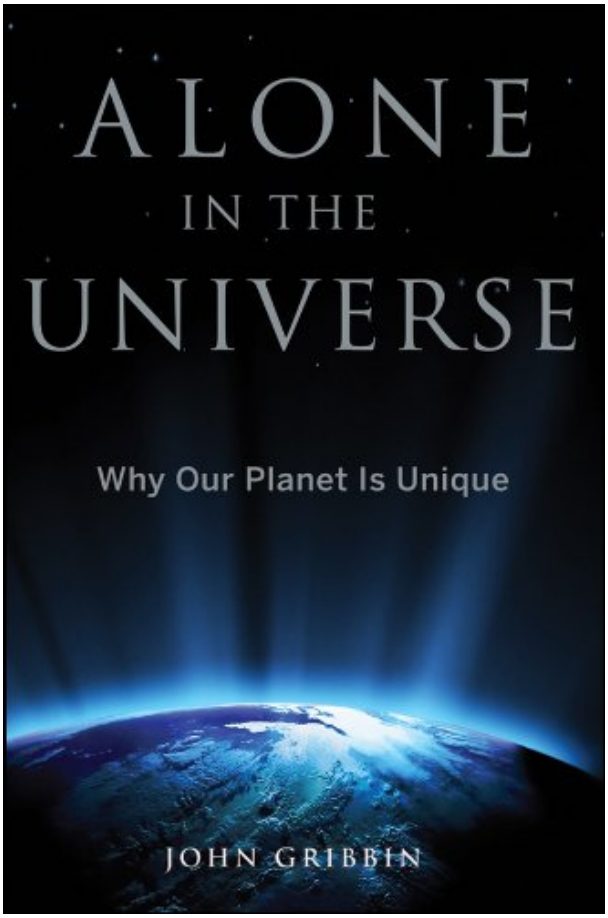
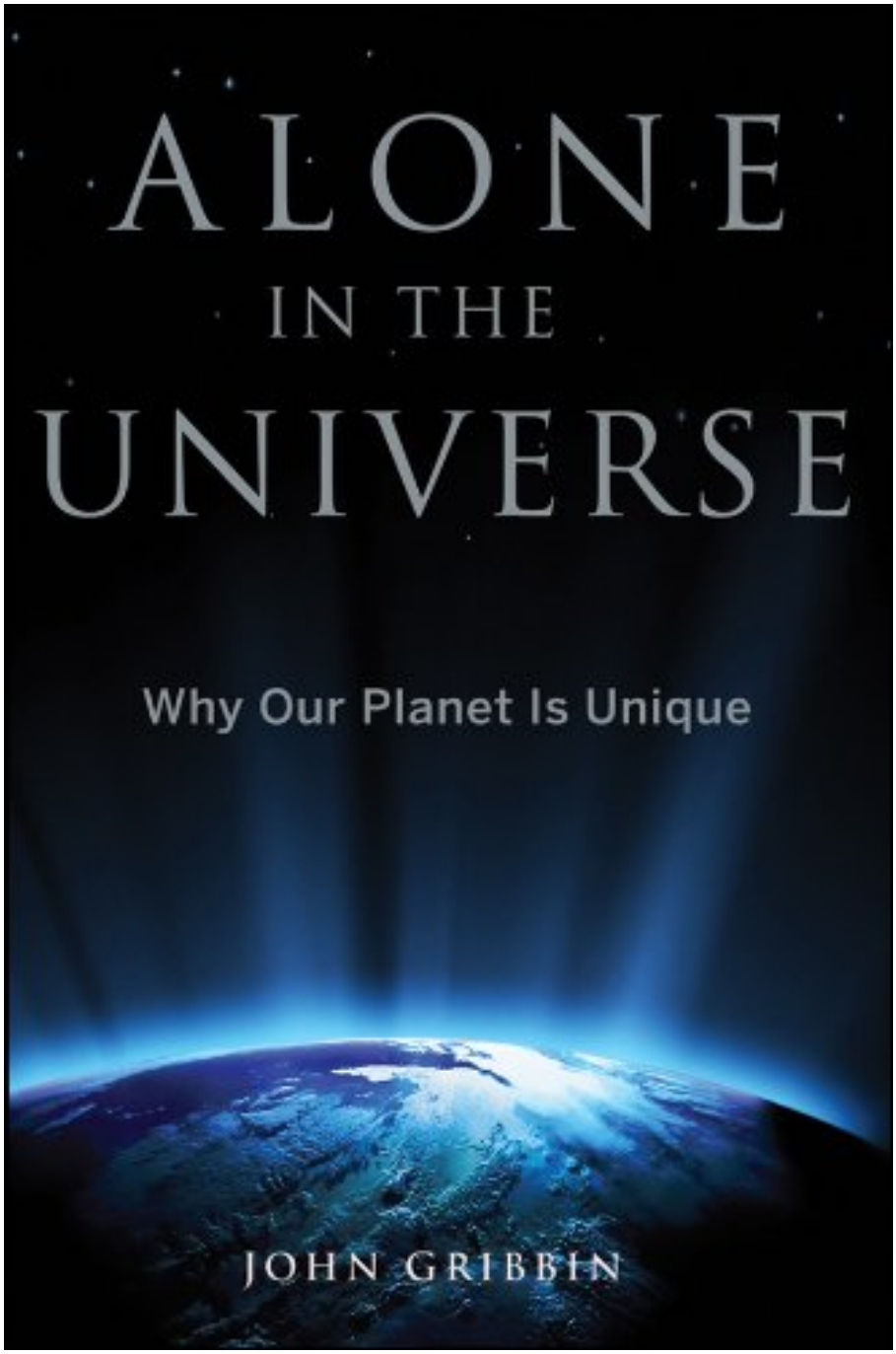
ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE: WHY OUR PLANET IS UNIQUE BY JOHN GRIBBIN





