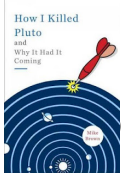


How I killed Pluto and why it had it coming

How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming



OK, who can resist a title like How I Killed Pluto...? It promises and then delivers a light,

interesting take on the Pluto demotion from one of the nine big ones to a dwarf planet at the edge of our solar system. "My very excellent mother just served us nine pizzas." Do you remember that line from science class in grade school? The words helped us remember the planets and their order in the solar system: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto. Alas, now mother is just serving us nine___?

What can be more thrilling than observing a night sky full of stars? If you've ever gone camping during the Perseid Meteor shower and forgotten about the full moon, you'll thoroughly understand why astronomers hate what they call "bright time."

In fact, one young child, the daughter of the author's friends, called the full moon, "Michael's nemesis."

This book describes everything about an astronomer's daily life--how digital technology has changed everything, how hard it is to schedule use of a first-class telescope (the Hubble requires a detailed project description and approval three years in advance), how astronomers must be as talented at writing computer code as searching the night sky, and how they name celestial objects; for instance, craters on Mercury are named after dead poets, and the moons of Uranus are named after Shakespearean characters. (I'm not making this up.) I also learned that astronomers often don't spend their time on mountain peaks; for instance, astronomers using the Keck telescopes on 14,000 foot high Mauna Kea in Hawaii actually work miles down the mountain in a control room where they have to train themselves how to explore the sky remotely.

So why did poor pathetic Pluto get booted out of the major planet club? Well, you'll just have to read this intriguing book to find out. If you're an astronomy fan, you might also like Mark Garlick's Astronomy: a Visual Guide (fantastic photos of stars and planets), and Strange New Worlds: the Search for Alien Planets and Life Beyond Our Solar System by Ray Jayawardhana.

Posted by Dory L. on May 5, 2011

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