



Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium

By Carl Sagan

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In this book, his last, Carl Sagan shows once again his extraordinary ability to interpret the mysteries of life and the majesty of the universe for the general reader. Brilliant, eloquent, and imbued with Sagan's uniquely childlike sense of awe, this entertaining collection of essays captures the authors spirit at its best.

In **Billions and Billions** Sagan applies what we know about science, mathematics, and space to everyday life, as well as to the exploration of many essential questions concerning the environment and our future. Ranging far and wide in subject matter, he takes his readers on a soaring journey, from the invention of chess to the possibility of life on Mars, from **Monday Night Football** to the relationship between the United States and Russia, from global warming to the abortion debate. And, on a more intimate note, we are given a rare glimpse of the author himself as he movingly describes his valiant fight for his life, his love of his family, and his personal beliefs about death and God.

Throughout these essays, Sagan provides clarity and understanding for an audience eager to make sense of the world around it as it prepares for the challenges of the coming millennium, and in the process he illuminates his strongly held belief that we have the ability to change the world and our lives for the better.

Sagan has said, We make our world significant by the courage of our questions and by the depth of our answers. With this book, as in his magnificent career, he makes this world significant indeed.

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- Sales Rank: #396487 in Books
- Brand: Random House Inc
- Published on: 1997-06-02
- Released on: 1997-06-02
- Ingredients: Example Ingredients
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.75" h x 6.50" w x 1.25" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 244 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

It is doubtful that there is anyone unfamiliar with noted astronomer and science writer Sagan's ability to convey the wonder, excitement, and joy of science. This book is a wonderful, if eclectic, collection of essays, some reprinted from magazines of national prominence, covering a wide range of topics: the invention of chess, life on Mars, global warming, abortion, international affairs, the nature of government, and the meaning of morality. Writing with clarity and an understanding of human nature, Sagan offers hope for humanity's future as he illuminates our ability to understand ourselves and to change the world for the better. The last chapter is an account of his struggle with myelodysplasia, the illness that finally took his life in December 1996. An epilog written by his wife is a personal account of the man rather than the scientist admired by so many. This last book is a fitting capstone to a distinguished career. Enthusiastically recommended.

-?James Olson, *Northeastern Illinois Univ. Lib., Chicago*

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From [Booklist](#)

Carl Sagan died last December, and as a result, these essays exude a feeling of interrupted eloquence. The celebrity planetary astronomer possibly had more books to write that could have compared favorably with his *Cosmos* (1980) or *Pale Blue Dot* (1994), but disappointingly, this collection does not bloom like those dependable library perennials. Perhaps expectations are overly inflated with a new Sagan exposition in hand--but here, expectations rapidly deflate upon seeing that the contents comprise much reprinted material, such as nonscience articles he and his wife and coauthor, Ann Druyan, wrote for a Sunday newspaper supplement. One *Parade* piece, advancing their argument in favor of legal abortion, sourly criticizes televangelist Pat Robertson for using his influence to mobilize opposition to the 1990 article, a point that skates over the sway the authors themselves were trying to exert in the abortion controversy by means of their article. In other chapters, the subjects are flat--an explanation of the origin of Sagan's brand-name cliché "billions and billions" --or the subjects are rudimentary. Blemishes apart, this collection offers some worthwhile essays: his account of battling cancer or summaries of the enviro-political issues that he weighed in on, such as ozone depletion and the fossil fuels^atmospheric warming nexus. However uneven and eclectic, this tome still flashes with Sagan's curiosity, wonder, and humanity concerning the scientific enterprise. *Gilbert Taylor*

From Kirkus Reviews

The final book by the late science populist (*The Demon-Haunted World*, 1996, etc.) shows him in his role as one of the finest exponents of science for the general public. These brief pieces apply scientific knowledge to the exploration of essential questions about the environment and the world's future in a disarmingly clear and charming manner. Sagan begins by pointing out that the phrase "billions and billions," indelibly associated with him in the popular mind, is in fact a parody of his style invented by Johnny Carson--then he segues into a discussion of large numbers and scientific notation. In similar fashion, he extrapolates from TV sports to an examination of our species's hunter-gatherer origins, and from the fragile ecology of a small aquarium to that of our entire planet. Sagan's concerns always extend beyond a simple examination of whatever scientific principle he begins with; he is always ready to look into the human consequences of the ideas he discusses. Thus, a discussion of how exponential numbers grow evolves into examinations of population growth and the spread of AIDS. Sagan spends some time reconciling the missions of science and religion: Both relate to the ultimate welfare of humanity, and each, he argues, has something to learn from the other. Chapters on moral issues of global importance (such as the degradation of the environment), and reflections on our

accomplishments as a species, including the prolonging of human life, the discovery and manipulation of the atom, travel into space, and unprecedented insights into the nature of the universe, attempt to capture an even longer perspective. In the final chapter, written after Sagan's discovery of his fatal cancer, he looks death in the face and declares his willingness to fight it. A poignant afterword by his wife, Ann Druyan, ends the book. Sagan was upbeat to the last, and a true believer in humanity's ability to transcend its worst impulses. This book captures his spirit at its best. -- *Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

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