Turtles, Tortoises and Terrapins: A Natural History. R. Orenstein. 2012. Firefly Books. ISBN 9781770851191. 448 p. $59.95 (hardcover).—This book joins an ever-growing list of books written about turtles in the last 75 years, a reflection of the strong interest in this iconic group of vertebrates by scientists and the public alike (Lovich and Ennen, 2013). The book is not an attempt to systematically review all that is known or published for various turtle species at global, continental, or oceanic scales, as did books by Pope (1939), Carr (1952), Ernst and Barbour (1972, 1989), Pritchard (1979), Alderton (1988), Ernst et al. (1994), Cann (1998), Klemens (2000), Ferri (2002), Spotila (2004), and Ernst and Lovich (2009), to name a few. Instead, the book is a self-professed “popular” account of all things turtle, with major sections on “Why turtles matter,” “What turtles are” (including abbreviated discussions of various species), “How turtles live,” and “Will turtles survive?” As such, this book bears more similarity to those written by Obst (1988), Gibbons and Greene (2009), and in some regard (especially the greatly abbreviated species summaries) Bonin et al. (2006). It is a revision of the author’s earlier book (Orenstein, 2001), which I have not examined.

The first question I had when I was asked to review this book was, “Who is Ronald Orenstein?” Although I recognized the name as a participant on the LISTSERV for the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group, I knew little else about him. A quick search on Google Scholar and review of the information provided in the book and by the press revealed a surprisingly versatile individual. He is an accomplished Canadian ornithologist, conservationist, and a lawyer! With this background, it is even more impressive that he was able to synthesize the vast amount of turtle information compiled in the book. However, I should point out that he had wise council along the way, engaging a significant number of turtle experts (listed in his Acknowledgments) to help edit the entire book or review various chapters. Based on this approach, one would expect a limited number of errors, and in large measure, this is true. However, I did find some errors that are worth noting. Some of these are expected when taking complex topics and attempting to simplify them for a general audience unfamiliar with scientific details. Others are errors of omission or commission that slip by, despite good editing.

For example, on pages 22 and 191, the photos labeled as Terrapene ornata show T. c. carolina instead. Page 210 shows a photo of what appears to be a Western Painted Turtle (Chrysemys picta bellii), but the caption lists it as a Midland Painted Turtle (C. p. marginata). Elsewhere, Orenstein attributes the “humped shells” of Leopard Tortoises (Geochelone pardalis) to “... scavenging the carcasses of large mammals or eating the feces of Serengeti carnivores.” Neither food source would be expected for what is essentially an obligate herbivore (Rall and Fairall, 1993; Kabigumila, 2001). The author’s suggestion that the terms nuchal (bone) and cervical (scute) are interchangeable is at odds with over 37 years of diagrams and nomenclature suggesting their independence (Ernst and Lovich, 2009), although this is not without controversy (Dundee, 1989).

One area where oversimplification may cause confusion among non-scientists is the section about the placement of turtles in the higher classification of vertebrates, especially when he states, “Turtles, though, are unquestionably reptiles, even in the modern sense of the word” (p. 51). Although most herpetologists will be familiar with the complex backstory, enthusiasts may be puzzled by the suggestion that turtles were ever considered anything other than reptiles. The excellent review of the controversy by Harding (2006) would have been a very useful addition to this section. Despite the author’s goal of creating a popular book, this section was far too long and technically detailed for the target audience. To the author’s credit, he admits on page 57, 12 pages after beginning his discussion on the evolution of turtles, that he is relieved to move the reader away from “... potential proto-turtles, pseudo-turtles, quasi-turtles and definitely-not-turtles that littered the Permian and the Early Triassic...” Alas, there are 18 pages yet to come before the long history of turtle evolution is finished at about seven million years per page for the entire section. An additional item I noted is that Orenstein is inconsistent with attribution to the authors whose work he describes. A few are recognized by name, but many others are not. While this is not a standard scientific work with citations, more consistency in attribution would have completed each highlighted research vignette with proper credit given to the particular authors who did the work.

The species “accounts” have some shortcomings as well. For example, the described eastern limit of the range of the Razorback Musk Turtle (Sternotherus carinatus) stops at “…the