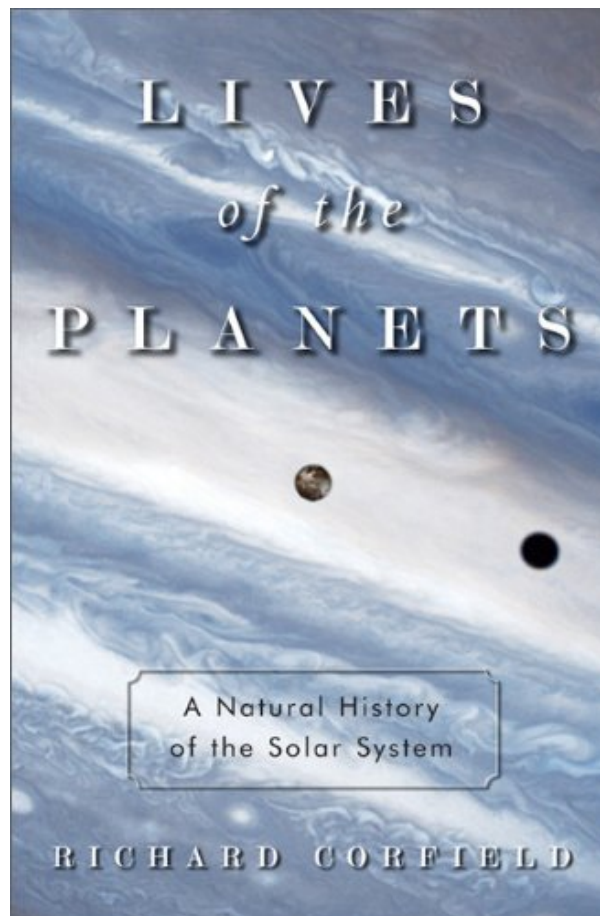
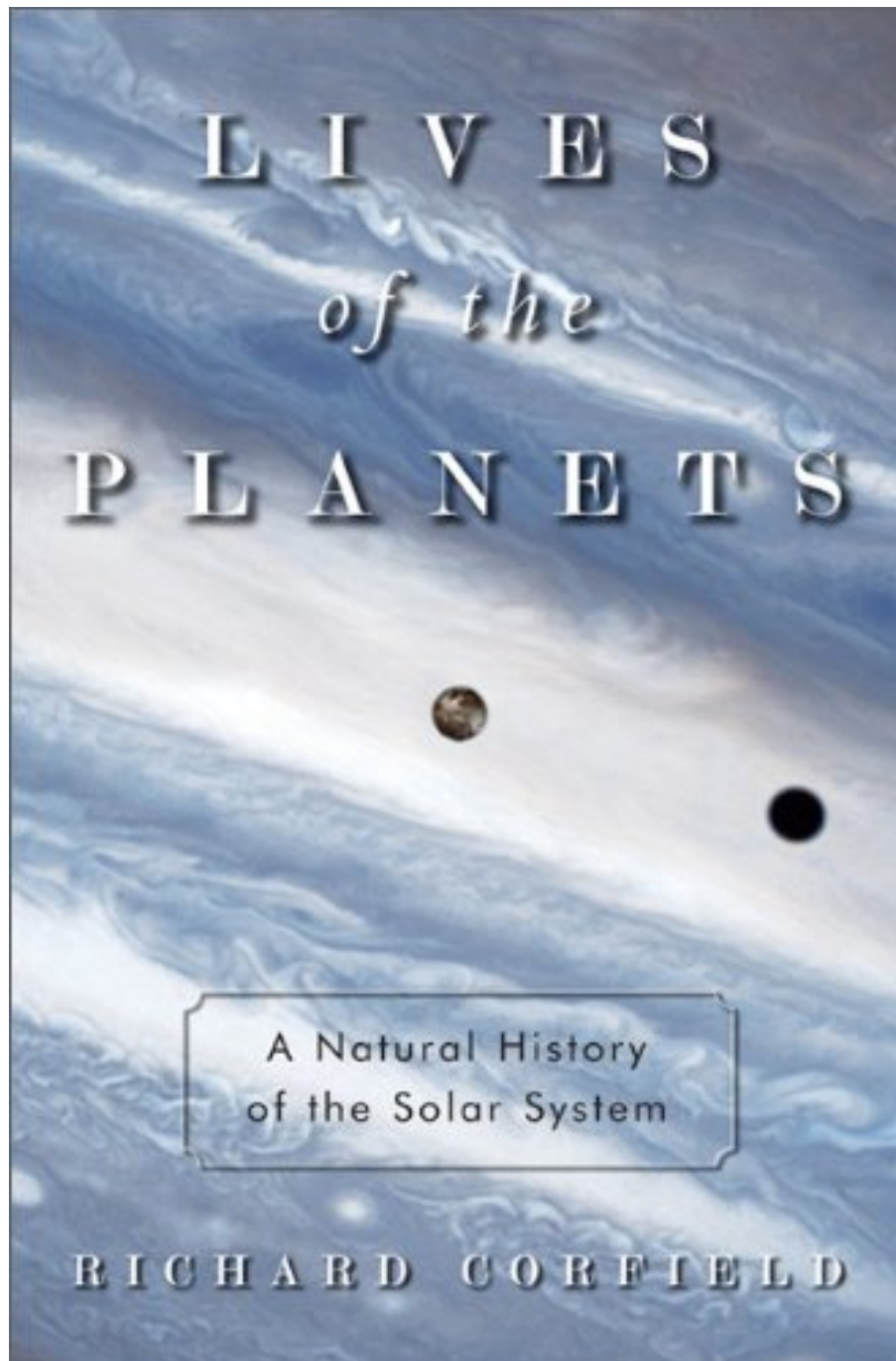


