

DR. SETI'S STARSHIP

Searching For The Ultimate DX

"The Listeners" (2004 edition), by James Gunn

The search for intelligent signals from space was the lonely life's work of Robert MacDonald. Today, he would not be quite so alone, as many of us have been privileged to follow in his fictional footsteps. Indeed, in the three decades since *The Listeners* was first published, SETI has grown from an obsession of a handful of scientists working on the fringe into a household word pursued by literally millions of amateur and professional enthusiasts. However, we have yet to uncover the Call from Capella, which was central to the plot of this science-fiction classic. Perhaps we never will.

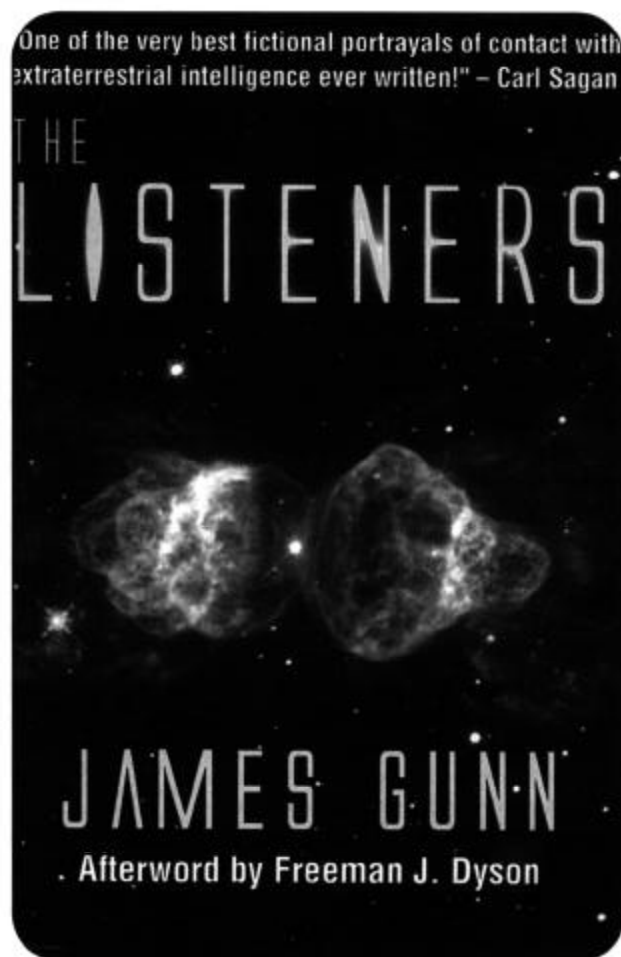
The widespread public interest and support which SETI now enjoys is indeed a tribute to human optimism. It also speaks volumes about Gunn's novel, recently reissued by BenBella Books, of Dallas, Texas (2004 ISBN 1-932100-12-1, \$14.95 [trade paperback], available through The SETI League, Inc. Order online at <<http://www.setileague.org/photos/premiums.htm>>). This is the book that inspired a generation of SETI scientists to pursue the seemingly impossible. Many of us decided early on that we wanted to be Robert MacDonald when we grew up, and if we ever do grow up, one or more of us may someday achieve that goal.

The SETI Institute's Tom Pierson notes in an insightful introduction to this new edition that the growth in our technological prowess since Jim Gunn first penned this book has been astronomical. Our searches today are just beginning to approach the sensitivity of Big Ear (Gunn's fictional space-based one, not the recently demolished radio telescope of the same name at Ohio State University). Our computerized signal-analysis hardware and software are expanding the search space to include most of the microwave spectrum, as well as significant segments in the infrared and optical regions. Soon the entire electromagnetic realm will reveal its secrets to us. All we need to do is wait . . . perhaps, as MacDonald did, for most of our lives.

More important, maybe, than our technological prowess is our societal progress, for the notion of humankind's uniqueness in the universe is falling into disfavor (due, in large part, to this very novel!). The idea that we are but one civilization among the many is fast becoming the accepted paradigm. For my children's generation, the burning question is no longer *whether* we will achieve contact with our cosmic companions, but rather *when*.

A major shift in funding has occurred in the years since *The Listeners* first saw print. What Jim Gunn envisioned as a massive government-sponsored project has gone grass-roots. Indeed, since the lamented day a dozen years ago when Congress cancelled the NASA SETI program, thousands of radio amateurs and signal-processing experimenters have turned their own modest back-yard dishes toward the stars.

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The Listeners (2004 edition) by James E. Gunn and published by BenBella Books, Dallas, Texas. Jim Gunn's inscription inside my personal copy reads: "To Paul, for helping to realize what I only imagined." Although not himself a radio amateur, Gunn clearly understands the importance and significance of amateur SETI.

Millions of ordinary citizens have lent their spare computer cycles to the process of analyzing data from the world's greatest radio telescope (the very one Robert MacDonald used in Gunn's story). Also, a handful of dedicated industrialists have financed the design and construction of arrays grander and more sensitive than those contemplated in fiction. SETI is truly the science that refuses to die.

We who dedicate our lives to "The Search" well realize that ours may be, like MacDonald's, a multi-generational effort. We can only dream large, as Jim Gunn has taught us to do, and count the days (or centuries) until our dreams are realized.

73, Paul, N6TX