



## The Listeners

*James E. Gunn*

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## **The Listeners** James E. Gunn

A classic of science fiction, this book predicted and inspired the creation of the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI)—the organization dedicated to the search for extraterrestrial life. A tale of contact with alien life hailed by leaders of SETI organizations and today's leading science fiction authors as hugely influential, the story appeals to both science fiction readers and the hundreds of thousands of members of various SETI organizations. This replaces 034530036X.

## **The Listeners Details**

Date : Published April 12th 1985 by Del Rey (first published October 1st 1972)

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Author : James E. Gunn

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## From Reader Review The Listeners for online ebook

### **Paul says**

Involvement in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) might be the ultimate job for the extremely dedicated. Most scientists might not be willing to spend their careers listening for signs of intelligence out there, dealing with bureaucratic nonsense, constantly fighting for funding, and knowing that the chances of actually hearing anything are remote.

The Project has spent the previous 50 years listening to the stars, using the "Little Ear" radiotelescope at Arecibo, Puerto Rico. The rest of the world does not share the interest of the scientists on duty, so The Project is on the bureaucratic chopping block. Everything changes the day that a message is received.

It isn't so much a message as it is early human radio broadcasts beamed back to Earth, with the message inside, as a series of something like dots and dashes. It is analyzed, and turned into a very stylized picture of the sender (specifically, from the star Capella). An interpretation of the message says that Capella's binary star system is becoming very unstable. Perhaps one of the stars is about to go supernova, and the message is an attempt, before their race perishes, to learn that they are not alone in the universe.

There is much discussion in The Project as to whether or not Earth should answer the Message. An answer is sent, consisting of a similar stylized picture of humans, knowing that it will take 90 years for the message to reach Capella, and for them to send a response. The Day of The Reply is a worldwide holiday on Earth. Billions of people are tuned in to see The Reply, but it's not what they were hoping for.

This is a really good and plausible novel. It shows how one moment of "Oh, my God!" (receipt of a message from space) can make up for many years of nothing. It's recommended.

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### **Kelly Flanagan says**

This was a great read. No car chases, no gun battles! Just the emotional/mental changes that the world would go through if we received a message back from out in space.

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### **Rio Cornelius says**

are we alone in this entire universe? scary.

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### **Dusk Peterson says**

"Between MacDonald and the sky was a giant dish held aloft by skeleton metal fingers - held high as if to catch the stardust that drifted down from the Milky Way. . . . Then the dish began to turn, noiselessly,

incredibly, and to tip. And it was not a dish any more but an ear, a listening ear cupped by the surrounding hills to overhear the whispering universe." I fell in love with this novel as a child. I still think it's one of the finest science fiction novels ever written.

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### **Pierre Sotér says**

A wonderful surprise. The science fiction book I liked the most.

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### **Matthew says**

A cool Sci-Fi I found for \$.25 at the local book sale. Classic themes with a nice make you think (but not too hard) feeling. Simple and clean.

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### **Jon Norimann says**

The listeners is a short novel, almost a short story. The form is also short story like. The book is about a SETI scientist missing the forest for the trees. A nice little read with a memorable point.

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### **Scott Kardel says**

The Listeners is the novel that inspired Carl Sagan to write Contact. James Gunn certainly blazed new trails in writing this in the early 1970s and, while it does go places that Contact never does, it feels a bit dated now as the scientists are men & the women are wives or secretaries. Frankly Contact is a much better novel, so if you are interested in reading a novel about listening for alien life, I would recommend that.

Note Reputation Books printing the paperback edition that I read. I purchased it new and it was printed last year, but I still had a page fall out while reading it. That shouldn't be the case.

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### **Ian Lewis says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, despite its flaws. The characters are a bit too eloquent, honest, and good. Humanity responds a bit to well to a message from the stars. Would have been nice to have some jerks and dishonest, selfish people. Despite this optimism, the book is still very melancholic about our failings in our interactions with each other. Well written and compelling throughout.

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### **Bookbrow says**

Clearly the inspiration for Sagan's Contact, an interesting book about the future that avoids any sort of world

building, with the exception of mentioning "the computer" that said, a kind of humanistic sentimental story is told. The fine conclusion reminds me of a particularly fine episode of Star Trek - Next Generation that I will not spoil for interested readers although the book predates THG by many years.

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### **Bridgett Brown says**

I won this book in a Goodreads Giveaway. MacDonald 100% believes that life is out there and that intelligent beings will communicate with humans. He and others like him have been listening for over 50 years, but they've heard only silence. Until now. A cryptic message, but what does it mean? MacDonald gets permission to send a reply. The catch? It takes 45 years for the message to reach the planet it came from and another 45 years for them to send a answer back. So 90 years before a answer gets back.

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### **Rob says**

...In the end I thought *The Listeners* featured a little bit too much promotional material for the SETI project but it is a fascinating read nonetheless. Gunn picked a subject that isn't particularly sexy and yields very little in the way of visible or easy to understand results and turned it into a good story anyway. It is a bit melancholic at times, some readers will not particularly care for the characters. I guess I can see why it didn't sweep the awards or turns up in lists of must read classics. After having read it, I think it does deserve more recognition than it has received. This novel is definitely one of the pleasant surprises encountered in my Grand Master Reading Challenge reading. I may have to check out some of Gunn's short fiction in the future.

[Full Random Comments review](#)

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### **Barry says**

The Listeners is a short novel that nevertheless manages to fit in some thought provoking ideas. It's more than a 'first contact' (with extra-terrestrial intelligence)novel. It's a novel of faith.

