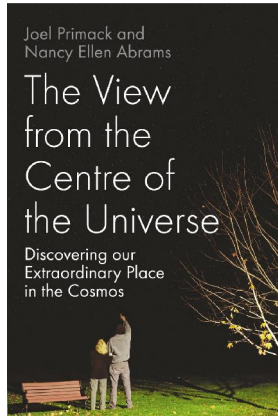


BOOK REVIEW

Primack, Joel and Nancy Ellen Abrams. *The View from the Centre of the Universe: Discovering our Extraordinary Place in the Cosmos*. London: Fourth Estate, 2006.



In this book, husband and wife team Primack and Abrams present a creative synthesis of the place of humans in the cosmos. In attempting to summarise the breadth of this work, I can do no better than quote their own words, from the Introduction to the book, where they discuss the new scientific story that is informing and inspiring so many of us today:

"The aim of this book is not only to help people understand the universe intellectually, but also to develop imagery that we can all use to grasp this new reality more fully and to open our minds to what it may mean for our lives and the lives of our descendants.

Unlike earlier cosmologies, the new scientific story is not intuitively simple. It can't be, because both intuition and common sense are always based on the assumption that we're on Earth. There's no way to have intuition about things one has never experienced, and most of the universe fits into that category. The new cosmology can't be intuitively simple for a second reason as well: it is based on unfamiliar concepts including relativity and quantum physics. But these theories can be translated into ordinary language and compelling images.

This book suggests mythic images that we can adapt to a modern understanding of the universe. This is essential, because just as scientific cosmology cannot be explained in numbers alone, neither can it be adequately explained in everyday language. Many religions have concepts that resonate harmoniously with aspects of the new scientific picture - concepts that can, in fact, help us tremendously to appreciate the depth and meaning of the universe - but all religions also have concepts that don't.

An attempt to explain the modern universe in terms only of a favorite religion would result in scientific ideas being crushed and distorted to fit narrow preconceptions, while beautiful and apt imagery would be dismissed. We need to find those concepts that work, and only those, borrowing from many religions as well as other sources."

The book traces understandings of cosmology from ancient times, through the impact of the scientific revolution and industrial revolutions, to our own time, to propose a model for contemporary humans to "identify with and honour the forces of the early universe as our oldest ancestors ... [until we] can say once again with confidence and commitment that we uphold the universe."

It includes diagrams, extensive footnotes, and a comprehensive index. I would like to have seen a bibliography also. This is not light bedtime reading, but neither is it overly heavy going. I enjoyed the book, and recommend it to anyone with an interest in "our extraordinary place in the cosmos".