



Carl Sagan: A Life in the Cosmos

By William Poundstone



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In this compelling life of Carl Sagan, award-winning science writer William Poundstone details the transformation of a bookish young astronomer obsessed with life on other worlds into science's first authentic media superstar. The instantly recognizable Sagan, a fixture on television and a bestselling author, offered the layperson entry into the mysteries of the cosmos and of science in general. To much of the scientific community, however, he was a pariah, a brazen publicity seeker who cared more about his image and his fortune than the advancement of science. Poundstone reveals the seldom-discussed aspects of Sagan's life, the legitimate and important work of his early scientific career, the almost obsessive capacity to take on endless projects, and the multiple marriages and fractured personal life, in what *The New Yorker* called an "evenhanded guide" to a great man's career.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Science writer William Poundstone (and biographer of game-theory guru *John von Neumann*) begins this book of deftly strung anecdotes from the life of pop-science demigod Carl Sagan with the following anecdote: four-year-old Carl, a Jewish kid growing up near the Jersey shore, rides piggyback on his dad's shoulders into the 1939 World's Fair and the "World of Tomorrow." Surrounded by mocked-up "rocketports," GM's "Futurama," and the promise of outlandish technology to come, it's easy to imagine the impact on this little guy who was to become one of our century's most visionary and visible scientists. A childhood friend tells Poundstone that "from an early age Carl was seized with the fabulous mission of searching for life on other worlds," a quest that would dominate his entire professional career.

Poundstone recounts how this quest drove the immensely intelligent, ambitious, and charismatic Sagan, from his discovery of Arthur C. Clarke to his predictable adolescent chemistry-set accidents to his colorful academic career and professional work on the *Viking* and *Voyager* missions, nuclear disarmament, the award-winning *Cosmos*, and Robert Zemeckis' *Contact*. What recommends this biography most, though, isn't its completeness but its style: Poundstone has divided the 500-plus-page book into over 200 easily digestible, addictive little sections, each an entertaining or illuminating (or, often, laugh-out-loud) anecdote from Sagan's life, with titles like "Pornography in Space," "Muskrats, Drunkards, Extraterrestrials," and "Sagan Versus Apple Computer." (The in-house name for the mid-range PowerMac 7100 was "Carl Sagan," the joke being that it would make Apple "billions and billions." But forced to change it by Sagan, Apple switched to "BHA," later revealed to stand for "Butt-Head Astronomer"--Sagan sued for libel.) --*Paul Hughes*

From Publishers Weekly

It is impossible to be neutral about Carl Sagan (1934-1996). Though supporters and detractors agree that he was one of the most brilliant and influential scientists of the 20th century, they argue about the ways he handled his gifts, fame and prominence. Poundstone (*Prisoner's Dilemma; Big Secrets*) does nothing to reconcile these disparities. Instead, he lays out the details of Sagan's life and work, revealing why some people idolized him and others disdained him. Sagan's overwhelming need for love and attention destroyed his first marriage to Lynn Margulis, Poundstone explains. Decades later, Margulis remains ambivalent, admiring Sagan the public figure but not the man. Second wife Linda Salzman could neither forgive Sagan nor understand his betrayal when he and their friend Ann Druyan announced that they were profoundly in love and planned to marry. Salzman is conspicuously missing from Poundstone's list of acknowledgments, just as Sagan's alienated best friend, Lester Grinspoon, was conspicuously absent from Sagan's deathbed. Sagan's scientific and public life is best known for its central quest and mission: searching for extraterrestrial life and sharing his love of science with the world. The so-far fruitless quest for ET continues, but Sagan's mission succeeded beyond all expectations. Because his greatest allegiance was to truth, Sagan would probably like this book. It tells readers why he chose to warn the world about "nuclear winter" despite weaknesses in the theory, and it includes the influence of marijuana highs on his work. Poundstone does not draw conclusions, but presents the evidence of Sagan's life and allows readers to develop their own theories of what that life might mean to their own. 16 b&w photos. Agent, John Brockman. (Oct.)
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From Library Journal

Both of these books portray astronomer Carl Sagan as a man of immense paradoxes. A charismatic public persona, he could be arrogant and demanding in his personal life. Fiercely ambitious, he still had a powerful

sense of civic duty. An outspoken defender of scientific methods, he was also a UFO enthusiast and obsessed with the possibility of extraterrestrial life. In some ways, each of these books represents a different side of the man. First, the similarities. Both authors are respected science popularizers. Both books are quite substantial, relying to a large degree on interviews with those who knew Sagan. Thus, there is considerable overlap between them—perhaps as much as 80 percent. Of the remaining, about 15 percent of Poundstone is totally unique material. His is the more exhaustive and detailed account, especially when discussing Sagan's original scientific work and influences. What Davidson may lack comparatively in content is more than made up for in style, though. While Poundstone plods in places, Davidson is lively, literary, and sometimes refreshingly speculative. Poundstone's version comes closer to being definitive and will probably have a longer shelf life, but Davidson's is more fun to read. Overall, Davidson's version seems truer to its subject, for with Sagan science and showmanship were inseparable. Let's split the difference and suggest that Poundstone's version is more appropriate for academic libraries, while Davidson's may find a larger audience in public libraries. A Gregg Sapp, Univ. of Miami Lib., Coral Gables
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