one of the worlds great natural history museums and research institutions. If you love science, you will love reading about how science is actually done!

Great story lines about museum curators as well as the "history" of natural history collections. The pictures alone would be worth it - but the stories are priceless as well.

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