



# American Eclipse: A Nation's Epic Race to Catch the Shadow of the Moon and Win the Glory of the World

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## **American Eclipse: A Nation's Epic Race to Catch the Shadow of the Moon and Win the Glory of the World** David Baron

In the scorching summer of 1878, with the Gilded Age in its infancy, three tenacious and brilliant scientists raced to Wyoming and Colorado to observe a rare total solar eclipse. One sought to discover a new planet. Another—an adventuresome female astronomer—fought to prove that science was not anathema to femininity. And a young, megalomaniacal inventor, with the tabloid press fast on his heels, sought to test his scientific bona fides and light the world through his revelations. David Baron brings to three-dimensional life these three competitors—James Craig Watson, Maria Mitchell, and Thomas Edison—and thrillingly re-creates the fierce jockeying of nineteenth-century American astronomy. With spellbinding accounts of train robberies and Indian skirmishes, the mythologized age of the last days of the Wild West comes alive as never before. A magnificent portrayal of America's dawn as a scientific superpower, *American Eclipse* depicts a young nation that looked to the skies to reveal its towering ambition and expose its latent genius.

## **American Eclipse: A Nation's Epic Race to Catch the Shadow of the Moon and Win the Glory of the World Details**

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## **From Reader Review American Eclipse: A Nation's Epic Race to Catch the Shadow of the Moon and Win the Glory of the World for online ebook**

### **Jeimy says**

The title lets readers know that the book will be about a particular eclipse, but the introduction left me wanting more anecdotes about earlier solar eclipses. Nonetheless, this was a satisfying read that focused on all the luminaries who gathered to witness the eclipse of 1786. It was fascinating to learn about the scientists who were making discoveries (planets, stars, comets) across the universe and the things they were racing each other to discover first.

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### **Dax says**

Very nice. Baron uses the total eclipse of 1878 to frame the scientific progress that was just beginning to take off in America. He also includes some interesting tangents about the history of astronomy, tales about outlaws of the West, and the battle for women involvement in the scientific community. Through portraits of some of the leading scientific minds of the day, including Watson and Edison. I also appreciate the extensive notes and sources listed at the end of the book. Very well researched and entertaining read. Excellent.

Side note: I started this off with the audio book. Do not recommend this format. I'm glad I switched to hard copy because the images in the book are helpful and the reader's voice on the audio book version is not pleasant to listen to.

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### **Andie says**

Appearing just before the total eclipse that will cross the United States on August 21, 2017, this book deals with the total eclipse of 1878, the last time there was such an event across a wide swath of the United States. This year, there are reams of material to describe what is going to happen on the day of the event, as well as detailed maps that show where one can go to be in the area of maximum total darkness when the moon totally blocks the sun. Back in 1878, things weren't so precise.

Author David Baron, a former science correspondent for NPR follows four different scientists as they travel to Wyoming and Colorado to witness this rare event:

--James Greg Watson, who had discovered many asteroids, was looking for a planet called "Vulcan," a hypothetical planet that astronomers believed existed between Mercury and the sun because Mercury's orbit didn't make sense otherwise. Watson believed that because Vulcan was so close to the sun it could be seen because it would be lost in the sun's glare. However, during a total eclipse when the moon blocks the bright sun, you might spot it. He was determined to try.

--Maria Mitchell, an astronomy teacher at Vassar College, wanted to prove that women could be serious scientists. DR. Clark, a Harvard doctor, had claimed that higher education could actually ruin a girl's health.

His ideas were taken very seriously, and Maria Mitchell wanted to show that women could be smart and educated and healthy and feminine. She led an all-female expedition to Denver to study the eclipse.

--Thomas Edison, who had already gained fame for inventing the phonograph, wanted to establish his own reputation as a scientist. He created something called a "tasimeter," which was an extremely sensitive heat detector hooked up to a telescope that he intended to test during the eclipse

-- Cleveland Abbe, known as the Father of the National Weather Service, tried to see the eclipse from Pikes Peak, Colorado And nearly died from altitude sickness. The night before the eclipse he was suffering from cerebral edema, and unable to get out of bed.. He put on a stretcher and carried halfway down the mountain to 10,000 feet where he started to recover. The next afternoon he was laid out with his back on the slope to watch the eclipse. He still couldn't get up, but he was able to see it nonetheless."

