



# Five Billion Years of Solitude: The Search for Life Among the Stars

By Lee Billings

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**“A definitive guide to astronomy’s hottest field.” —*The Economist***

Since its formation nearly five billion years ago, our planet has been the sole living world in a vast and silent universe. But over the past two decades, astronomers have discovered thousands of “exoplanets,” including some that could be similar to our own world, and the pace of discovery is accelerating.

In a fascinating account of this unfolding revolution, Lee Billings draws on interviews with the world’s top experts in the search for life beyond earth. He reveals how the search for exoplanets is not only a scientific challenge, but also a reflection of our culture’s timeless hopes, dreams, and fears.

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**Five Billion Years of Solitude: The Search for Life Among the Stars** By Lee Billings **Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### **From Publishers Weekly**

In his efforts to put a human face on the grand hunt for "life among the stars"—or at least a planet where life could exist—science writer Billings loses sight of the search and gets caught up in historical asides, profiles of scientists, and distracting poetic musings. His approach is novel, but all too often the results resemble just that—that is, a novel: Billings relies on interviews with researchers—including Frank Drake of the SETI ("search for extraterrestrial intelligence") Institute, MIT's Sara Seager, and the preeminent discoverer of extrasolar planets, UC Berkley's Geoff Marcy—conducted in relaxed settings: a home in Santa Cruz, a Pennsylvania farm, a family evening in Concord, Mass. Wherever his interviewees skim the surface, Billings fills readers in on the science behind the story. If he had stuck to this format, the book might have worked. Instead, he muddles the narrative with chapters on, for example, the history of astronomy in the Western world and the early epochs of Earth; these topics have been covered better elsewhere. And in his section on Seager, Billings dwells longer on the tragic death of her husband than on her work. The individual pieces are interesting, but they fail to cohere. Agent: Peter Tallack, Science Factory (U.K.). (Oct. 3)

### **From Booklist**

When scientists first began an ambitious search for extraterrestrial radio signals in the early 1960s, the space race was in full swing and government funding for NASA's pet projects was enthusiastically openhanded. Today, the formerly heralded project known as SETI garners a fraction of its once sizable budget, and instead, astronomers are spending more time peering outside our solar system to pinpoint distant worlds dubbed exoplanets. Lately, barely a month passes without the media announcing a new discovery. Exoplanet detection is space science's hottest field, one which science writer Billings surveys here with exceptional clarity while peering over the shoulders of the planet hunters' leading pioneers. Along with an absorbing history of celestial-body sightings from the Greeks to Galileo, Billings profiles colorful contemporary researchers, such as astrophysicist Greg Laughlin, who assesses planets' values based on their available resources (Earth's weigh in at \$5 quadrillion), and astronomer Matt Mountain, who has been lobbying Washington for a billion-dollar space telescope. A fascinating and informative read for both casual and serious astronomy buffs. --Carl Hays

### **Review**

"Graceful... the best book I have read about exoplanets, and one of the few whose language approaches the grandeur of a quest that is practically as old as our genes."

—*New York Times Book Review*

"Will leave readers who aren't rocket scientists slack-jawed"

—*New York Times*

"Billings performs a brilliant sleight of hand...the ending is a poignant reminder that humankind may yet find a way to the stars, but people — the ones we know, the ones we love, the ones we lose — are our entire history and our full universe."

—*The Washington Post*

"The search for Earth-like worlds orbiting distant stars is just a step in the age-old quest to learn whether or not we are alone in the universe. In his compelling, wide-ranging survey, Billings steps back to look at this broader picture, largely through richly textured portraits of some of the giants of the field...[an] extraordinary

tale of scientific discovery."

—*Scientific American*

“Fascinating... A great outline of the subject, bringing what's often treated as science fiction down to Earth where it can be understood.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Exoplanet detection is space science’s hottest field, one which science writer Billings surveys here with exceptional clarity while peering over the shoulders of the planet hunters’ leading pioneers...a fascinating and informative read for both casual and serious astronomy buffs.”

—*Booklist*

“Readers will find [*Five Billion Years of Solitude*] incredibly engaging...Billings has created a book that is not only entertaining, but educational as well.”

—*Universe Today*

“Billings communicates scientific and technical detail fluently, and there is much here to please any geek who does not already know how, say, it is possible to see a distant planet next to a star that outshines it as an exploding nuclear bomb does an unlit match.”

—*The Guardian*

“Astrobiology, the study of alien life, has been a dream—until now. Suddenly the detection of life on other planets no longer seems quite so peculiar. Lee Billings explains how the impossible dream became possible after all.”

—*The Economist “Books of the year”*

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