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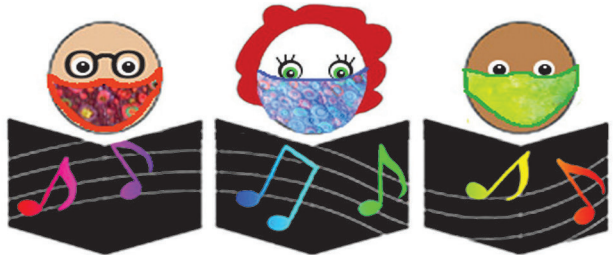
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BOOKMONGER

Exploring the final frontier

I hope everyone was able to get out to see Comet Neowise over the last few weeks. I had the thrill one recent night of viewing Neowise just as a meteor flashed into my field of vision right underneath it, as if to underscore that this comet's appearance was a once-in-every-6,700-years phenomenon.

This Week's Book

'The Last Stargazers' by Emily Levesque
Sourcebooks — 336 pp — \$25.99

There's always something to see in the night sky, as University of Washington-based astronomer Emily Levesque reminds us in her new book, "The Last Stargazers."

With that title, Levesque is not suggesting that future generations will fail to look up and marvel at the moon, planets and stars, but she does note a concerning shift that is occurring due to the dictates of economics and changing technologies.

With limited funding being directed toward the field of astronomy, massive new automated survey telescopes are now being prioritized over telescopes that allow human-driven observation. Levesque points out that while these larger telescopes will do a fantastic job of providing data about new corners of the universe, the data will have "impenetrable heaps of zeroes and ones" unless observational astronomy is also able to continue.

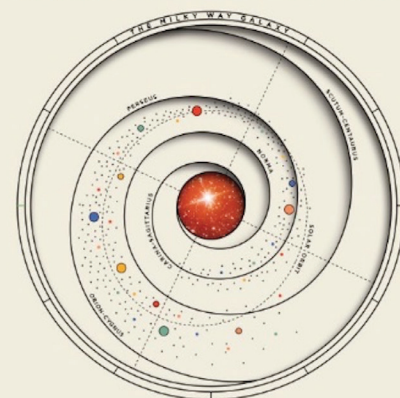
That means we still need scientists who are able to study the data, interpret it and investigate the anomalies through telescopes that, unlike the new pre-programmed behemoths, are allowed to manipulate. That's what will allow them to hone in on new understandings about physics or possibly to even detect signals from distant realms of the universe.

In "The Last Stargazers," Levesque incorporates the stories and experiences of more than 100 of her astronomer colleagues from around the world to describe the essential human component of astronomy.

She describes the bitter frustrations of cloudy nights as only an astronomer can experience them.

But there's also the thrill of new discoveries. In 2017, at a specialized observatory in eastern Washington, a gravitational wave was detected for the first time ever, con-

THE LAST STARGAZERS



THE ENDURING STORY OF
ASTRONOMY'S VANISHING EXPLORERS

EMILY LEVESQUE

firming something that Albert Einstein had hypothesized 101 years earlier as part of his theory of relativity.

And somewhere in between, there's the more typical night-in-the-life work of astronomers.

When astronomers are awarded a coveted turn at one of the powerful telescopes scattered on mountaintops around the globe, they bring along music playlists to keep themselves awake. They have favorite snacks like Goldfish crackers and peanut M&M's.

And there's the congenial custom of gathering outside to watch the sunset with colleagues before heading in to work with the telescopes all night.

Outside the telescopes in Chile, the sunset-watching is usually attended also by a complement of resident viscachas, members of the Chinchilla family that look like long-tailed rabbits.

Depending on the location, animals that astronomers have encountered inside the buildings housing telescopes have included tarantulas, scorpions, skunks, even a bear.

Surprising, inspiring and relatable, "The Last Stargazers" is a fine summer read.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlk.com.