All these people were trying to prove that the United States, despite having an egalitarian society, could still produce serious scientists who would make the world sit up and take notice. And i think the author demonstrates that they were able to do the job.

Baron tells eclipse-watchers they will be awed by what they see. He says instead of worrying about taking photos and getting caught up in electronic equipment, watchers should set up a camera to record their own reactions to the eclipse. "It is so precious and so brief, you really don't want to spoil it," he said. "You'll be excited and flabbergasted. Well-composed people just fall apart and become babbling idiots."

Even if you're not going to see the eclipse next month, you should read this entertaining and informative book.

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### **Robin Bonne says**

This is a history of the 1878 solar eclipse. I stayed up well past my bedtime reading this because every time I thought I had reached a good spot to put it down, something intriguing would happen and I would have to keep reading.

Until this book, I had never heard of Maria Mitchell. Her battle for women's rights and respect in the scientific community were inspiring. She is a fascinating historical figure and I would like to find a biography on her to get a broader picture of her full life.

Side note: the Galbraith's are my ancestors and it was fun to learn about their tiny role in the story.

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### **Laura says**

I'm at 35% and I have no motivation to go further. The storyline with Maria Mitchell was interesting. The writing style didn't work for me. It felt like a lecture and came across so boring. It may have gotten better if I had actually gotten to the eclipse portion but I felt like I had already sentenced this book to its death.

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## Tom Mathews says

If I had any doubts that the world is still obsessed with eclipses, I need only turn on the television or look online or at a newspaper to set me straight. In two days Americans will see the most famous total solar eclipse in decades and everywhere I go people are talking about it. Granted, we no longer feel that we need to sacrifice virgins to volcanos to get the sun to return but in our way, we are still enthralled by a mystical attraction to the most astounding astronomical event most people are ever likely to see.

Former NPR science correspondent David Baron witnessed his first total eclipse in 1998 and has been a confirmed *umbraphile* ever since, traveling the world to witness this amazing phenomenon whenever he can. His newest book tells the story of America's last greatest eclipse which occurred on July 29th, 1878, when path that the moon's shadow took went right across the wild west from Montana territory down to Texas. Astronomers and scientists from around the world flocked to the American West to witness the event. Chief among them was Thomas Edison who, at just over thirty and having recently invented the phonograph, was already an American icon and media darling. Others making the pilgrimage west were Cleveland Abbe, chief meteorologist for the newly formed National Weather Service, Maria Mitchell, director of the Vassar College Observatory, and James Craig Watson, director of the Ann Arbor Observatory. Edison had recently invented the *tasimeter*, a device designed to measure infrared radiation and scientists hoped that it could be used during the eclipse to measure the temperature of the sun's corona, something which cannot ordinarily be done due to the tremendous heat given off by the sun itself. Watson, the discoverer of 22 asteroids, was hunting an even more elusive prey. He hoped to be the first person to see the planet Vulcan widely believed to exist and have an orbit closer to the sun than Mercury. If it existed, such a planet would never appear in the night sky so the only way to see it would be during an eclipse. Mitchell's goal was possibly the most important of all. In a world that believed the feminine mind lacked the aptitude for higher education and that strenuous mental activity was physically harmful to women, Mitchell and a team of female astronomers from Vassar set out to report on the eclipse and prove to the world that women were just as capable of men at when it came to scientific observation, reporting and methodology.

The 1878 eclipse had result of putting the United States front and center on the stage of scientific study and discovery, a position that some would argue it has held firmly until the beginning of this year. Edison may not have perfected his tasimeter but as soon as he return home to Menlo Park he began work on the light bulb, an invention that forever freed mankind from the shadows.

Bottom line: This book was entertaining and full of valuable information. It also gave me a good sense of the mood and attitudes of Americans during the decade after the Civil War. Baron researched the subject thoroughly, which helped keep me reading even when the story was less than compelling.

The Highbridge Audio version of Baron's book was ably narrated by Jonathan Yen. Unfortunately, I have come to the conclusion that audio recordings are not the best medium for most nonfiction books. Often when reading a nonfiction book, I like to highlight certain passages and refer back to them in the future. This is not convenient in audio. Also, I would like to how characters names are spelled so that I can do further research on them. Finally, many nonfiction books include photographs and maps of the subjects that missing from an audio recording.

