

***The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era.* By Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992. ISBN 0-6-250826-1. Pp. x+305.**

Many years ago, while standing on the shores of Lake Huron, Thomas Berry pondered what to say to a group of native Americans he had been invited to address. As he listened to the wind and waves, he heard them say, "Tell them the story." The story "geologist" Thomas Berry related that afternoon is now shared with a wider audience in this volume, with the creative partnership of physicist and mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme.

Sometimes called the "new story," *The Universe Story* is a scientifically informed mythic narrative of the origin and integration of the universe, stars, solar systems, the earth and life itself. It ambitiously relates the "great adventure" of the universe's narrative, from the "primordial flaring forth" or "big bang" some 15 billion years ago, through the development of galaxies and supernovas 10 to 14 billion years ago, the emergence of the solar system, the development of Aries, the first prokaryotic cell on Earth, right through the unfolding of the human species and the rise of contemporary civilizations. The authors are novel in describing the "daring of the Kronos," the first organism to swallow whole some of its living neighbours, and the "courage" of the first strain of vegetation to venture out of the sea and take a gamble on land-living. The universe story is portrayed as one of drama, suspense, tragedy and celebration millions of years before we humans ever trod the planet. The language, at times technical and scientific, is also at moments lyrical, almost mystical. This "new story" portrays "the big picture" of creation—it doesn't get any "bigger" than this!

The fruit of a ten-year colloquy between the authors, this work replaces an understanding of the universe as cosmos—a given, fully formed, static entity—with the notion of "cosmogogenesis"—the universe as an emerging, dynamic and integral phenomenon containing a unique narrative. Berry, a cultural historian and Roman Catholic priest, and Brian Swimme, Director of the Center for the Story of the Universe at the California Institute of Integral Studies, share a deep concern over the present ecological crisis. They contend that, "with all our learning and scientific insight, we have not yet attained a meaningful approach to the universe and our role within it." For Berry and Swimme, the proper function of the human is to enable "the Earth and the universe entire to reflect on and celebrate themselves" (1).

In this "new story" about the universe, all matter, all reality, is not only interconnected, it is "bonded," suggesting an affective dimension to interrelationships within the cosmos. While the universe is a self-energizing and celebratory

event, it is not without its shadow side. Resistance, energy and dreams, they contend, are the provenance of violence in the cosmos, from the shattering blast of a supernova to the lethal burst from a gangland machine gun. The violence of the universe, they aver, is somehow bound up with its creative energy. In the universe story “we witness a burst of glory, an amplification of the universe’s beauty, and a dangerous and joyful release of power.” Unfortunately, the ethical implications of the “dangerous” dimensions of this power remain relatively unexplored in this volume.

At present, Berry and Swimme argue, we are at the end of the Cenozoic Era, initiated some 55 million years ago, and are poised on the edge of a new era, an era in which humanity, given its great power, both destructive and salutary, will be in charge. Claiming that we in the modern era sought progress through rapacious plunder of the earth, dazzled by a Disneylike vision of a Wonderland created by technological innovation, the authors argue that we are now being called to an “Ecozoic” era, where sacrifice, a sense of limits, and a profound readjustment to the lifecosystems of the planet will be defining features. In an Ecozoic era, the universe will be seen as the primary revelatory event. If we choose the “Technozoic era” we will inherit the “Wasteworld” we have begun to build, and will end up destroying the major lifecosystems of the planet.

The work is fascinating, compelling, challenging, but at times a little mystifying. (Thankfully, it is enhanced by a glossary of technical terms and a timeline of the universe’s development.) Yet the story it relates also has a few loose ends, particularly for those with religiously attuned ears: for example, what is the role of the divine in this universal story? What are the ethical implications of placing violence on the flipside of creativity within universal processes? Moreover, questions raised elsewhere by Gregory Baum and Eric Beresford of McGill still remain: Where is the social action agenda, or praxis dimension, in the universe story? What are the potentially destructive implications of replacing a monolithic “old story” of advancement through technology with a monolithic “new story” of humans standing at the centre of universal self-consciousness and the “control panel” of the earth’s next stage of development? Does the human-centredness of this new story pose potential problems for ecology?

The work’s great achievement, however, is the sense of mystery, awe and wonder it engenders for the integration of our created world. If discerning the wonder of creation makes one less inclined to deface it, Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have done our shimmering web of life a tremendous service.