The novel's focus is on 'The Project' which is the search for extra-terrestrial intelligence. Since the scientists have no way of sending out messages they are effectively listening for any sign that 'we are not alone'. Robert McDonald is the project's Director who, along with his colleagues has spent decades 'listening' with no tangible results. His role is ensure motivation and belief is strong within the team whilst also dealing with outside factors that threaten the future of The Project.

The Project has been listening without success for fifty years with McDonald at the helm for the previous fifteen. As McDonald faces budgetary concerns and the threat of closure he is dealing with an influential journalist who is openly planning an exposé of The Project and a damaging article. During the journalist's visit the scope of the novel changes as a signal is received from a satellite of a distant planet, Capella. The Capellans have heard radio waves transmitted from Earth since the 1930's and it has taken until 2028 for the message to get back to Earth - a round trip of ninety years.

McDonald faces the moral responsibility of sharing the message with Earth, deciding on the response and

engaging with those who would choose not to reply or those who discredit the validity of the message. The novel passes through the generations as another ninety years pass waiting for the reply from Capella which is particularly powerful and frightening as to the idea of us 'being alone' on Earth. The last sentence of the novel though ends on such a positive note of belief and perseverance and that humanity / other intelligent life has the capacity to grow.

On one level this book is a huge promotion for SETI (Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence) and indeed this book predates it, envisages it and is a powerful advocate of the need to listen. The structure of the book is interesting as each chapter is interspersed from real and fictional scientists, poets, artists, philosophers, writers and cultural history from throughout mankind. They ponder the question of life in the Universe and our place in it. These chapters set the context and provide the reader with ideas to the big questions about life on other planets and how they would view us. Are we a threat, an exploitative resource, significant or not, or an opportunity to learn and share intelligence and understanding. Gunn firmly nails his colours to the mast of promoting the search for extra terrestrial intelligence is intertwined with our evolution as a species.

Most of the quotes in between the chapters are from Gunn's contemporaries and early founders of SETI. In many respects this book is an effective time capsule as to the understanding of the search in the 1960's (although over fifty years later the big ideas remain the same and as such the big questions no nearer to being answered).

In terms of being a 'time capsule' the novel discusses the nature of time and more importantly faith. It's an interesting concept to be dedicated to a task knowing full well that the results will not be realised in one's life time. It seems in our modern world we think in terms of months and the next election for results, not in a generation or two - this is seen in our governments behaviour. Something as important as understanding if we are truly alone in the Universe will always be difficult to convince a government to fund (at the same time - as a species we haven't begun to meet the basic needs of our own yet so it could be argued how can we begin to understand the 'other' when we don't understand ourselves).

As a novel of faith it asks the reader to believe and the people of Earth to believe that it is worth listening for decades with no tangible results. It has an interesting resolution to the major religious question of whether we are unique and created in God's image. I think the novel successfully realises a belief in God and the notion that we are not the only intelligent life in the Universe. I don't consider myself religious but I think this was handled masterfully.

What I really like about the novel is Gunn's optimism. He has a faith in human nature. Part of this may be evident in the optimism and forward looking nature of the 1960's but I think it is mostly due to the authors belief in mankind. I suspect similar novels written today would have a dystopian nature whereas this is decidedly different. I'm not sure if Man evolves and solves it's issues because of the existence of the Capellans or because it is the natural order of things. In a world of such suffering and pain I find Gunn's novel a message of hope and I find this refreshing and a pleasure to read. Through Gunn's eyes the world is a better place in a hundred years and that's a vision I'm glad to read.

One of the novels key themes is one of communication - McDonald (like Gunn) is a linguist first, then a scientist. McDonald oft quotes significant figures (in their original language) to illustrate a point and much of his role and success isn't in listening for signs from the universe, it's listening to other persons and their point of view. The novel focuses on understanding the Capellans but it's also about understanding other perspectives. McDonald doesn't use linguistic tricks to convince his peers (including President's and religious leaders) he uses understanding and visionary leadership. (I think Gunn demonstrates an awareness of leadership theory in advance of what was commonly believed in the 1960's).

The characterisation of the novel is weak in places and I struggled to be overly interested in McDonald, his family and his colleagues. The relationship between Father and Son is an interesting dynamic and even made me think about my relationship with my son and his future. However, I felt the way the estranged Bobby McDonald picks up his father's work was a bit clunky. The theme of dedication to work, or one's life's work and its impact on the family is explored but Maria McDonald comes across as a weak character who only exists in this novel in the context of her husband. She says, 'yes, husband' then gives up. In a novel of hope, Maria has little.

There are tons of ideas in the novel but not much happens in the novel. It will make you think but isn't particularly exciting and doesn't wow the reader.

A small complaint about my SF Masterworks Kindle edition. Translations for the quotes are at the back, like the print version I presume however the translations are not linked so it's a real pain to access the translation. The technology exists to fix this and use the format to its capability. For the publishers not to do this is just lazy.

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### **Jayhawkrockdoc says**

Thought provoking and poetic. Like all sci-fi greats, Gunn tells an intriguing story without knocking you over the head with details. He instead lets the reader's imagination piece together the time gaps and implications of each event. This is the first book I read from him and it won't be the last.

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### **Mike Maurer says**

A quick read that feels more like the serialized form of the original story. I can definitely see how James Gunn influenced *Contact* by Carl Sagan. The book has pages and pages of quotes from the mid 20th century about looking for and finding alien signals. I can also see how the book influenced a whole group of scientists and engineers to help with SETI.

The two most interesting bits are the computer and the Capella civilization. The computer is a monolithic design, patterned after what machines looked like in 1960. But as it grows and eventually learns, it turns into something like the AI that we have today. It isn't HAL 9000 type AI, it is more subtle. The Capella civilization has depth, as even though they are only sending simple diagrams, you feel for them. The rest of the characters I didn't feel much for. It was the yearn for the Message and the Reply that drove the story for me.

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