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Review

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From the Inside Flap

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For some of us, it is an article of faith; for others, it's simple arithmetic: with hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy, billions of which are circled by planets capable of supporting life, there simply must be intelligent beings elsewhere in the Milky Way. Throw in the countless other galaxies, and it goes almost without saying that the universe abounds with intelligent species capable of building civilizations, right? Not so fast.

In Alone in the Universe, acclaimed science writer and astrophysicist John Gribbin builds a convincing case for the uniqueness of intelligent life on Earth. Asserting that a "habitable" planet need not be inhabited by intelligent beings, he cites a wealth of recent scientific findings to suggest that the incredible diversity of life on Earth resulted from a chain of events so unlikely as to be unrepeatable in a galaxy the size of the Milky Way.

The most significant of these events was the impact of a Mars-size object with Earth soon after our planet formed. It was this unimaginable impact, Gribbin argues, that changed almost everything about our planet. It gave us a moon, and thus tides; altered the tilt of Earth in its orbit around the sun; and set the scene for continents to drift.

A novel feature of Gribbin's argument is the suggestion that another catastrophic event occurred in our solar system six hundred million years ago. An enormous super-comet collided with Venus, scattering ice balls and dust grains across the inner solar system. A side effect of this activity triggered a freezing of Earth into a "snowball" state.

The most profound transformation then occurred among the microscopic, single-celled organisms that had populated Earth virtually unchanged for three billion years. Suddenly, as Earth thawed, complex multicelled organisms appeared, including the first complex sea animals, and life began moving onto land.

This sudden profusion of life, known as the Cambrian Explosion, marked the effective beginning of rapid evolution on Earth—but it took a disaster of cosmic proportions to set it off. Had it not happened, Gribbin argues, there would be no intelligent life here. What are the chances that such an improbable chain of events could occur twice in the same galaxy? Zero, says Gribbin.

Is there an upside to Alone in the Universe? For one thing, Gribbin says, Earth and human beings are special, after all. We are no longer insignificant specks in the cosmos but the unique products of an extraordinary set of circumstances that have as yet occurred nowhere else in our galaxy, and possibly not in any galaxy. As such, we are the only witnesses with an understanding of the origin and nature of the universe, and our home is the only "intelligent" planet. Gribbin ends his discourse with an impassioned plea for action against climate change and to restore the ailing ecological systems of a planet like no other.

