Book Review: â€˜Lives of the Planetsâ€™

by CNS

"Lives of the Planets" by Richard Corfield; Basic Books; 352 pages; $30.

The solar system may be shrinking - what with the recent demotion of Pluto from full-fledged planet to "dwarf planet" - but the number of books about our celestial neighborhood continues to grow.

FASCINATING SOJURN - The solar system may be shrinking but the number of books about our celestial neighborhood continues to grow. CNS Photo. In the case of Richard Corfield's new book, "Lives of the Planets," this is a good thing, though I will admit some initial skepticism, particularly after Dava Sobel produced a similar and very fine book in 2005.

But while Sobel could, at times, wax a bit too lyrical about the solar system, Corfield generally sticks to the science and the facts, which befits his status as a working researcher at Open University in England. Still, his enthusiasm for the subject is obvious and infectious. And the subject, even stripped to basic, layman science, is wondrous to behold.

Like Sobel, Corfield divides his book into the obvious chapters, beginning with the sun. But his professional training, which includes studies in botany, zoology, paleontology and climatology, ensure that his approach will be diverse. There is, for example, the usual recitation of facts about the sun: It's a solitary yellow dwarf star of the spectral type G2. It contains about 98 percent of the mass of the solar system and could hold 1.3 million Earths. It is middle-aged.

But Corfield blends in lots of other information, from how Stonehenge was conceived and built to track solar movements and predict astronomical movements (a Stone Age supercomputer, so to speak) to the current debate over the influence of sunspot cycles on the Earth's climate. (He thinks there's a strong connection between the spots and climate change, but says more research is needed.)

From the center of the solar system, Corfield blazes outward, with stops at Mercury, Venus, Earth and the moon, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Because much less is known about Uranus, Neptune, Pluto and beyond, they share chapters.

If there is an overarching theme to "Planets," it is the unsurprising notion that space exploration is a necessary and noble human endeavor. The solar system is our neighborhood, and we should know it, Corfield argues, and he diligently expounds upon the various historical missions to different planets and places, from the Soviet Venera probes to Venus in the 1960s to the American Pioneer probes a decade later (Pioneer 10 and 11 have since left the solar system, the first artificial objects to do so) to the Martian rovers, still hard at work.

There are many books on the solar system. New ones seem to pop up with the frequency of extrasolar planets. (At last count, there were 243.) There is talk of sending humans to Mars by 2030, though it's probably more fanciful than fact. "Lives of the Planets" is a worthy diversion while you wait.

- Scott LaFee is a science writer for the San Diego Union-Tribune.

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