

Miss Leavitt's Stars: The Untold Story of the Woman Who Discovered How to Measure the Universe (Great Discoveries)

By George Johnson

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The answer to the controversy?a “yardstick” suitable for measuring the cosmos?was discovered by Henrietta Swan Leavitt, who was employed by the Harvard Observatory as a number cruncher, at a wage not dissimilar from that of workers in the nearby textile mills. *Miss Leavitt’s Stars* uncovers her neglected history, and brings a fascinating and turbulent period of astronomical history to life.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
In the early 1900s the "computers" at the Harvard University Observatory were women, paid 25 cents an hour to pore over photographic plates taken with the university's telescope and to catalogue changes in the sizes and locations of stars. Henrietta Leavitt was an unmarried clergyman's daughter who began working at the observatory soon after graduating from Radcliffe. The director quickly recognized her skill and made generous allowances for the long absences occasioned by her apparently delicate health and family problems. *New York Times* science writer Johnson (*Strange Beauty*) relates that Leavitt's singular contribution to astronomy came when she recognized that cyclical changes in the size of Cepheids, giant variable stars, could be correlated with their luminosity. Once luminosity was known, a star's distance from Earth could be calculated. Leavitt wasn't interested in pushing her discovery to its logical conclusion, but other astronomers quickly grasped the ramifications for calculating the size of the Milky Way and the universe. In recent years, Leavitt has joined Rosalind Franklin in receiving long overdue recognition. Scant documentation exists for Leavitt's life aside from correspondence with the observatory, so readers shouldn't be surprised to discover that this excellent book is more about the search to measure the universe than about Leavitt's life. Nevertheless, it's a fine tribute to a remarkable woman of science. 10 illus. not seen by *PW. Agent, Esther Newberg.(June)*
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From Scientific American
In the early 20th century, colorful, strong-willed astronomers debated the size of the universe: Was the Milky Way just one galaxy among billions, or did it constitute the entire universe? At the same time, in the backrooms of the Harvard Observatory, a not-so-colorful, rather plain young woman was hard at work. Henrietta Swan Leavitt was paid 25 cents an hour as a human "computer": she examined photographic plates, concentrating on variable stars--those that periodically change brightness--looking for anomalies. Eventually she discovered a direct correlation between the time it took a star to go from dim to bright and how bright it actually was--and thus a way to use these stars as a cosmic measuring stick. On the shoulders of her accomplishment, Edwin Hubble was able to prove that the Milky Way is but one galaxy among many. Little information about Leavitt exists--a few grainy photographs, some letters, no diary. From such scraps, the well-known science writer George Johnson fashions a fascinating picture of her life: her passion for astronomy, the humiliations at the hands of her male colleagues, the constant interruptions of illness, including her growing deafness, and finally her death from stomach cancer at age 53. His grace in bringing her to life is matched by his lucidity in explaining difficult scientific concepts. Unfortunate in life, Miss Leavitt is very fortunate in her biographer.

Editors of Scientific American

From Booklist
Starred Review *New York Times* science reporter Johnson observes that "Henrietta Swan Leavitt deserves a proper biography. She will probably never get one, so faint is the trail she left behind." But at least we have Johnson's illuminating profile of this gifted human "computer." Hoping to learn astronomy, she arrived at the Harvard Observatory around 1893 and was put to work recording the magnitude of stars and looking for "variables," stars that wax and wane in brightness. Leavitt worked until 1896, after which travel, health troubles, and family obligations kept her away until 1902. In 1908 she published an account of her work on the variables in the Magellanic Clouds that included her theory that one could estimate the distance of stars

by using their brightness and the rhythm of their beats, one of the most significant findings in stellar astronomy. Leavitt died in 1921, leaving behind her magnum opus: "the measurements for her North Polar Sequence, ninety-six stars whose magnitude she had determined with such authority and care they could be used as a standard for the rest of the sky." Given Leavitt's neglect, this tale is as frustrating as it is spellbinding. *Rebecca Maksel*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robin Millard:

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