

# Not in Ourselves but in Our Stars

By Marcia Bartusiak

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### CONVERSING WITH THE PLANETS

*How Science and Myth Invented the Cosmos.*

By Anthony Aveni.

Illustrated. 255 pp. New York:

Times Books/Random House. \$21.

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**I**N this intriguing work, so delightfully titled, Anthony Aveni defends astrology with both passion and rigor. No, he isn't peddling the modern-day junk found in New Age bookstores or newspaper horoscopes. Rather, Mr. Aveni, a noted lecturer in astronomy and anthropology at Colgate University, expertly demonstrates how today's scientific endeavors — the questions we ask and the ways we seek answers — are firmly rooted in the cultural traditions of our past. In "Conversing With the Planets" he writes, "Long ago the fingertips of humankind touched earth and sky more sensitively, and from those sensations there came a self-awareness that we could never be separate from nature."

So familiar are we with today's sophisticated images of the solar system — Voyager's stunning pictures of the outer planets, for example — that we too easily dismiss early notions about the heavens as silly superstitions. But those primeval myths, Mr. Aveni argues, were not utter fabrications; they were based on remarkably accurate observations. Ancient astrological tales of the sky, with their intricate plots and subplots, were humanity's first attempts to wrest order from its seemingly chaotic surroundings — which, after all, is the very mission of science.

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Many of the stories that the author relates will be familiar to archaeoastronomy buffs. He takes us from Babylonia, Persia and ancient Greece to the Mayan culture of the Yucatan Peninsula. But Mr. Aveni examines the astronomical beliefs of these civilizations with a keen anthropologist's eye. He's not concerned with how the myths came to evolve into our modern-day descriptions of the cosmos, a popular thread in many histories of astronomy. Rather, he wants us to understand exactly why early stargazers thought the way they did about those wandering deities, the planets. The ancients' reasons can be surprisingly rational.

Take Venus, for example, the primary subject in "Conversing With the Planets." Disparate cultures

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around the world have associated the planet Venus with love and fertility, probably because its 260-day-long appearance (as either the morning or evening star) closely approximates both the period of human gestation and the duration of an agricultural season from planting to harvest. But why did the Mayas in particular associate Venus with the god of rain? "When we chart Venus's disappearance periods over several seasonal years as seen from Mayan territory," Mr. Aveni points out, "we discover that the planet's absence is shortest when Venus vanishes in the dry season and longest during the time of rain. . . . How many modern astronomers are attuned enough to Venus's movements to recognize that connection?"

The Aztecs, Mayas and Babylonians did more than converse with the planets; they interrogated, feared and exalted them. "Every subtle bend, kink and turn, every closely watched disappearance and reappearance in a planet's cycle was carefully written into a script of life as rich and complex as an Ibsen play or a Ptolemaic ephemeris, as vibrant and colorful as Homer's 'Odyssey' or a Verdi opera," the author writes.

When he introduces us to this rich literature in his opening chapters, Mr. Aveni is superb. He writes with a mastery and polish that is wonderfully accessible, akin to an engaging classroom lecture. Unfortunately, "Conversing With the Planets" is less successful when it moves on to specific details.

Mr. Aveni has difficulty herding his overabundant evidence into a coherent whole. I wish he had been more selective. After a while it seems as if he threw in everything but the Sumerian sink. To his credit, the author provides fair warning of his painstaking scrutiny; a section describing the Dresden Codex, a meticulous table of Venus's motions written onto a piece of

bark by Mayan astronomers around A.D. 1200, is entitled "Proceed With Caution." Nevertheless, emerging from this sizable sea of facts, I did gain a far deeper appreciation for the amazing attention to detail with which ancient observers probed the sky.

We have to quit chastising our ancestors, Mr. Aveni says, for failing to adopt our world view. Whether astrology "meets our modern criteria for common sense is unimportant, for it never was intended to apply to us," he writes. Long before Sir Isaac Newton formulated his law of gravity, natural philosophers believed in the ether, an invisible substance that filled the heavens. In light of this model, it doesn't seem so strange that ancient astronomers thought the planets could influence a person's actions; here was a medium, an ethereal substance, for linking Earth with the other planets.

And why shouldn't a planet's past behavior help prophesy the future? Our ancestors clearly saw that nature was enmeshed in repetitive cycles: each and every year the sun regularly completed its march through the zodiac, and every month the moon waxed and waned. Mr. Aveni explains that "it is logical to suppose that the most influential predictors of our destiny would be the very ones who behave most like us." The planets are, he writes, "the most diverse, fickle, hard to pin down for astronomers. They sway to and fro, stop dead in their courses, turn backward, then spring ahead again in double time, waxing to brilliance only to fade away. . . . They seem almost human."

An ancient culture's myths — its sometimes bizarre interpretations of natural phenomena — suddenly make sense when viewed through the lens of that culture. Before we walked, we had to crawl. Before humanity developed science, it had to believe in astrology. □