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References

- (1) <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/09/dozens-scientific-journals-have-vanished-internet-and-no-one-preserved-them>
- (2) <https://blog.dshr.org/>

Don't Mention the War!

Leonard Matula notes in his review¹ of *The Birth of Modern Astronomy* that “many other writers have failed” to credit Fritz Zwicky with “predicting dark matter and neutron stars”. While that might be the case, not uncommon is the claim that Zwicky was the *first* to suggest dark matter. Coincidentally, in my article in the same issue² I went to some length to point out many who had, in various contexts, suggested dark matter before Zwicky. There is also still no Nobel Prize for astronomy, though several astronomers have been awarded the physics prize; that to Bethe in 1967 was arguably the first for work connected to astronomy, though Bethe was not an astronomer; the first to actual astronomers was that to Ryle and Hewish in 1974. (Five of the last six winners have been astronomers, and the sixth, Penrose, has done work closely connected with astrophysics. In this century, six physics prizes have been awarded to seventeen people for work in astrophysics — compared to four prizes to seven people in the (five times longer) previous one.)

My main comment, though, concerns Wernher von Braun, on whom Matula spends about a quarter of his review. It's nice to see a more realistic picture painted of him; too often one-line comments, such as that which Matula criticizes, can create a false impression³, even if that is not the intent of the author. Interestingly, I actually knew Wernher von Braun somewhat, as my mother had worked for several years as secretary to Ed(win) Riddick before I was born; the American Riddick was von Braun's public-relations/political deputy while the German Eberhard Rees was his R&D deputy (and later, succeeding von Braun, director of the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama — which is also where I was born). Although she had stopped working when I was born, she occasionally went back to visit, sometimes taking me with her. I have a distinct memory of standing in von Braun's office and drawing a rocket on a blackboard. (We moved from Alabama to Texas in early 1969, when I was

just over four years old, after having spent a few months at Cape Canaveral, watching the launches of *Apollo 7* and *8* from the beach, so I was probably three or four at the time. My father had also worked, indirectly, for NASA — as did many at that time — doing static testing of the Saturn IB rocket, which was built by the Chrysler Corporation (known mainly for automobiles.)

I don't know whether my parents' involvement with NASA had anything to do with my interest in spaceflight (which later shifted more to astronomy then more to cosmology), but after that interest had developed, my mother was an invaluable inside resource, having met all of the original seven (and many of the later) astronauts as well as various politicians and heads of state — both domestic and foreign — who visited Huntsville during the space race. She had fond memories of Dr. von Braun (as she always called him) and those jibe more with Matula's account than the 'just another Nazi' image. As Matula notes, for those who haven't experienced it, it is difficult to imagine what life in a dictatorship is really like. My real concern, however, is not with von Braun but with memories and history in general. Access to written history (which, as Churchill was not the first to note, is written by the victors) is now easier than ever, while all of those old enough to remember World War II will probably be dead within the next twenty years. How will future historians decide which of conflicting accounts is closer to the truth? Also by coincidence, today in French class we discussed whether too much information can lead to loss of information (*trop d'information tue l'information*). The title of this piece is a reference to a line spoken by Basil Fawlty, played by John Cleese, in the television comedy series *Fawlty Towers*. How many young astronomers writing code in the PYTHON programming language today realize that the name is a reference to Cleese's Monty Python troupe? Or that there are webs outside the internet, or that one can surf on water?

Yours faithfully,
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References

- (1) L. Matula, *The Observatory*, **140**, 267, 2020.
- (2) P. Helbig, *The Observatory*, **140**, 225, 2020.
- (3) P. Helbig, *The Observatory*, **140**, 92, 2020.

*Presumably, some do, such as the authors of the Monte-Carlo code for cosmological-parameter extraction 'MONTE PYTHON'.