

RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

An Exo-Jupiter?

Scientists believe they have for the first time eyeballed a planet outside our solar system. A team of astronomers headed by Susan Terebey of the Extrasolar Research Corp. in Pasadena, California, spotted the putative planet while studying an image of a nearby star-forming region made with the Hubble Space Telescope. The planet appears to have been ejected by its parent stars and was caught hurtling into space. According to NASA scientist Ed Weiler, the observation "could turn out to be the most important discovery by Hubble in its 8-year history."

Planets orbiting stars other than the sun are notoriously hard to see because they are obscured by the stars' glare. So far, detections of these so-called exoplanets have all been indirect. In this case, however, the planet was displaced far enough from its orbit

around a binary star to show up on the image. It's connected to the binary by a clearly visible trail—a luminous, filamentary structure that Terebey's team interprets to be a tunnel burrowed through the interstellar dust. Although the object is dark and obscured by dust, Hubble's infrared NICMOS camera picked up its feeble heat radiation, left over from its formation. Scientists estimate the planet is about 300,000 years old and 450 light-years away. They put the mass of the object—apparently a gas giant, like Jupiter—at two to three times the mass of Jupiter, the largest planet in our solar system.

Astronomers have yet to confirm that the object really is a planet, warns David Black of NASA's Lunar and Planetary Institute in Houston. He says "this is an exciting observation" but notes that even a slight error in the age



Out of the nest. Presumed planet leaves luminous trail.

determination—related to its brightness, from which its mass can be inferred—could push the mass of the object high enough to make it a brown dwarf: a "failed star" larger than a planet but not massive enough for hydrogen fusion to occur in the core. Adam Burrows of the University of Arizona, Tucson, adds that there's a remote possibility that "this is a chance alignment" of a distant star with the foreground binary star and that the bright filament is unrelated to it.

Pain at Georgetown Medical Center

Discontent among researchers at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., has erupted in angry calls for the resignation of the center's director. Like academic medical centers across the United States, Georgetown is being squeezed by managed care, and it is cutting basic science budgets.

More than 100 of the 700-

member Georgetown medical faculty have signed a letter to university President Leo O'Donovan in response to budget proposals announced in April that they say would cut contributions to research facilities from clinical income by up to 40%.

"It is clear that [leadership's] priorities will destroy the academic soul of the Medical Center," the medical faculty's letter said. "We demand the removal

of [center director] Dr. [Sam] Wiesel ... and a restoration of true academic leadership." Wiesel, a professor of orthopedics, says drastic reductions are needed to counter a 1997 deficit of \$57 million, which Georgetown hopes to reduce to \$15 million by fiscal year 1999. "I wish to gosh we could come up with a solution without the anguish we're going through," says Wiesel. He says he'd be glad to entertain alternatives to the retrenchment, but "the only alternative plan" he hears is "you're not giving us enough money."

Some faculty members have come to Wiesel's defense. Marc Lippman, director of Georgetown's Lombardi Cancer Center, says he thinks Wiesel is being "scapegoated." What's happening at Georgetown is happening everywhere, Lippman says, although the pain may be more intense at Georgetown because it lacks money either from a legislature or an endowment. As for the Lombardi Center, he says, "we are not being devastated."

Labor Scholar Lawsuit Thrown Out

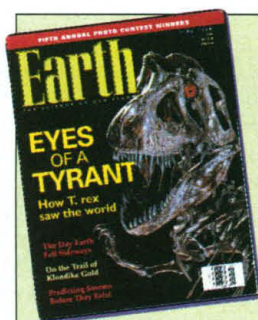
In a ruling many view as support for academic freedom, a court in Pittsburgh on 27 May tossed out a libel suit brought by a chain of nursing homes against a labor-relations expert at Cornell University.

Last year the researcher, Kate Bronfenbrenner, testified at a Pittsburgh "town meeting" held by Representative Lane Evans (D-IL) on the employment practices of Beverly Enterprises of Fort Smith, Arkansas, which has 42 facilities in Pennsylvania. She said her research showed that the company engaged in a multitude of illegal tactics to thwart unionization. Beverly sued her for libel and slander and demanded access to her research materials.

Cornell lawyers moved to dismiss the case, arguing that the issue touched on matters of free speech. The court ruled that because Bronfenbrenner's charges were made at a hearing before members of Congress, her testimony is protected by legislative immunity.

Bronfenbrenner calls the suit an "attempt to silence me and other scholars" and adds that "handing over any of my research would have a devastating impact" not only on the people who had been promised confidentiality but on the ability of others to do this type of research. She has been backed up by the American Association of University Professors and a statement signed by about 700 labor scholars.

Beverly is appealing the ruling. Donald Dotson, vice president for labor relations, says many of Bronfenbrenner's allegations are false and that the company is not asking for all her research notes—"just anything she has that supports her statements. ... Just because you get some people together, and it includes a couple of congressmen, doesn't give you the right to say anything you want." Counters Bronfenbrenner: "Everything I said is supported by the public record."



Earth Joins Fossil Record

The only popular magazine devoted to "the science of our planet" will be laid to rest after its next issue. *Earth* magazine, which delivered news and features on topics ranging from the crystalline core to the very edge of the atmosphere, started out in 1991 as a bimonthly mag for rockhounds. (Its owner, Kalmbach Publishing, specializes in hobby magazines.) In 1996, editor Joshua Fischman was hired away from

Science to turn it into a popular science magazine. But, says Fischman, there was no marketing effort to reflect the changed focus of the magazine. Says Russ Larson of Kalmbach, "We just weren't able to make it financially viable."