



The Life of Super-Earths: How the Hunt for Alien Worlds and Artificial Cells Will Revolutionize Life on Our Planet

Dimitar Sasselov

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In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus fomented a revolution when he debunked the geocentric view of the universe, proving instead that our planet wasn't central to the universe. Almost five hundred years later, the revolution he set in motion is nearly complete. Just as earth is not the center of things, the life on it, it appears, is not unique to the planet. Or is it?

The Life of Super-Earths is a breathtaking tour of current efforts to answer the age-old question: Are we alone in the universe? Astronomer Dimitar Sassellov, the founding director of Harvard University's Origins of Life Initiative, takes us on a fast-paced hunt for habitable planets and alien life forms. He shows how the search for "super-Earths"—rocky planets like our own that orbit other stars—may provide the key to answering essential questions about the origins of life here and elsewhere. That is, if we don't find the answers to those questions here first. As Sassellov and other astronomers have uncovered planets with mixes of elements different from our own, chemists have begun working out the heretofore unseen biochemistries that those planets could support. That knowledge is feeding directly into synthetic biology—the effort to build wholly novel forms of life—making it likely that we will first discover truly "alien" life forms in an earthly lab, rather than on a remote planet thousands of light years away.

Sassellov tells the gripping story of a moment of unprecedented potential—a convergence of pioneering efforts in astronomy and biology to peer into the unknown. *The Life of Super-Earths* offers nothing short of a transformation in our understanding of life and its place in the cosmos.

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