Interesting Premise And Valid Questions

As many earthlings already know—including more than 2 million computer users with firsthand experience—our best hope for finding extraterrestrial intelligence might just lie with an ingenious little screensaver. So it’s not surprising that this introduction to searching for and communicating with intelligent life begins with some of the details behind UC Berkeley’s groundbreaking, massively distributed SETI@home project, which processes intergalactic noise for pennies on the teraflop. But that’s just the start of the story. Inventor and software developer Brian McConnell continues with an overview of whether and why we might find something out there, who’s doing what to look for it (including the folks at Berkeley), and—once some ET picks up on the other end—what we might say and how we might say it. This last problem, which occupies the final half of the book, proves to be the most thought-provoking, and McConnell has put together a methodical, nuts-and-bolts walkthrough of both the challenges involved and how binary code might be enlisted to solve them. If you’ve taken even a single computer-science class in your life, you’ll probably skip ahead through explanations of data structures and Boolean arithmetic, but McConnell doesn’t want to leave anyone behind in fleshing out his alien-friendly lingua numerica. The book’s first half surveys various SETI projects, past and present, and includes generous sections on signal processing, what sort of radio and laser hardware has been mobilized for the search, and how exactly SETI@home works. (So, if nothing else, now you can know how your computer decides if its talking to aliens while you’re off having lunch.) --Paul Hughes

My Personal Review:

I like the idea of this book, but the execution left a bit to be desired. The first two sections (Are We Alone? and Getting a Dial Tone) do a passably good job of introducing some of the basics of interstellar
communication, ably introducing both the fundamentals of radio and optical technologies and the unique challenges of communicating a signal (any signal; the details of the signal to be sent are reserved for Part III) across interstellar distances.

Problems with the first two sections are:
(1) inconsistent readability: the author seems not to have found a consistent tone for the book, and wanders between wide-eyed pie-in-the-sky speculation and bone-dry technical detail;
(2) organizational flaws: the author routinely discusses a concept or entity throughout early chapters without a decent introduction or explanation, only to treat the subject in question at length (with the proper explanatory introduction) later in the text -- the discussion of the SETI@home distributed computing project is particularly guilty of this;
(3) lack of investigative reporting: almost every piece of information in these sections could have come out of a textbook or a web search, and its clear that the author hasnt bothered to interview the movers and shakers in the SETI community and find out anything much about the story behind the story, which might have made for some interesting reading;
(4) bad editing: there is a typo every few pages, which is a minor beef but in the age of spell-checkers hardly excusable.

Nonetheless, if youve never read a Scientific American article about SETI, the first two sections of the book would be educational. If you have any exposure to SETI prior to picking up the book, chances are that you wont learn very much (except possibly about optical SETI/CETI, which relies on the production and/or detection of laser light aimed at a specific star system, and which is grossly undertreated in the literature).

The third section (Communicating with Other Worlds) treats the specifics of the authors ideas about what sort of message could be sent by us (or, by extension, might be received by us from others). The author makes an analogy between modular messages encoded in binary code and genes encoded by DNA, and sets up one potential system that might be used to send a complex message from star A to star B. This section is definitely the weakest in the book, for the following reasons.
(1) It treats at punishingly great length only one possible system of a presumably great many for communicating with alien intelligences, glossing over other approaches in favor of a detailed treatment of the authors pet approach. While I dont have a specific complaint with the approach described, I will say that as a working biologist, I found the authors biologically motivated analogies (igenes, binary DNA) strained and in some cases laughable. It probably makes the material sexier in the computer-science and SETI literature, but as a life scientist I mostly winced a lot.
(2) In part because of this, the author doesnt put his approach in any kind of context -- e.g., how else might we do it?
(3) Its way too long and inappropriately detailed: a great deal of theory of computation stuff thats not at all unique to SETI or the challenge of communicating with a non-human intelligence ends up in this section, and I dont think that benefits the reader more than just saying, Well send computer programs using the benefit of knowledge reaped from the
maturing fields of cryptography and computer science and our impressive knowledge of the physical universe, and focusing more on reasons why any approach like this has shortcomings and might not work regardless of how clever you are.

All that having been said, this is an OK book. I wouldn't recommend that it be the only thing that you read about SETI, nor would I recommend that you read it cover-to-cover (unless you have troubles with insomnia), but if you're an avid reader of the SETI literature, it certainly can't hurt to pick this one up.

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