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#### A review of: "Planet quest. The epic discovery of alien solar systems"

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### *Book Review*

## PLANET QUEST The Epic Discovery of Alient Solar Systems

by Ken Croswell

*Illustrated. 324 pp. New York: The Free Press. 1997.*  
*\$25. ISBN 0-684-83252-6*

Seven years ago, astronomers possessed no evidence that planets existed anywhere beyond our own Solar System. Now that they have discovered nine of them, it is only a matter of time before we have photographs of their landscape. “When our descendants look back on this age, they will mark this time as one of profound change in the history of astronomy”, said Richard N. Zare (Stanford University), leader of the team that announced evidence of fossil life in a Martian meteorite.

This story begins long ago. For millennia, philosophers have speculated about the existence of planets orbiting other stars, but only in this decade have astronomers succeeded in finding genuine extrasolar planets. The year 1991 saw the discovery of planets orbiting a neutron star over 300 parsecs away. But in 1995, a new era in the exploration of the Universe began when astronomers spotted a Jupiter-like planet circling 51 Pegasi – a star strikingly similar to the Sun – and the prospects of finding an Earth-like planet dramatically increased. These discoveries did more than simply grab headlines; they brought us to the brink of finding out if our existence in the Universe is one in a million, or run of the mill.

Well, what about the *Planet Quest*? Let us to look over its Contents: Introduction; Bruno’s execution; A good planet is hard to find; A living Solar System; The Sun’s distant outposts; Planet X; A shaky start; The Vega phenomenon; Dark star; Pulsar planets; Thanks, Jupiter; Harvest of planets; Future worlds; Into the cosmos; Catalogue of planets.

The author of the book, Ken Croswell, is former professional astronomer: his Ph. D. (from Harvard) topic was the thick disk of the Galaxy. Recently, he has become a very active freelance scientific writer: he has written for a number of popular magazines, including *Astronomy*, *New Scientist* and *Sky and Telescope*. He also writes for the “Star Date” radio programme, which is aired on two hundred radio stations throughout the USA. And last, not least, he is the author of the internationally successful *The Alchemy of the Heavens*, which was nominated for a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. He also writes for amateur astronomers, for teachers, for students, for professionals – for all people who are fond of astronomy.

Now Ken Croswell has written the definitive guide to the culmination of the scientific revolution that began with Copernicus. Weaving together the personal travails of the scientists who made the key discoveries, Croswell marshals extensive research and interviews to bring to life this epic scientific adventure. He succinctly defines the essential features of our own Solar System, then recounts the stories of the discovery of Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto and the search for the mysterious Planet X. From there we leap with him beyond the Solar System's edge, following the pioneers of science in their quest for planets around other stars. Ken Croswell chronicles the exhilarating and often maddeningly disappointing work of planet-searching astronomers who have scoured space for worlds like our own for five decades. Croswell's portrayal of their adventures puts the reader in intimate contact with the personalities and controversies surrounding the recent discoveries, as well as the astonishing methods that were used to achieve them. In many ways it is the astronomers themselves who are the stars of *Planet Quest*.

Following Peter D. Ward (Washington University), I'd like to say: "Reading this book is like sailing with Columbus". It is really a lively, timely history of the search for extrasolar planets – today's hottest astronomical enterprise. Every day seems to bring us closer to finding an Earth-like planet, perhaps harbouring life, and the resolution of the grandest human mystery of all: Are we alone?

V. G. Surdin