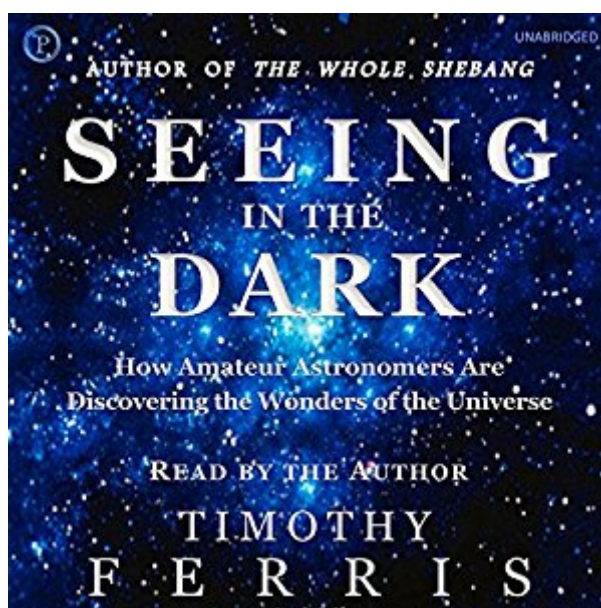


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Seeing In The Dark: How Backyard Stargazers Are Probing Deep Space And Guarding Earth From Interplanetary Peril



Synopsis

In *Seeing in the Dark*, a poetic love letter to science and to the skies, Timothy Ferris invites us all to become stargazers. He recounts his own experiences as an enthralled lifelong amateur astronomer and reports from around the globe -- from England and Italy to the Florida Keys and the Chilean Andes -- on the revolution that's putting millions in touch with the night sky. In addition, Ferris offers an authoritative and engaging report on what's out there to be seen -- what Saturn, the Ring nebula, the Silver Coin galaxy, and the Virgo supercluster really are and how to find them. The appendix includes star charts, observing lists, and a guide on how to get involved in astronomy. Ferris takes us inside a major revolution sweeping astronomy, as lone amateur astronomers, in global networks linked by the Internet, make important discoveries that are the envy of the professionals. His ability to describe the wonders of the universe is simply magical, and his enthusiasm for his subject is irresistible. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 11 hours and 34 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Phoenix Books

Audible.com Release Date: November 4, 2002

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00007EIDM

Best Sellers Rank: #91 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science > Astronomy #427 in Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Star-Gazing #621 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Nature

Customer Reviews

My heart sank when I began to read this book and read many of the chapters were originally published in *The New Yorker*. My fear was born out. These essays were written for the cocktail set on the Upper East Side, not for an amateur astronomer. There were a couple of good reads, most notable a few of the interviews, especially O'Meara. However, I found most of it to be written for someone with little to no exposure to the night sky. There was a great chapter on some of the accomplishments of amateur astronomers through history which was quite informative. The deep

sky section was a simple overview of what any hobbyist with a year or two of observing already knows. Disappointment if your into astronomy, probably a good read if you wish to impress the cocktail crowd.

This is an informative and at times whimsical work about outer space, specifically who is doing the observing and what is being observed. The material goes considerably beyond the title, as only one chapter actually treats of near earth objects [NEO's] at depth, and I am still confused over the author's distinction between "amateur" and "professional" astronomers. With those caveats in mind, "Seeing In The Dark" is a fine overview of astronomy for those of us who have been out of school awhile and think of Pluto as the edge of the meaningful universe. As a boy I was intrigued by astronomy and at age 10 owned an off-the shelf hand telescope that, in my recollection, simply made the bright stars brighter. I once tried to observe the crescent of Venus through my mother's hand mirror and a magnifying glass. I did get to see the rings of Saturn, finally, through the 8" telescope at the Buffalo Museum of Science, and to this day I divide the world into those who have seen that spectacle firsthand and those who haven't. Popular astronomy in the 1950's was lunar and planetary: the supposed canal system of Mars, for example, was still an issue of debate. I lost my interest in the 1960's when astronomy became less optical and more electronic. Real observations and photos of heavenly bodies are egalitarian. Spectroscopic charts, radio waves, radar exploration and the like required time, sophisticated education, and money. Every decade or so something would catch my fancy: Apollo 11, Viking, Pioneer, Hubble, Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9, Cassini. But why should an amateur like myself spend money and time at something already being done with more precision at Arecibo in Puerto Rico or Mt. Palomar in California, or from a satellite in space, for that matter? Timothy Ferris argues in so many words that the modern astronomical-industrial complex, so to speak, is too big and too expensive to perform some of the most critical work of present day astronomy. The author provides a plethora of examples, such as planetary weather. Most planets have atmospheres with characteristics not entirely unlike the earth's own. The atmospheres of the large outer planets [and in at least one case, a planetary satellite] have predictable patterns of wind currents and even storms that produce lightning. Mars, we have come to realize, has significant dust storms and seasonal markers. To monitor these systems, however, requires daily observations over months and years. With the crush of competition for seat time for the monster telescopes and the costs involved, such meticulous and time consuming planetary observations are gradually falling into the hands of the dedicated [and exquisitely patient] amateur backyard astronomers. The older, smaller, and midrange telescopes

