

The Eerie Silence by Paul Davies
reviewed by Erin Peters

In *The Eerie Silence*, Paul Davies discusses the current attempt to search for extraterrestrial intelligence and the problems encountered in that search. He explains the history of SETI, how the search for intelligence has change and the limitations researchers face due to the laws of physics. He also explains the policies in place if we are actually contacted by aliens. Throughout the book, Davies keeps reminding us of the big question: are we alone in the universe?

Davies begins his book by giving a history of SETI, from Frank Drake's initial inspiration for using radio waves to listen for life outside our solar system to the large arrays and army of scientists who continue his work to find signs for intelligence in the universe. However, he also points out a huge flaw in the search: alien technology might not resemble our technology. He says, "we only have one sample of life, one sample of advanced intelligence, and one sample of high technology." And, since it's difficult to determine what is unique to us and what might be universal, we just assume the rest of the universe operates as we do. This assumption has bothered me for years, and I'm glad Davies pointed out this flaw in the search for intelligence.

Another flaw he points out, which I hadn't fully considered, is the time radio waves take to travel through space. Any alien intelligence conducting their own search for intelligence life in our region of space is most likely going to see a pre-industrial Earth. Since high technology on Earth has only been around for a century, the radio waves leaving our atmosphere hasn't had time to reach a planet that might have the ability to receive these signals. And then there is the idea that advanced civilizations are short-lived; therefore, it is highly likely that, by the time ET receives our signals and responds, no one will remain on Earth to get the message.

Assuming we overcome all these obstacles and the highly unlikely happens, how do we respond after First Contact? Davies discussed the implications on life as we know it. It would affect science and philosophy in somewhat predictable ways, causing us to rethink all we know about the universe. The effect on religion, although again somewhat predictable, would have a much larger impact. Would First Contact cause reactions similar to Copernicus and Galileo? Or would we be able to extend our belief in a creator to the entire universe?

Davies ends his book by explaining the potential political ramifications. Although processes are prepared for the slim chance we are visited, like much else in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, First Contact may not happen in a way we could imagine. Davies book is well-written and easy to understand. He isn't afraid to point out the flaw in the search for ET and the organization at the forefront of the search, an organization he is a part of. The fact that he explained both sides of the argument without obvious bias made the book more interesting to me. It is still up to the individual to decide if we are alone.