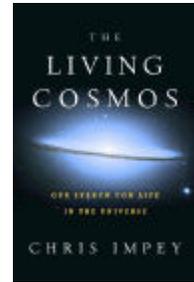


The Living Cosmos: Our Search for Life in the Universe by Chris Impey

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Reviewed by Tim Davis



Suppose you were living in Athens in the 5th century B.C., and suppose you looked around you. It would be reasonable for you to think a great deal about your world and assume that you were living in a finite environment in which you and your immediate surroundings were the absolute center of everything else that you could see (or imagine) beyond the horizon and in the skies.

Then fast-forward a bit and suppose you were living in the 16th century and had the audacity to suggest - as the Dominican monk Giordano Bruno suggested - that this place we call Earth is not the center of everything; moreover, you could suggest (like Bruno) that the stars (and the Sun) are simply huge balls of glowing gas, and you could further suggest that all those stars (those ones you see with your own eyes and the others that must certainly be out there somewhere) almost certainly have planets orbiting them. Then - making a large intellectual leap of faith, with no pun intended - you could make the outrageously dangerous suggestion that some of those probable planets might be home to living creatures.

Now, fast-forward again and here you are in the 21st century, and - unlike the introspective Athenian and unlike the unfortunate Bruno (more about him later) - you might wonder if scientists are any closer to either proving or disproving Bruno's bothersome notion.

Well, now in a fascinating volume, you have the answer to that question. *The Living Cosmos*, an erudite though highly readable book by Chris Impey, one of the world's most distinguished astronomers, takes an exhaustive and illuminating look at astrobiology, an exciting new science that is enthusiastically involved in the rigorous search for life in the universe.

Impey begins his great new book with a quick 2500 year history of how we've learned about our place in the universe, and then he follows that introductory survey with intriguing discussions of biological and astronomical evolution, the changing solar system, the possibility of life on other planets (in our own and in other planetary systems), and - the most intriguing question - the possibility and probability of intelligent life elsewhere in the mind-boggling expanse and variety of the universe.

Consistently engrossing and provocative, and frequently absolutely mind-blowing in its implications, *The Living Cosmos* is filled with scientific details but it remains accessible to readers without a background in astronomy and science. This book is most highly recommended, and - to put minds at ease - it is not a dangerous book: You can safely read and enjoy this book without ever risking the same unfortunate fate as the aforementioned Giordano Bruno (who was,

you ought to know, paraded naked through the streets of Rome, tied to the stake with a stout rope, and burned to death - after having had a nail driven through his tongue and into his jaw to stop him from speaking such outrageous ideas).

It is comforting (to many of us) to know that scientific inquiry and knowledge are no longer death-sentence heresies, and we are quite free (at least we can safely presume) to ask what some might suggest is the naïve question, '*Are we alone?*' ***The Living Cosmos*** is the perfect place to begin thinking about all the possible answers though the answers themselves will be fascinating to some and downright frightening to others (especially those others who have still have a supply of ropes, nails, and firewood waiting for us somewhere in storage).