



The search for life continued: Planets around other stars

by **Barrie W. Jones**

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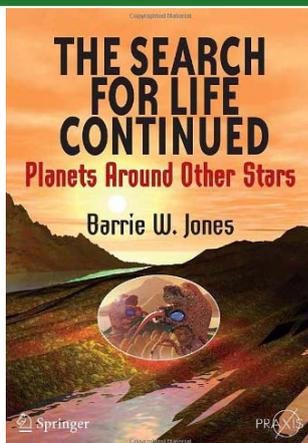
One of the major unanswered scientific questions is whether life exists elsewhere in the Universe. Although life has not been detected on other bodies within our solar system so far, the discovery of planets around other stars has increased the probability that life might exist elsewhere.

But how can we hope to detect life, not only in our solar system but on these so-called exoplanets? This question forms the theme for this book by Barrie W. Jones, an emeritus professor of astronomy at the Open University. Prof Jones' research interests include theoretical work on whether there could be habitable planets in these exoplanetary systems, so he is well qualified to write a book on the search for life.

The starting point for the book is our own solar system. It then moves on to explain the nature, origins and evolution of life on our own Earth and the possibilities for life in the solar system. One of the major astronomical discoveries in the mid-1990s was the detection of a planet around another star. More discoveries followed. The book devotes three chapters to the various techniques that are used to search for exoplanets and all of these techniques are very well described. The book also describes the methods that may potentially be used to detect life forms on exoplanets, including the use of optical and radio techniques to detect intelligent life.

A wide variety of topics is covered throughout this book ranging through astronomy, geology, chemistry and telescopes, which shows that the search for life encompasses many scientific disciplines.

The book is well structured and Barrie Jones' clear writing style makes it very readable. The explanation of the concepts is very good and supported by the many colour pictures (including a couple of humorous cartoons) and line diagrams. One useful feature is the frequent use of boxes embedded within the text which provide explanations of terms used or asides. The book also contains a useful glossary, plus a list of books and related web sites for those who want further information on this interesting topic. Certainly those with little or no knowledge of astronomy should have no trouble in reading this book – one



of the author's stated aims.

In the final chapter of the book, Professor Jones speculates what intelligent and non-intelligent alien life might be like, including life having alternative biochemistries to our own. Who knows whether the intelligent aliens shown

sitting around the campfire in the last picture of the book exist, or whether we will ever detect life on other planets? Barrie Jones believes that we are bound to be successful in this quest; perhaps within our lifetimes but no later than by the end of this century. Whether this belief is optimistic or not, only time will tell. In the meantime, I highly recommend this book as an introduction to the search for life on other worlds. It is a very enjoyable and fascinating read.

Mike Foulkes

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