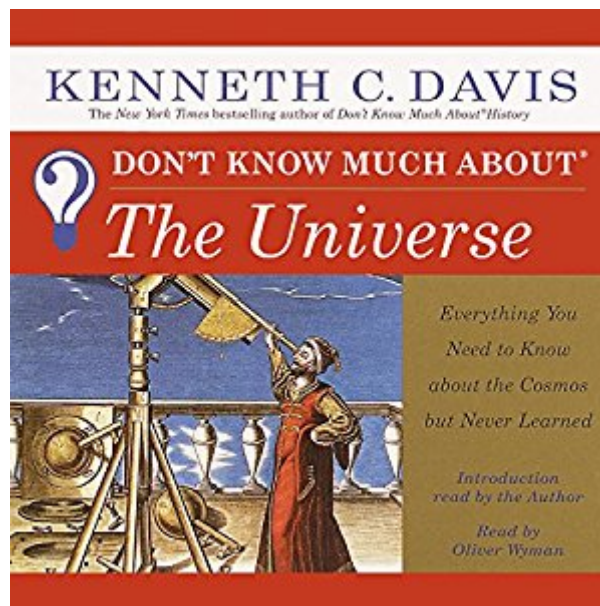


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Don't Know Much About The Universe: Everything You Need To Know About The Cosmos But Never Learned



Synopsis

From the ancients who charted the stars, to Jules Verne and Flash Gordon, to The X-Files, Apollo 13, and Armageddon, people around the world have long been intrigued with the heavens and outer space. Don't Know Much about the Universe, the fifth title in this best-selling series, uses the now-familiar and popular question-and-answer format to inform and entertain listeners by examining a subject that has inspired the greatest of fascinations, produced many popular misconceptions, and ultimately, helped to shape the course of history. Like other books in the series, Don't Know Much about the Universe integrates diverse subjects and ideas, touching on everything from geography to cosmic theology to the impact of the Space Race on American history.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 6 hours and 4 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Abridged

Publisher: Random House Audio

Audible.com Release Date: July 9, 2012

Language: English

ASIN: B008IYJAK6

Best Sellers Rank: #80 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Science > Astronomy #3933

in Books > Science & Math > Astronomy & Space Science > Astronomy #9059 in Books > Science & Math > History & Philosophy

Customer Reviews

Davis lists an impressive bibliography of sources. If only he had actually consulted them. For a book promising "Everything you need to know about the cosmos but never learned," this trots out a dismaying wealth of old myth and sets little of the record straight. According to Davis, Stonehenge -- which he incorrectly glosses as "stone hinge," obviously unaware what a henge is -- was built by druids around 1900 BC. As every English schoolchild knows, it was a ruin centuries before the first druid ever set foot in Britain. (There is a reason that it and dozens of other stone circles are known as "Stone Age Monuments.") Davis has astronomer Tycho Brahe die from a urinary tract infection after an all-night bender. Brahe in fact died from complications of a burst bladder because he considered it impolite to leave a six-hour banquet in his honor long enough to relieve himself -- which Davis could have gleaned from any responsible biography. He perpetuates when he could

have punctured the myth (eagerly promoted by Welles himself) that Orson Welles's "War of the Worlds" broadcast sent "millions" into panic in 1938. Davis can't spell Copernicus's Polish name (Koppernigk, not "Kopernik"). ...I could forgive all of this if Davis would only, like the even more factually-deprived Richard Shenkman, deliver a good read. But he's surprisingly turgid and uninteresting. Take Davis's title at its word. This is one to leave on the shelf.

Kenneth Davis' "Don't Know Much About..." books are fun and interesting. There are occasional factual errors, so use his works to get an overview or refreshment of the subject, and don't rely too heavily on specific historical anecdotes. But I recommend reading, not listening. Davis has a penchant for droning on about himself, his critique of the schools, and his own philosophy of learning. When doing so, he is verbose and repetitive. With a book, you can skim over his homilies and get to the data points. Unfortunately, you can't do that with an audiocassette or CD. In addition, the charts and lists he puts in his books are fine when you can view them, but they don't come through well when he reads them to you. I recommend skipping the cassettes or CDs -- try the books.

Contrary to the other 2 reviews, I thought this did exactly what I hoped. This is a simple review -- okay, simplistic review -- of the universe, but I was barely 8 when I last had any formal instruction about the vastness of the heavens. I have managed to be successful in my life in spite of this dereliction, but now in the comfort of an easy chair with a cigar and glass of cab for company, I can finally learn that some guy in 300 some-odd BC calculated the earth's circumference to within a couple hundred miles. My kids knew that, of course -- probably from some video game -- but it was a wowie for me. So what if Davis doesn't know how to spell Polish names. I am not trying out for a spot on the next Mars mission. This may not be a scholarly work, but it's a good read.

Did you sign up for Astronomy 101 in college, and drop it like a hot potato when you found out how much of it was physics and math? Were you just gung-ho to look at the stars and learn about the planets, and do you get a kick out of all those terms they're always mentioning on Star Trek -- the ones that are real? Then this is the book for you. It's not for the serious astronomer, nor for the in-depth student. It's just what the title promises: a book of facts and explanations for the person who gets a kick out of outer space, and always wanted to know more. Sure, there are some chapters that are a little dry, but it's all a matter of taste. Definitely recommended for both teen and adult space enthusiasts.

Overall, I liked this book more than many of the other reviewers. Sure, there are some factual errors (enough to drop my rating down to 4 stars), but Davis gets his facts right 9 times out of 10. The material is broken up in a very logical manner, and the questions Davis chooses to pose, then answer, form a cohesive overview of the subject. I think anyone with enough interest in the subject to consider reading this book will come away fairly satisfied with what is delivered. Recommended.

As in the other books in this series, Davis attempts to inform his readers about elements that we "never learned" in school. Whether it's history, geography, or the Bible, Davis always illuminates areas that people THINK they know about, but don't. This work is no exception. In his standard question and answer format, Davis covers 'The Universe' from the beginnings of astronomy, to the 'Big Bang' theory (not what most people think it is), to the question of 'are we alone' in the universe? He also includes scientific milestones, mostly of astronomy, that are enlightening - and at times humorous: Wan Hu attempted the first manned flight in 1500 by tying 47 rockets to a chair; "the device explodes, killing Wan Hu, who acted as pilot." (43) On a more serious note, Davis also outlines Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Bruno, and others who challenged the accepted 'everything revolves around us - literally' mentality, and sometimes paid for these challenges with excommunication, ridicule, and grievous bodily harm. In terms of helpful information, Davis provides a planet-by-planet description of our solar system. In the light of recent unmanned journeys to Mars, it's interesting to compare the theories of life on the 'red planet' with what current events may bring. The insertion of cartoons depicting the space race, space travel, and other related issues is another good historical context for the book's information, as well as breaking up the sometimes dense scientific material. For a non-expert, this book is a great introduction to 'The Universe', and is second, in my opinion, to Davis' best work in this genre, his original 'Don't Know Much About History'. Well worth reading.

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