

Book Review

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Hell Creek. By L.M. Graziano and M.S.A. Graziano. Trafford Publishing. Softcover 275pp.

Five people and a German shepherd are in a concrete vault in the physics laboratory of a university called Creekbend in the fossil-rich state of South Dakota. The vault is fitted out with computers, wires, cables, copper tubing, pressure chambers and esoteric instruments studded with dials and gauges and so on. The equipment is a bit the worse for wear: there has been a small explosion. Dr. Shanker, a physicist, has been knocked down and bloodied. Shanker's colleague, the beautiful Yariko Miyakara, is telling everybody to get out of the vault as quickly and quietly as they can. Julian Whitney, a paleontologist who arrived a few minutes ago, is trying not to be sick. Frank, a security guard, is examining Dr. Shanker's injuries and ignoring Yariko's order to leave. A second security guard, a very unlucky young man, thrusts his upper body through the hatch-like doorway. There they all are, and- KABOOM, explosion number two, a real humdinger this time: "the world heaved and disappeared in blackness and noise, sparks and confusion."

Dr. Shanker, Yariko, Julian, Frank and the dog wake up on a white beach by an azure sea. The sun smiles down, the land behind them is as green and dense as a Caribbean forest. Where are we? St. Thomas? Bermuda? And where are all the people? While the four are pondering these questions a gigantic reptile rises out of the sea: a crocodile the size of an 18-wheeler. Down the beach another appears and the two beasts rollick in the ocean making fearful noises and-how to put this?-mate. Julian, the paleontologist, can identify the crocodiles, deinosaurs and has some bad news for everybody: deinosaurs lived in the Cretaceous period. They have been extinct for 65-million years.

So begins L.M. Graziano's and M.S.A. Graziano's time travel thriller, *Hell Creek*. Lisa Graziano, who lives in Hatchville, is a former oceanography professor at Sea Education Association in Woods Hole; Michael Graziano, her brother, teaches neuroscience at Princeton. The Grazianos obviously know their stuff, and even at its most fantastic *Hell Creek* has more than a whiff of plausibility. Time travel? It is called "translocation" and Yariko makes a convincing-sort of-case for it: "Think of it as a long straight rope that can be folded. Time travel requires folds so that linear time differences meet ever so briefly, allowing mass to be transferred."

Sounds logical to me. And if you can cross from fold to fold once, then surely you can cross back again-back, that is, from the Cretaceous to the year 2006. Yariko makes some calculations-I admit the logic eluded me here-and concludes that the moment for reverting will come precisely two months from now, at a precise location 1,000 miles from this beach. The time travelers, if they ever want to see an electric light again, have no choice but to start walking.

Meanwhile, back in Creekbend in 2006, the local police are investigating the disappearance of four and a half people and a dog. A human body, cleanly severed at the waist, lies just outside the vault. The vault itself is a shambles of charred and mangled instruments but, astoundingly, contains no dead bodies, no torso, no blood, no bones, no ashes. No one died here, it is clear. The police chief, a shrewd young woman named Sharon Earles, calls in a couple of crack physicists to see what they can make of the puzzle. The physicists, an ambitious and weasel-like man and a ruthless and cunning woman, have a pretty good idea what happened. They also small a Nobel Prize in the situation, provided the time travelers stay where they are. The two of them cut a deal with each other, agreeing to share the Nobel. Sharon Earles begins to smell a rat. She talks to Yariko's student lab assistant, who was in the vault just before the explosion and as suspicious of his own. The question is, can the vault be repaired in time to receive the missing persons back from wherever they went? Back in the Cretaceous the time travelers get down to the uncongenial business of catching something to eat, building a fire, making weapons, and setting out on their journey, which lies across water, forests and mountains populated by carnivorous dinosaurs. Frank, who might have been equal to these challenges, arrived in the Cretaceous with a broken leg and, before the journey commences, has a fatal encounter with a small dinosaur that walks erect like a man. Julian won't be much help, being timid and about 20 pounds out of shape. Dr. Shanker is physically powerful but no outdoorsman. Yariko-athletic, spunky, resourceful-is the group's best hope for survival.

The Grazianos' make-believe science comes with some intriguing concepts. If matter-a live human being, for instance-can be translated backward through time, who is to say that that same

human can't be reconstituted simultaneously in different pasts? Think of the explosion in the vault as a cloning process so violent that the clones are scattered far and wide in the past. Julian, separated from the others and trudging on along, comes upon a man named Carl living alone in a stone hut. Carl, it turns out, speaks some rudimentary English. A time traveler, clearly, or the descendant of time travelers. What's his story? He can't say, or won't. Yariko, when Julian rejoins her, has a theory. What color are Carl's eyes? What color are Julian's? Suppose she and Julian, somewhere else in time, had a baby?

No need to check the color of Dr. Shanker's eyes. His considerable vigor finds other outlets, and his affection for Yariko is wholesome and avuncular. Julian, on the other hand, is head over heels. In Creekbend she had a boyfriend and Julian could only eye her wistfully at campus cocktail parties; translocation for Julian, even to a place where a dinosaur might bite you in half, has its consolations. He is a sweet man and Yariko begins to notice this, and as one thing leads to another Julian can almost wish he'll never see Creekbend again.

The Hell Creek of the title is a fossil deposit stretching across Montana, North and South Dakota, and Wyoming. In the Cretaceous period these states were under an ocean, and when they wake up on the beach the time travelers are no great distance from modern-day Creekbend. The genuine science in *Hell Creek*-paleontology, geology, evolution, natural history-is rendered with clarity and vividness and gives the novel its richness. I only wish the Grazianos' editors had been more attentive, and that the spelling and usage were as good as the science. "All right" is mis-spelled throughout, "its" becomes "it's," and no one in the building seems to have had any idea how to conjugate "lie" and "lay." Aside from these annoyances, *Hell Creek* is plain fun, and educational at that. Short of time travel, this is as close as you'll ever get to the silent, grim, predatory world of the Cretaceous, a nightmare Eden crawling with monsters that come in all sizes.