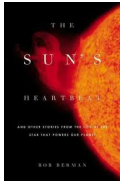


The sun's heartbeat : and other stories from the life of the star that powers our planet

The Sun's Heartbeat



Browsing the new science books, I came across The Sun's Heartbeat. I picked it up expecting a rather dry collection of facts and was immediately engaged by a chapter titled "The Wild Science of the Bearded Men."

Not only can Bob Berman write but he also has that gift shared by all the best science writers: the ability to translate complex scientific terms into language that anyone can understand.

This book provides a compelling overview of several thousand years of sun research including the great sunspot controversy of the 17th century. The invention of the telescope in 1608 spurred a race to discover facts about the sun. Johannes Fabricius and his father discovered little spots on the sun and excitedly watched them for days until they burnt out their retinal cells. An English astronomer who had voyaged to Roanoke with the English explorers also began recording sunspots. And Galileo himself entered the fray. In fact, Galileo engaged in a decades-long fight with the German professor Christoph Scheiner over sunspots. Over who discovered them first--in fact, neither had, over whether the sun has an atmosphere, and many other topics.

Soon after, European universities set up the first programs to count sunspots daily--or as daily as you can under northern Europe's grey skies. But then the number of sunspots observed tanked to nearly zero. From 1645 to 1720, even with astronomers across Europe searching for them, very few sunspots were counted. At the same time, the world's weather deteriorated. Canals in Venice froze solid for the first time recorded. In France, Louis XIV, ironically known as the Sun King, watched many of his people suffer. Boston recorded thirty-eight blizzards between Nov. and April. Sweden's fishing industry failed. Even China recorded brutally cold winters and crop failures.

Another great yarn shared by Berman is how the first Royal Astronomer of Britain, William Herschel, who also discovered Uranus, believed that people-like inhabitants lived on the sun's surface. This scientific "fact" was taught in schools until well into the nineteenth century.

Winter is a great time to keep warm and enjoy this captivating book about our unique star that makes life on our lovely green orb possible. For a book that delves into the history of the moon and how people from many cultures celebrate it, try Nocturne: a Journey in Search of Moonlight.
Posted by Dory L. on January 5, 2012

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