

SUNLIT INTERVIEWS

Sci-fi sparked Adam Frank to eventually pursue “The Little Book of Aliens”

Sure, his career in astrophysics had something to do with it. But his dad’s pulp magazine collection really pointed him toward seeking evidence of life in the universe.



The Colorado Sun

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Adam Frank is a University of Colorado Boulder graduate and currently an astrophysicist, “alien optimist” and professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Rochester. In 2019, he became the principal investigator on NASA’s first grant to study technosignatures — signs of advanced civilizations on other worlds. He is also a contributor to *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, CNN, NPR, NBC, and other media outlets. He was the science advisor on Marvel’s “Doctor Strange” and lives in Rochester, New York.

SunLit: Tell us this book’s backstory. What inspired you to write it? Where did the story/theme originate?

Adam Frank: I wrote this book because, after being a professor of astrophysics for 30 years, I wanted to give people a fast, fun way into understanding everything that’s happening now in the search for alien life. While lots of people are talking about UFOs and UAPs, they probably don’t know how close astronomers are to getting real, hard data about alien life in the most likely place it exists ... on alien planets.

I also explore UFOs and UAPs in the book from a scientist’s perspective. Do they have anything to do with alien life? I wanted people to see how science views that question and why.

Ultimately, though, the idea for this book came to me when I was 5 years old. That’s when I stumbled on my dad’s pulp science fiction magazines in his library. Each one had images of rocket ships and aliens’ moons and big-eyed monsters. I was hooked from that point on.

SunLit: Place this excerpt in context. How does it fit into the book as a whole? Why did you select it?

Frank: This is from the book’s introduction and I think it will give people a good idea of what “The Little Book of Aliens” is about and why, after they read it, they’ll be ready to join this amazing adventure we’re launching.

SunLit: Tell us about creating this book. What influences and/or experiences informed the project before you sat down to write?

Frank: Much of the book comes from my own scientific research and those of my colleagues. I'm the principal investigator of NASA's first ever grant to study what are called atmospheric technosignatures — imprints of alien civilizations in the light from distant worlds. I want people to see how much we've learned about all these planets orbiting other stars and how we will use them to hunt for life of all kinds in the galaxy.

I was also drawing on my decades of exploring topics needed to think about life in the universe – like how evolution works (and might work on other worlds),

cognitive science (alien minds) and history (how human civilization has evolved and how we can, or can't use it as an example). All of it is relevant if you want to think systematically about alien life and alien civilizations.

SunLit: What did the process of writing this book add to your knowledge and understanding of your craft and/or the subject matter?

Frank: While the astronomy and astrobiology is second nature to me, I learned a lot about the history of UFOs as a cultural phenomenon and how the pop culture idea of aliens got lodged in our heads. I am a huge fan of science fiction and have always been fascinated by how constrained our ideas of aliens are. We have very limited imaginations when thinking about life outside Earth and it shows up in UFO culture.

SunLit: What were the biggest challenges you faced in writing this book?

Frank: It was just “Big Fun” as the Canadians say! I love this topic so much and have been thinking about it for so long. I had a great time just letting loose and writing about it the way it appears in my head. I am from New Jersey, right

UNDERWRITTEN BY



Each week, The Colorado Sun and Colorado Humanities & Center For The Book feature an excerpt from a Colorado book and an interview with the author. Explore the SunLit archives at coloradosun.com/sunlit.

“The Little Book of Aliens”

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outside of New York City, where everybody has a hustle. You learn to think quickly and be skeptical. I wanted to bring that kind of funny skepticism to the voice of the book while also really diving into the excitement I feel when looking into the night sky.

SunLit: What’s the most important thing – a theme, lesson, emotion or realization — that readers should take from this book?

Frank: We may be the last generation to think we are alone in the universe and the first to know that we aren’t. It’s such an amazing moment in history, even as the world seems to be on fire. We are, perhaps, about to cross this remarkable threshold. “Are we alone?” It’s the most important question we can ask. So, I want people to be ready when someone tells them, “We found aliens.” I want them to know how to judge that claim and why it’s so important.

SunLit: In a highly politicized atmosphere where books, and people’s access to them, has become increasingly contentious, what would you add to the conversation about books, libraries and generally the availability of literature in the public sphere?

Frank: Books should never be banned. Period.

SunLit: Walk us through your writing process: Where and how do you write?

Frank: Mornings are my writing times. I get up. Do a half hour of zazen, drink some coffee and dive in. There is nothing better than getting lost in writing.

SunLit: Why do aliens matter? What’s the big deal?

Frank: The last part of the book really unpacks this question. If we find even one example of life beyond Earth, then everything changes. It would be the most profound and important discovery in human history. That’s because life is unlike any other physical system in the universe.

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SunLit present new excerpts from some of the best Colorado authors that not only spin engaging narratives but also illuminate who we are as a community. **Read more.**

Stars are amazing, Comets are amazing. Black Holes are amazing. But only life invents. Only life creates. Only life goes beyond itself. Right now, it's entirely possible that life and Earth and humans are an accident, a one-off that's never occurred anywhere else in the universe. But if we knew of just one other example of life on another world then we can conclude there are even more out there. If that's true then who knows what life has created, how far it's gone, what it might have done.

SunLit: Tell us about your next project.

Frank: My next big project is working through the video game Starfield. I'm 36 hours into it and just built a new starship for fighting space pirates. Apparently if I can disable their engines, I can board the ship and steal it!

After that, more science! I'm involved in a new international research project using information theory to unpack the physics of life.

A few more quick questions

SunLit: Which do you enjoy more as you work on a book – writing or editing?

Frank: My dad told me that Hemingway said, "You don't write, you rewrite." That's the part I like most.

SunLit: What's the first piece of writing – at any age – that you remember being proud of?

Frank: My high school graduation speech where I told the audience that they should forget everything that happened in high school because it doesn't matter anymore. They were free.

SunLit: What three writers, from any era, would you invite over for a great discussion about literature and writing?

Frank: Rilke, Nietzsche, Kim Stanley Robinson

SunLit: Do you have a favorite quote about writing?

Frank: Damn, I just used it for a previous question.

SunLit: What does the current collection of books on your home shelves tell visitors about you?

Frank: That I have more books than I can possibly read.

SunLit: Soundtrack or silence? What's the audio background that helps you write?

Frank: Two words – John Coltrane.

SunLit: What music do you listen to for sheer enjoyment?

Frank: Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, Gil Scott-Heron, The Ramones, Johnny Cash, Larkin Poe, Aretha Franklin, Harpo Slim, Tribe Called Quest. John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner.

SunLit: What event, and at what age, convinced you that you wanted to be a writer?

Frank: My first book by Carl Sagan.

SunLit: Greatest writing fear?

Frank: Getting some fact wrong.

SunLit: Greatest writing satisfaction?

Frank: A sentence with lyricism.