



First Contact: Scientific Breakthroughs in the Hunt for Life Beyond Earth

Marc Kaufman

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Are we alone in the universe? Almost certainly not.

In *First Contact*, Marc Kaufman provides a gripping tour of the magnificent new science of astrobiology that is closing in on the discovery of extraterrestrial life. In recent decades, scientists generally held that the genesis of life was unique to Earth: It was too delicate a process, and the conditions needed to support it too fragile, for it to exist anywhere else. But we are now on the verge of the biggest discovery since Copernicus and Galileo told us that Earth is not at the center of the universe. New scientific breakthroughs have revolutionized our assumptions about the building blocks of life and where it may be found. Scientists have hunted down and identified exoplanets, those mysterious balls in the universe that orbit distant suns not too different from our own. They have discovered extremophiles, the extraordinary microbes that thrive in environments of intense heat or cold that may mimic the inhospitable conditions of other planets. They have landed rovers on Mars and detected its methane, a possible signature of past life. And they have created sophisticated equipment to sweep the sky for distant radio signals and to explore the deep icebound lakes of Antarctica. Each of these developments has brought forth a new generation of out-of-the-box researchers, adventurers, and thinkers who are each part Carl Sagan, part Indiana Jones, part Watson and Crick—and part forensic specialists on *CSI: Mars*.

In this masterful book, Kaufman takes us to the frontiers of astrobiology's quest for extraterrestrial life and shows how this quest is inextricably linked with the quest to understand life on Earth. He takes us deep under the glaciers of Antarctica, into the mouth of an Alaskan volcano, and beneath the Earth into the unbearable heat of a South African mine, and leads us to the world's driest desert. For thousands of years, humans have wondered about who and what might be living beyond the confines of our planet. *First Contact* transports us into the cosmos to bring those musings back to Earth and recast our humanity.

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