



## Starlight Detectives: How Astronomers, Inventors, and Eccentrics Discovered the Modern Universe

**Alan Hirshfeld**

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*This comprehensive rundown of the great names in astronomical detection makes for compelling biographical reading.*

*Starlight Detectives* throws light on the lives of many of astronomy's greats, from the well-known Edwin Hubble to the early and fairly obscure William Bond, Harvard astronomer and telescope pioneer. The book goes into some detail about the personal background of each of its personae before delving fully into their contributions to astronomy. The result is an engaging text that discusses scientists and innovators who often don't see their day in the sun outside of a fairly small academic community.

The bulk of the achievements described in this book are in the field of optics. The specific emphasis is on telescopes, but photography and the development of cameras play a strong supporting role, since they are critical to actually capturing images of the night sky. Since the book progresses more or less chronologically, it is possible to watch the disciplines of astronomy and photography develop in tandem, as though the book itself seeks to highlight this remarkable union of art and science.

Hirshfeld is to be commended for his overwhelming thoroughness. The workings of early- and late-model telescopes, the sometimes preposterous lengths to which astronomers have gone for their craft, and the litany of astronomical discovery over the past two centuries all enhance the subjects' lives with context and connections that might not get a great deal of treatment in a textbook. The book contains a wealth of astronomical information as well—it wouldn't make much sense to talk about the researchers without mentioning the research—but the biographical focus never flags, and *Starlight Detectives* does not ramble.

Far from a dry scientific text, the book contains prose that is light even when didactic, engaging in its personification of these unjustly forgotten astronomers as determined, obsessed, stalwart, and sometimes just plain strange. Every researcher presented in this book is as lively in the text as if they were still personally scouring the heavens. By avoiding technical jargon, the book both avoids becoming dense and helps to make astronomy in general feel accessible, even friendly. Ultimately, *Starlight Detectives* is more like a guided tour than a lesson.

Almost anyone with a passing interest in astronomy could enjoy this book.

ANNA CALL (Fall 2014)

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