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The Eerie Silence: Renewing Our Search For Alien Intelligence



Synopsis

Fifty years ago, a young astronomer named Frank Drake pointed a radio telescope at nearby stars in the hope of picking up a signal from an alien civilization. Thus began one of the boldest scientific projects in history, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). But after a half century of scanning the skies, astronomers have little to report but an eerie silence---eerie because many scientists are convinced that the universe is teeming with life. The problem, argues leading physicist and astrobiologist Paul Davies, is that we've been looking in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and in the wrong way. Davies should know. For more than three decades, he has been closely involved with SETI and now chairs the SETI Post-Detection Taskgroup, charged with deciding what to do if we're confronted with evidence of alien intelligence. In this extraordinary book, he shows how SETI has lost its edge, then offers a new and exciting road map for the future. Davies believes that our search so far has been overly anthropocentric: we tend to assume an alien species will look, think, and behave like us. He argues that we need to be far more expansive in our efforts, and in this book he completely redefines the search, challenging existing ideas of what form an alien intelligence might take, how it might try to communicate with us, and how we should respond if we ever do make contact. A provocative and mind-expanding journey, *The Eerie Silence* will thrill fans of science and science fiction alike.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The search for extra-terrestrial intelligence, or SETI, is in a rut. That is Paul Davies's message in

'The Eerie Silence - Are we alone in the Universe' - a thorough taking stock of the programme started by Frank Drake in 1959 to search for alien radio messages from outer space. Davies wants a rethink from scratch, where we shake off the blinkers of anthropocentric thinking and question exactly what we should be looking for. Listening out for a direct radio message is fine, but lets extend the search to include more subtle evidence of alien legacy and the very origin of life. ET has indeed been strangely quiet, and for Davies two rather extreme explanations for that are providing signposts to a 'New SETI'. Under the first option, we have to accept that life on Earth was born of a series of events so incredibly flukey they will never be repeated. Under the second, we face the chilling prospect that intelligent life pops up quite frequently, only to develop a propensity for technology fueled self-destruction. Holding out hope for a middle way, and putting speculation over self-destructing aliens aside, Davies argues there is a raft of solid science we could be getting on with to better understand the scarcity of life. Those up for the task (and skilled enough to secure funding) will enter a field of polarised opinions and a paucity of hard evidence. The prize? - possibly the final word on the question of whether life is ubiquitous in the universe - a 'cosmic imperative' - or that you and I here on Earth are a one-off, somewhat lonesome, rarity.

When this book first came out four years ago it caused a brief stir within the SETI community although it seems to have been quickly forgotten afterward. Paul Davies is an astrophysicist at Arizona State University and he has been peripherally involved in SETI for many decades. He heads the SETI Post-Detection Taskgroup which is supposed to make recommendations concerning how first contact is to be handled. The basic gist of Davies' book is that the current SETI community is going about the job all wrong. They are looking for the wrong signal in the wrong way at the wrong time and Davies has some specific suggestions for a New SETI that will correct the mistakes of the Old SETI and put it on the right track. He calls the lack of success of the Old SETI during the past fifty years the Eerie Silence although by the end of the book he lets on that this failure may have more significance than just the mere fact that the Old SETI technique has been all wrong. So it is no surprise that the book stirred up a hornet's nest of controversy within the SETI community when it was first published. It was probably intended to do just that. But after reading the entire book I can't help but thinking that Davies' suggestions for improvement are a bit vague and nonspecific with many of them not having anything specifically to do with the search for intelligence out there, but rather a general astrobiological program designed to improve our understanding of many of the terms of the Drake equation. But before we begin discussing these let's take a look at the general mode of search that modern SETI takes and how it would confirm a signal. Let's

imagine a radio dish somewhere pointed at some point in the heavens and searching a wide swath of the microwave spectrum.

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