**LIVES OF THE PLANETS: A NATURAL
HISTORY OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM BY
RICHARD CORFIELD**



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From Publishers Weekly

Corfield (*The Silent Landscape*) paints a companionable guide on this tour of the solar system. With a subject spanning 4.6 billion years, many billions of miles and eight (well, maybe nine) planets, a host of moons, asteroids galore, a plethora of comets and more, it is not surprising that many of the details are not filled in. Nonetheless, there is much to grab the average reader. Corfield focuses in turn on each major item in the solar system. Chapters begin by discussing the early ideas humans had about each object and then move to the advances we've made over the past 50 years. Finally, Corfield synthesizes available knowledge and explains what we currently know and why we know it. Throughout, he does a good job of articulating why he believes the billions of dollars spent on space exploration have been worthwhile. Discussing the joint NASA/ESA Cassini-Huygens project to explore Saturn and Titan, one of its moons, Corfield says, We went to Titan because it seemed the world most similar to the Earth when our world was new. With his strong writing and expansive subject, it is impossible not to be infected with Corfield's enthusiasm for planetary science. 28 color photos. (July 9)

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Lives of the Planets is a sweeping tour of our solar system, from the sun and demoted Pluto, to the Kuiper Belt and beyond the edge of the interstellar void. From the Neolithic computer that is Stonehenge to Galileo's telescope to Kepler's latest search for life on other planets, Richard Corfield deftly describes the colorful history of humanity's unfolding discovery of our solar system's secrets.

In this era of unprecedented discovery, Lives of the Planets is a comprehensive survey of our growing knowledge and the history of how we got here.

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Not really about the planets

By Artyom Kopp

I must say I was very disappointed in this book. Not that it's bad, it's just not at all what I expected. "Lives of the hardware launched into space" would be a more accurate, although perhaps less alluring, title.

I would say that roughly 1/3 of this book is actually about the planets and other celestial bodies. Most of it is about hardware, NASA, science administration and funding, mission managers and engineers, and the authors family life and childhood interests. Things like planetary surface topography and chemistry, geological history, atmospheres, orbital mechanics, etc. - the actual "Lives of the Planets" - are skipped over with an absolute minimum of detail. Volcanism on Io is barely dignified with a mention while the political infighting between different space agencies and laboratories takes center stage. To my taste, there just not enough meat in this book. If you enjoy "human interest" stories, by all means go ahead and buy this book - just don't expect much science. You'd be better off browsing through old *Scientific Americans*.

By the way - if someone can recommend a good, up-to-date "science" book on the Solar system, I'd appreciate it.

