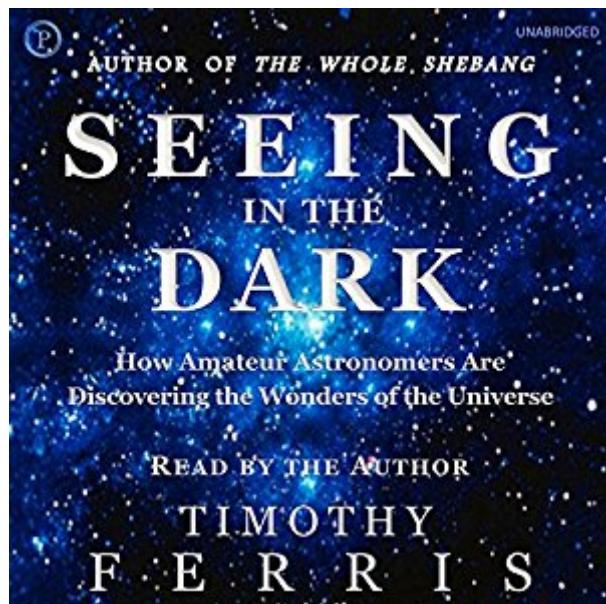


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Seeing In The Dark: How Backyard Stargazers Are Probing Deep Space And Guarding Earth From Interplanetary Peril



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.

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Customer Reviews

As an amateur astronomer myself, I was very pleased to find this wonderful tribute to those whose diligent, patient efforts have expanded our knowledge of the night skies. Ferris, an amateur astronomer himself, provides a well-written and engaging account (with appropriate doses of historical context, anecdotes and humor) of the quirky, sometimes obsessive, but always dedicated individuals who do the "dirty work" that professionals often lack the time--and access to overbooked telescopes and equipment--to perform: monitoring Martian storms, tracking comets, observing the

occasional nova, and much, much more. Their constant vigilance may be our first line of defense against a rogue comet or asteroid, and thanks to improved equipment, their range is greater than ever. (Unfortunately, light pollution sometimes cancels out any gains in technology). Amateur astronomers toil mostly in obscurity and are mostly unheralded outside the field (though the professionals largely appreciate them), which is unfortunate--but Ferris does a wonderful job of giving them their due, revealing the quality work that they perform. Very highly recommended to fans of astronomy, both amateur and professional. One last thought--William Herschel was a practicing amateur when he discovered Uranus. For more Tim Ferris, see "The Sky's Mind," "Coming of Age in the Milky Way," "The Red Limit," and the excellent "The Whole Shebang."

Everybody has done it: looking up at the bright night sky produces mixed feelings of awe at the beauty, and impenetrable mysteries, and the insignificance of our local tiny problems, and other ineffable feelings besides. Serious stargazers just do it better than most. In Seeing in the Dark: How Backyard Stargazers Are Probing Deep Space and Guarding Earth from Interplanetary Peril (Simon & Schuster), Timothy Ferris tells about some of the ones that do it best. A lifelong stargazer, Ferris has his own observatory in the California wine country (he writes about how it was planned and built). He is not a professional astronomer. He is a journalist, one who has produced fine books about science before, but this one is close to his heart, and his enthusiasm is easily apparent and beautifully described. As an amateur himself, Ferris is able to describe the importance of amateur astronomy, and the surprising ways in which the big telescopes on mountaintops used by the professionals, and the Hubble, have not put amateurs out of business. He shows many ways that amateurs are useful, doing explorations and finding objects that throw more light on explaining such serious theories as the Big Bang. One amateur explains, "In how many areas of science can you still make an important discovery without a ton of funding?" There's some prestige in making such discoveries, but one supernova hunter spoke for thousands when he said, "I can't really tell you why I do it." There is a good deal of basic astronomy here, and someone interested in starting in the field will get good advice on doing so. However, this is only partially an astronomy textbook. Even better is that Ferris has given interviews and small biographies of amateur astronomers to give us an idea about how their passion affects them. Take, for instance, John Dobson, who got thrown out of his Krishna monastery because he kept leaving it at night to go use his telescopes. His vow of poverty meant he had to make cheap ones, but he found ways to use scrap plywood and piping to make large telescopes that amateurs could afford. He would set up a scope on the sidewalks of San Francisco and call out, "Come see Saturn!" If a kid came by and showed real interest, Dobson might

give away the telescope and build another one. Ferris's book is an inspiration. Even if you have no intention of ruining your sleep with this sort of activity, it is impossible to withhold admiration from the ones who do love it. Ferris writes with clarity and fervor about the endeavors of his fellow stargazers, and puts their efforts into a broader perspective, as part of the human condition. "We observe, and try to understand, and formulate ideas that, if we're honest with ourselves, we will admit to be 'not quite right.' But we keep trying, knowing that we'll never figure it all out but trusting that if we persevere we shall keep doing better."

Timothy Ferris has an unusual gift for explaining complex subjects in a highly readable, even felicitous, style. The first book I read of his, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*, was a thoroughly entertaining history of how we gradually came to understand the impossibly vast scale of the universe. It evoked awe of our strange and wonderful cosmos while staying refreshingly free of the antireligious crankiness and oddly mystical naturalism of Carl Sagan. *Seeing in the Dark* focuses on areas of astronomy that any of us could plausibly make contributions in - planets, asteroids, comets, the sun, the moon, even SETI. It is fascinating to learn how amateurs continue to make important discoveries and, indeed, how the professionals still depend on them to help expand our understanding of the solar system and beyond. But what I gained most from reading this book was the realization that I don't really have to own an expensive telescope and live in the open desert to enjoy stargazing. I especially appreciated such personal stories as Ferris viewing a lunar occultation of Saturn with a small telescope from his deck in San Francisco. He had to maneuver the tripod into a far corner, wait until the planet drifted into view between his house and a tree, then cope with a bright streetlight by pressing his eye tight against the eyepiece - but it was indisputably worth the effort. This book inspired me to pull my cheap little 2.4 inch refractor out of the garage where it had languished for fifteen years and look again at Saturn's rings and Jupiter's moons. It has re-awakened my youthful fascination with outer space and I am greatly appreciative.

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