have come into a new age of usefulness, where persistence is of equal value to optical power. And, as the author observes, the marriage of a modest telescope with digital photography, computer controls, and Internet access to professionals, has created a formidable network of information gatherers. Nowhere is the amateur's value of more importance than in the discovery and tracking of NEO's, asteroids whose orbits regularly criss-cross the earth's. Observation of these dangerous bodies and forecast of collisions is extremely difficult for several reasons. NEO's are hard to see [in some instances, at the 29th magnitude], only small tracks of their orbits are currently known, and they are notoriously vulnerable to gravitational influences from the earth, the sun, and even Jupiter. Science has developed a public coding system for risk from each known object, and I would venture a guess that readers will find particular stimulation from Ferris's discussion of the "Torino Scale." [As I was reading this work, I checked the day's "Torino forecast" on NASA's web site, the very day that NASA used a "Torino 4" rating for the first time, for Asteroid 2004MN4. As this occurred the same day as the Asian tsunami, little or no press coverage was devoted to the event, though astronomers around the world focused on the potential risk of a 2029 collision. The odds for 2004MN4 were downgraded to Torino 1 a few days later.] Suffice to say that NEO's are the "high needs child" of space observation, and every verifiable observation by an amateur astronomer enables NASA and international tracking systems to add another fraction of certainty to a body's orbit. Ferris intersperses observational details of heavenly bodies with interviews of the men and women who do the observing. His use of the word "amateur" is stretched like taffy. Some of these unsalaried observers have spent six-figures in outfitting their equipment or, in some cases, pursuing doctorates to expedite their work. Some have walked away from lucrative professions and made wholesale disruptions in personal and family life on behalf of serious stargazing. In some cases "amateur" does not do justice to what is more appropriately an "obsession." Ferris summarizes what we have come to know about planets, stars and galaxies in the past few generations of advanced study. Again, if one has not addressed astronomy systematically since school days, this work is an excellent primer on our current state of understanding the heavens. There is a thorough 25-page appendix that treats of basic stargazing information, including issues of light pollution, choice of equipment, and basic star charts, as well as a summary of periodicals and web sites. I regretted that there are no photos of any kind in the book, so we never get to see with our own eyes the quality of work produced by the amateurs in our communities. Perhaps the author was deliberately setting out to pique our curiosity, for yesterday I found myself investigating the features and price tag of a small telescope at the Brookstone's in my local mall. It's been a long time since I've done that.

The publication of a new book by an author of Timothy Ferris' stature should pique the interest of most amateur astronomers. Seeing in the Dark is exceptional in this regard, since the book is all about amateur astronomers. Ferris, an avid amateur observer himself, has spent the last few years visiting some prominent amateur astronomers, following them as they engage in what amounts to sophisticated research (for free), going to their star parties, looking at their photos, and just generally learning their stories. Those stories are collected in his new book "Seeing in the Dark," along with Ferris' usual assemblage of science, storytelling, history, and culture. As usual, Ferris has a knack for sounding quotable, as in his description of a total solar eclipse. I've read countless accounts of the powerful visual experience of viewing totality, and Ferris ranks among the best in terms of capturing the raw mix of terror and fascination: "Suddenly the sky collapsed into darkness and a dozen bright stars appeared. In their midst hung an awful, black ball, rimmed in ruby red and surrounded by the doomsday glow of the gray corona. No photograph can do justice to this appalling sight: The dynamic range from bright to dark is too great, and the colors are literally unearthly. I staggered back a few steps, like a drunken man..." The amateur observers that Ferris highlights will be familiar to readers of popular astronomy publications: Jack Newton, Stephen James O'Meara, Don Parker, David Levy, and many more. But few have heard the anecdotes told here, of the personal motivations and triumphs of a handful of legendary sky gazers. There's even a conversation with Brian May, the lead guitarist for the rock band Queen. How many amateurs know that May has a college degree in mathematics and astronomy, or that Queen's little known but outstanding acoustic song '39' is about relativistic time dilation? There's a lot of good science in this book as well. The chapter on the moon contains a wonderful explanation of the tides on Earth, as well as the best summary I've ever read of the various theories about the "moon size" illusion that makes the moon seem huge when seen close to the horizon. Ferris' previous books have established him as a solid popularizer of science and he continues that tradition with Seeing in the Dark. It's an easy blend of history, science and personal experience that is a pleasure to read. I highly recommend this book.

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