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- Written by one of our foremost popular science writers, author of the bestselling In Search of Schrödinger's Cat
- Offers a bold answer to the eternal question, "Are we alone in the universe?"
- Explores how the impact of a "supercomet" with Venus 600 million years ago created our moon, and along with it, the perfect conditions for life on Earth

From one of our most talented science writers, this book is a daring, fascinating exploration into the dawning of the universe, cosmic collisions and their consequences, and the uniqueness of life on Earth.

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Most helpful customer reviews

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful.
Good short summary
By Amazon Customer
This is a book about the likelihood of life existing on other planets. Currently, there are a lot of recent books on this topic, many of which are referenced in this book. There seems to be two approaches that are popular when looking at this topic. Some authors have explored the different possibilities for places and conditions where life might exist. Others look at the history of life on Earth and estimate how likely it is that a similar situation could arise elsewhere. This book follows the second of these approaches. The author reviews a lot of the well-known highlights of the history of the universe, galaxy, solar system, planet and life. Along the way there are some interesting and curious details that some readers may not be aware of. Here and there, there is also some more speculative material such as a link between the idea of a large comet or asteroid breaking up in the inner solar system and an outburst of evolutionary activity on Earth. None of the more speculative ideas are outlandish or based on anything for which there isn't at least some reasonable evidence.

One of the most popular ideas surrounding the practice of trying to estimate the chances for extraterrestrial life is the concept of the Drake equation. This is the famous equation with a number of different terms for things like the number of planets in the galaxy or the likely length of time for an advanced civilization to

arise and so forth. This particular author doesn't seem to like the Drake equation much because of the low likelihood of getting very specific estimates for most of the terms. Instead of focusing on the Drake equation per se, he builds up his own estimate of how unlikely life elsewhere must be. As he narrows his focus from the history of the universe down to the history of life on Earth, he adds to the estimate of how likely life is by showing how unique and rare some of the aspects of our situation here on Earth are, from the uniqueness of the sun to some of the very unique events that may have shaped the environment and climate of Earth. In the end, he concludes that it is highly unlikely that intelligent life has arisen anywhere else in the galaxy, possibly the universe.

The conclusions of this book are very similar to the conclusions of a number of other authors who have taken a serious look at the topic. That being said, this book does have a number of unique perspectives and mentions a number of interesting ideas that are not found elsewhere. Of course there is absolutely no way we can be sure about his conclusions based on our current inability to get very good data on the exact number and situation of planets around the galaxy. In spite of that, the fact remains that we also have absolutely no indication that there is any intelligent life elsewhere. This book is a decent attempt to explain why that might be. Whatever the end verdict might turn out to be, this is an interesting and relatively short book on the subject that's well worth checking out.

14 of 14 people found the following review helpful.
A definite good read.
By Dad
This book is well worth reading. I am surprised at some of the negative reviews. The book is short and to the point, giving reason after reason why intelligent life here on Earth is unique. This will upset a lot of SETI people, who are sure there are millions of advanced civilizations out there just waiting for us to find the magical frequency they broadcast on. This book makes you stop, think, and question the popular wisdom of other worldly civilizations. The popular notion is the comic book blonde who says, "Gee wiz, like, there are just so many stars, like, out there, you know, like grains of sand on a beach, there just has to be lots and lots and lots of Star War like empires out there, like, you know!" If you want a reasoned argument of why our Earth, our civilization, and even our comic book blonde are special, read this book.

16 of 18 people found the following review helpful.
A great read -- interesting and scary at the same time
By Clive (Max) Maxfield
Although I think that we as a race are precious and have a lot to offer, before reading "Alone in the Universe" I took the view that if anything did happen to wipe us out, at least there would be other intelligent species out there to carry on the good fight. Now I have read "Alone in the Universe" I'm not so sure. It may well be that we are "It", which makes it all the more important that we take better care of ourselves and the Earth.

The bottom line is that I thoroughly enjoyed this book. It taught me lots of things and made me look at things from a completely different angle; it's given me a whole lot of things to think about (and to worry about; and I would heartily recommend it.

See all 31 customer reviews...

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