

Books in Brief

by Catherine Lazaroff

Contact: *Carl Sagan, the star of the PBS series "Cosmos," tries on a new hat as a fiction writer and comes through with flying colors.*

Contact: Is There Anybody Out There?

The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) has always had a strong and highly visible supporter in the form of Carl Sagan, astronomer, Cornell University professor, and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer. Carl Sagan became a household name during the original 1980 run of the award-winning PBS series *Cosmos* when "billions and billions" of viewers tuned in weekly to hear his engrossing discourse on everything from DNA to black holes. The companion book **Cosmos**, written by Sagan, is the best selling science book ever published in the English language. **Contact** (1985. 431 pages. Pocket Books: Simon and Schuster) is Sagan's first venture into fiction writing, and it is easily as compelling as the stranger-than-fiction facts in *Cosmos*. In fact, many of the ideas in *Contact* are straight out of *Cosmos*. There was an obvious and logical transition from scientific speculation to a purely fictional tale.

Contact is the fictional story of the detection of the first hard evidence of extraterrestrial life, discovered by the real-life Argus Array of radio telescopes in New Mexico. Ellie Arroway is the radio astronomer in charge of the Argus Array, deeply committed to the SETI project, and is the first to recognize the signal being sent from Vega. Unfortunately for the United States, whose woman president would perhaps have been happier keeping the Message for her own country alone, the signal is heard 'round the world, and the combined efforts of all the countries of Earth are required to decipher its meaning.

What follows is an absorbing look at one possible human reaction to news of extraterrestrial life. Written as it was in the mid-1980's, *Contact* does not foresee the end of the Cold War or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Earth is already more advanced toward becoming a unified planet than it was when Sagan dreamed up this scenario, if only by just short of a decade. But we have not really advanced very far. The suspicion, sabotage, and political jockeying that Sagan portrays are probably close to the truth of how Earth's leaders would react to a highly advanced technology. Most countries would go to great lengths to prevent this technology and all its possible advantages fall into the hands of the Americans/Russians/Germans/Japanese, or whoever their particular enemies are this week.

On the other hand, *Contact* is overall a hopeful scenario. The citizens of Earth can cooperate, given enough incentive, and ultimately succeed in deciphering this Message and even responding to it. In fact, the Message is described as bringing a curious sense of brotherhood to all humans -- a realization that the artificial boundaries we have imposed on our little continents are essentially meaningless in the grander scheme of things, and would be entirely invisible and trivial to an extraterrestrial intelligence. All life on Earth has more akin with each other than it would with any other conceivable life in the universe.

Sagan's portrayal of the E.T.'s in *Contact* is romantic and optimistic. When and if we do find signs of other life in the universe, we will be lucky beyond belief if they are this wise and benevolent. It is unfortunate that aliens must almost always be portrayed as one extreme or another -- either god-like in their abilities and concern for poor humanity, or devilishly powerful and wicked. It would be nice to meet someone a little more like us, fallible and ... well, human. And still have them be marvelously foreign and exotic. But as Sagan himself pointed out in the book *Cosmos*, "I am terribly limited by the fact that I know only one kind of life, life on Earth." It is hard to invent someone totally alien based only on human knowledge and imagination.

The novel twists that Sagan has introduced to this genre are drawn from his own expertise as an astronomer. He offers

fascinating mathematical and astronomical specifics regarding the reception and deciphering of the Message. The astonishing revelations offered by the aliens take that whole united Earth business and make it seem insignificant to the universe -- which of course, ultimately it is. As with the *Cosmos*' series "ship of the imagination," Sagan takes you places you've never been and makes the trip fascinating and enlightening. Sagan makes the reader want to run right out and buy a telescope.

Sagan offers some interesting ideas regarding advancements in technology which real-life has yet to produce. Sagan foresaw the exponential growth of entertainment media and the vast choices in niche channels such as the fictional "Lifestyles of the Mass Murderers." However, Sagan also imagined that we would invent ways of winnowing out the information we don't want by using channel selectors attuned to our own personal preferences. The world is still desperately awaiting the invention of such a life-saver. Speaking of life-saving, Sagan also investigates future attempts at prolonging life and maybe even foiling death using the metabolism-slowng effects of outer space.

It is, finally and somewhat surprisingly, in his human storytelling that Sagan shines. The characters of the many scientists involved in the "Message Project" are beautifully drawn and fully fleshed out. The very human concerns and foibles that they bring with them to their world-encompassing endeavors personalize the project and the later alien encounters. Sagan also adds a healthy dose of religious inquiry into the subject of extraterrestrial life. As a confirmed scientific skeptic, Sagan does not recommend blind faith, but neither does he rule out the possibility of a "higher power." Both sides are given a voice. The conversations between Ellie Arroway and the Reverend Palmer Joss are especially thought-provoking. And all of the characters are intelligent and insightful enough to offer periodic jolts of penetrating wisdom, of a flavor that keeps the mind hungry for more.

Back in 1985, Sagan imagined Earth in the mid-1990's on the brink of contacting extraterrestrial life. And maybe we are. In the words of the indefatigable Star Hustler, Jack Horkheimer, "keep looking up."

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