9 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

PWNED!!!!: The Astronomy Book!

By racapowski

As already noted, this is a history of the various satellite missions to the planets instead of the planets themselves. And that's OK; I expected such, having read the reviews and a few sample passages in the store. What shocked me, though, was Corfield's odd and plainly mean-spirited decision to focus on the programs' blunders and failures, however miniscule they may be in comparison to their accomplishments. Strange to see an astronomer, someone who presumably has a big-picture outlook on the world, caught up in such pettiness.

Corfield consistently portrays of scientists as a stupid lot, their beliefs founded on fads and personal prejudice until the evidence knocks them upside their empty heads. Funny thing about that evidence; it seems to show up of its own accord, with no human responsibility for its discovery. (Who's pursuing the truth and amending previous theories, then? Flying spaghetti monsters?) Any researcher who has ever come to a conclusion we now perceive as erroneous, regardless of the limitations of their era or tools, is smirkingly dismissed as worthless and chuckleheaded. (Galileo failed to properly identify Saturn's rings with his 17th-century telescope - heh, what a hopeless moron.) Forgive me for flinging this accusation at an accomplished astronomer, but - Corfield doesn't seem to get how science works. I imagine that "PWNED!!!!" is a prominent part of his everyday vocabulary.

Corfield's approach makes his account of space exploration opaque. It's not important what the Pioneer

missions observed, only that those losers eventually got thrashed by Voyager; it's not important what Voyager observed, only that its team was unforgivably boneheaded for not following the course Corfield would have. Corfield's...interesting priorities don't address the questions one usually has about these programs. His technical explanations also fail to define crucial terminology (H-R diagrams, for example, are mentioned but never explained), leaving laymen in the dark.

The author also makes the poor decision to shove a ten-page climate change denial manifesto into the very first chapter, blaming the phenomenon completely on sunspot activity. (A thin layer of "some people say" weasel words fools no one; take responsibility for you own crackpot theory, buddy.) He introduces the idea of climate change as a collection of "doom-laden forecasts [from] highly-paid think-tank moguls and academics with an eye on their funding". Ah, yes, Big Science, with all those researchers getting rich off global warming! My heart and expectations sank as I read it; it nearly discredited Corfield for me right off the bat.

There are some neat things in here, like a thorough and convincing archaeological exploration of Stonehenge as a giant astronomical clock in the Sun chapter. Corfield also worked on Britain's Beagle 2 mission to Mars, which never reached its landing site; we get a vivid and insightful chronicle from Corfield on the would-be landing day, as it gradually becomes sadly apparent that things have gone awry. Every time I got hooked by something awesome and intriguing, though, Corfield soon steered back to his personal grudges and schoolyard smirks. You can pick out good tidbits from "Lives of the Planets", and it might be worth borrowing from the library if you're interested in astronomy. If you want a solid popular-science book about the solar system, though, I'd recommend Dava Sobel's "The Planets" instead.

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

An Unnatural History of the Solar System

By doomsdayer520

The title and subtitle of this book are quite curious and one has to wonder if they were coined by the publisher and not the author. A "natural history" of the "lives of planets" would imply an evolutionary treatment much different than what the author generally delivered - a mostly technical and political history of exploration programs. More specifically, Corfield takes a few wrong turns while attempting a pan-scientific focus, particularly in the chapter on the earth and the moon. There, Corfield covers alternatives to mainstream biological theory for some reason, and then closes the chapter with an unnecessary debunking of the solar system's lamest conspiracy theory - moon landing denial. Overall, except for the final chapter on Pluto and the mysterious mini-planets beyond, there is little new astronomical information in this book, though it is a pretty readable compendium of knowledge as of 2007. Despite these flaws the book is still enjoyable and offers plenty of coverage of the development of the various instruments and spacecraft that have built our knowledge of the solar system, which will satisfy more engineering-oriented readers. For those interested in an approachable update on the latest knowledge of our fascinating solar system, this book is a mostly rewarding experience. But for knowledgeable readers who may be looking for new revelations, or unique coverage as implied by the title and subtitle, this book doesn't have much to add to our knowledge. [~doomsdayer520~]

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