

News Feature: Another review of Avi Loeb's *Extraterrestrial Sky at Night* presenter Professor Chris Lintott weighs in on Avi Loeb's controversial book about 1I/'Oumuamua

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In the last issue of *Principium*, we reviewed *Extraterrestrial*, Professor Avi Loeb's book about our first interstellar visitor, 'Oumuamua [1, 2]. There, Loeb puts forth his radical view that the simplest hypothesis to explain various anomalies in the observational data that was gathered in 2017 is that 'Oumuamua is some sort of ultrathin solar sail, and thus likely evidence of the existence of an intelligent alien civilisation elsewhere in our galaxy, since a natural origin for an object of this nature is extremely difficult to conceive. Loeb's book has recently been reviewed in the prestigious London Review of Books [3] by the co-host of the longest-running popular astronomy programme on TV, *The Sky at Night*. Chris Lintott is Professor of Astrophysics and Citizen Science Lead at the University of Oxford. He may also be known to some *Principium* readers due to his involvement in running several citizen science projects, including *Planet Hunters*, which employs the help of interested members of the public to identify potential exoplanets by interrogating data from NASA's TESS (Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite) mission [4].



BBC Sky at Night

First broadcast in 1957

www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006mk7h

Lintott takes a pretty conventional view of the controversy, somewhat akin to that of Professor Alan Aylward, who critiqued Loeb's side of the 'Oumuamua debate for us two issues ago [5]. Lintott is similarly unconvinced by Loeb's arguments, sees greater validity in the alternative natural explanations of 'Oumuamua's various anomalies, and reminds readers of previous instances when highly unusual astronomical discoveries have turned out to have a purely astrophysical explanation – the periodicity of pulsars, as discovered by Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell in 1967, being a good example.

If you haven't already made up your mind about Avi Loeb and his views on 'Oumuamua, Lintott's review in the LRB may be worth reading to gain another perspective.

References:

- [1] Avi Loeb, *Extraterrestrial: The First Sign of Intelligent Life Beyond Earth*, John Murray, 2021.
- [2] Patrick Mahon, review of Loeb's *Extraterrestrial*, *Principium* issue 33, May 2021, pp.34-37.
- [3] Chris Lintott, 'Flying Pancakes from Space', the London Review of Books, Vol. 43, No. 11, 3 June 2021. Available online at www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n11/chris-lintott/flying-pancakes-from-space.
- [4] Details of the *Planet Hunters* citizen science project can be found at www.zooniverse.org/projects/nora-dot-eisner/planet-hunters-tess.
- [5] Alan Aylward, *An Interstellar Visitor: sorting the fact from the speculation*, *Principium* issue 32, February 2021, pp.53-59.