



# BOOK REVIEW

## STEIN PÅ STEIN

Henrik H. Svensen, Aschehaug Press, 2018

Reviewed by Anne Hope Jahren, Wilson Professor, University of Oslo at Blindern

Henrik H. Svensen's newest book *Stein på stein* (Aschehaug Press) is about digging for the past, in every sense: as a geologist, as a son, as a father, as a person. It is by far the most personal of the author's literary offerings, which include *The end is near: About natural disasters and society* (2006) and *Bergtatt: The history of the mountains and the fascination of the elevated*, which appeared in 2011.

*Stein på stein* is a geologist's quest to find the reason for the greatest crisis the Earth has ever known: the "Permian Crisis," a massive extinction that occurred 252 million years ago and obliterated more than ninety-percent of all life on Earth. To take the liberty of a modern metaphor, the Permian Crisis effectively wiped the Earth's biological hard drive clean, and everything – everything – both in the sea and on the land had to start over. Almost every organism we know of, save for a few scrawny horsetails on land and some odd shells in the ocean, evolved from scratch during the last 252 million years.

This leaves the intrepid geologist Svensen with two burning questions: What was the earth like before this crisis? and What caused this devastation? During the 252 million years since the Permian Crisis, most of the rocks that existed then have been lost to us forever: across the intervening eons, they have broken down and been recycled into sand, then melted or re-cemented into younger rocks, both chemically and physically unlike whatever they used to be. Thus a geologist's quest for the Truth of the Permian Crisis

is more like the story of Don Quixote than an episode of Sherlock Holmes, it is as much or more about what motivates him to stay the course than it is about what he finds along the way.

Nevertheless, Svensen imparts all there is to be known about this great moment in Earth's History, describing state-of-the-art findings and hypotheses with the simplicity, humility and grace that earned him the Norwegian Research Council's Dissemination Award in 2017 (Forskningrådets formidlings pris). But more than that, Svensen shares with us his moments of vulnerability while searching for answers – ranging from the intellectual confusion that comes from too many valid hypotheses to the physical misery of spending days in the field carsick and thousands of miles from home. But throughout the book, as a literal backdrop for the action, is a vision of nature: a view from a mountain top, a stone in your hand, a wall of rock that stands one meter in front of you. It is these fine descriptions of what the geologist sees as he works that allows the reader to fully taste the seduction of working outside, and learning to love the rocks that often mean so much but more often say so little.

At present *Stein på stein* is only available in bokmål, but hopefully, like Svensen's other books, it will soon find itself translated into multiple languages. In the meantime, my advice is to enjoy it in its mother tongue, and by doing so, celebrate your special connection to a fellow Nordmann who, like all researchers, digs for answers, and on most days, uncovers just enough strength to keep digging.