

Aurora Simionescu

Romania

Aurora Simionescu, named by the media “The Girl with the Eyes on the Stars” is 24 years old and was born in Braila, a small city from Romania. In 2008, her passion for astronomy and astrophysics led her to the discovery of a missing „piece” of the Universe, together with a group of German and Dutch researchers from Max Planck Institute (Garching, Germany) where she is now a PhD student.

Aurora was honored “The Person of the Year 2008” in Romania and she quickly became an inspiration for all those who are reaching for the stars in order to pursue their dreams.



THE BOOK AND THE BABY ANT


✿ Aurora Simionescu

My passion for astronomy started with one particular book I read during my last year of high-school. It was called “Astronomy: The Structure of the Universe” by William J. Kaufmann, III. I was so fascinated by it that even now, almost seven years later, I still remember parts of it vividly. One of my favorite chapters was about the birth and death of stars. It taught me that even those objects, which guided generations upon generations of sailors and inspired generations of poets, dreamers, prophets and astronomers, are not eternal.

Although our lives are too short to see the stars change, astronomers know that they do. To explain how we know this, the author of the book compared people looking at the night sky with ants in a forest. Ants don't live long enough to see how the trees change. They only see fallen acorns, small young trees, large tall oaks and logs covered by moss rotting on the ground. And from the existence of all these at the same time, the ants can guess the story of how oaks are born and die, just like we understand how stars evolve by seeing different stars at different stages of their lives.

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It was a compelling comparison, which is probably why I still remember it. Except for one small detail. You see, ants can't write. They can't leave a message to their children's children about the truths that they unravel about their forest, about their home. And so, generation after generation, the ants have to keep rediscovering with surprise how majestic oaks are born from tiny acorns, and how the trees which seem eternal to them, and which guide their way through the forest - just like stars used to guide the sailors - in fact do eventually die and return to dust.

Imagine if the ants could write down their discoveries and pass them on to the next generation by something more lasting and permanent than just by word of mouth, where things get easily altered, lost and reinterpreted (if you doubt me on this, just think about the latest gossip you heard). Imagine how future ants could build upon the knowledge of their predecessors, always discovering something new, always understanding more about their universe and about the nature. Imagine how, finding out ever more about the miracle of the unbroken cycle of life, about the ephemeral nature of even those things that seem the most permanent, the ants would admire the works of nature, cherish their forest, sing and compose poems about its beauty.

And now imagine, if ants could write, that a baby ant would accidentally stumble upon a book about, let's say, how some clouds bring rain and how rain brings life to the plants of the forest. Something that she never knew about before. Imagine that this book incites the baby ant's fascination for the beauty of the clouds in the sky and her curiosity about why water is so important for the plants. Maybe water is also important for her own life, not just that of the plants? Is part of her body is made out of water too, like the body of a plant? She starts to look at her home forest and at herself with different eyes, almost like a whole new pair of passionate, curious, knowledge-seeking eyes.

Unlike the ants, we, humans, can write. We do build upon experiments and theories carefully documented by our predecessors over many hundreds of years, and we have made it far because of





this. Everything we have, technology, medicine, philosophy, mathematics, all we can achieve today would not have been possible without the written contribution of many generations before us.

Yet, unlike the fictitious baby ant, some real people among us never get the chance to stumble across a book that incites their mind and makes them wonder about nature, about whether their bodies are made of water too, about whether the stars are eternal, about how such a big oak can grow out of such a small acorn. Some people never find out that our Earth is just a pale, blue, very special and very vulnerable dot in an immense and sometimes hostile universe. Some people never get to feel this kind of awe and fascination that our current knowledge can instill.

These people – those who cannot read and do not have access to education – are denied one of the greatest goods that we as a human race possess. Humans don't just need clean water, food and shelter. We need to know who we are, what we are made of, how things work around us, we need to ask "how", "why", and "what for". Knowledge is our greatest inheritance from our forefathers and our greatest endowment for the children of our children.

I was lucky enough, as the baby ant you imagined above, to find a book and a piece of knowledge which changed my life and my view about nature. It inspired me and gave me a goal – that of understanding the stars. Although I've now learned much more about astronomy than this one book could ever teach, I still find in it the motivation to strive for this goal, and the courage follow my passion. We cannot afford to deny any single one of us the hope of finding the same.

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