\* The review was based on an advanced reading copy obtained at no cost from the publisher in exchange for an unbiased review. While this does take any 'not worth what I paid for it' statements out of my review, it otherwise has no impact on the content of my review.

FYI: On a 5-point scale I assign stars based on my assessment of what the book needs in the way of improvements:

\*5 Stars – Nothing at all. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

\*4 Stars – It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but it's pretty good as it is.

\*3 Stars – A solid C grade. Some serious rewriting would be needed in order for this book to be considered great or memorable.

\*2 Stars – This book needs a lot of work. A good start would be to change the plot, the character development, the writing style and the ending.

\*1 Star - The only thing that would improve this book is a good bonfire.

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### **Blaine DeSantis says**

I personally loved this book. As I sit in my home that is directly in the path of the August 21, 2017 Total Eclipse I can begin to experience the excitement that the 1878 Eclipse generated to a much less sophisticated society. So much has happened in the last 139 years in terms of exploration of the galaxy, the moon, the stars and the sun and yet this book transports us back to a simpler time, a time when people did not know that helium existed and that it is one of the two elements that causes the sun to burn so bright, as well as not knowing whether or not a planet named Vulcan existed.

We follow 3 main characters: James Watson, Thomas Edison and Maria Mitchell. I loved the parts about Mitchell and her fight for Women's rights and the ability to work as Astronomers and Scientists. Watson searches, we later discover, in vain for the planet Vulcan, and Edison goes West for both a rest and to try out a new invention (the tasimeter). There are host of other names and astronomers in the book. I particularly enjoyed the time we got to spend with Astronomer/Meteorologist Cleveland Abbe and his experiences on Pikes Peak.

A fast reading book for me. I have seen some lower reviews and I can understand then since the book, in one or two chapters becomes a bit tedious but the adventure of that Eclipse overwhelmed those chapters for me. Well researched and written, this is a perfect book for anyone who is anxiously awaiting our next Total Solar Eclipse in August.

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### **Pouting Always says**

Another nonfiction book that wasn't bad but I didn't enjoy because of my own personal tastes. I got pretty bored reading about scientists trying to go out of their way just to observe an eclipse, and I couldn't relate with the authors clearly visceral feelings towards eclipses. I don't even get why properly measuring and observing an eclipse was even something that would put the US on the map and make our science community respectable because again I'm just like wow the sun was blocked out great so what. I did enjoy reading about Maria Mitchell though because she seems pretty kick ass and proactive. The writing was good too. Just the only thing that really caught my attention in the whole book was the murder that happened during the eclipse and I guess that just explains why I couldn't enjoy a science book with much subtler suspense and I just want things to happen.

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### **Badseedgirl says**

I was fortunate enough to live just a couple hours from the path of totality of what is being called 2017 Great American Eclipse, and was even more fortunate to have a Mom who lived in the path so I had a convenient place to stay. I purchased and read this book to give me a better idea of what I could look forward to. Although I did learn a whole lot about eclipses, what I enjoyed most about this book was how very difficult women scientist of the time had it. I mean it really sucked being a female scientist in the 1800's. I found it amazing and informative.

And the eclipse was amazing. I was able to view the wonder of God's work with my own eyes. It made me feel both insignificant and consequential at the same time. As an added bonus, I was able to experience it with most of my family.

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### **Katie says**

This was an interesting read after watching the total eclipse of the sun this summer - shout out to my friend Beth who sent me this book after we viewed the eclipse together! The author states that he purposely prepared and released this book to coincide with the 2017 American Eclipse. He focuses on the 1878 total eclipse that crossed America and some of the major players that were making efforts to travel and study the event.

We started by listening to this one in the car, but I would not recommend that for a couple of reasons. First and most important, the printed book is full of illustrations - people, maps, locations, etc. The illustrations made a big difference in my ability to keep track of the names and places mentioned in the story; just listening made it more difficult to follow along and stay engaged.

Second, the book opens with kind of a gory scene, which took me off guard and made me hope that the kids weren't listening in. It is for effect, and it works, but I would have preferred to read it and not hear it right at the get-go. :)

The three main characters' stories are interwoven and divided into time periods; it was fairly easy to keep up although I won't remember many of the smaller players that were mentioned. I enjoyed the anecdotes that are sprinkled through and found myself sharing parts of the book with my husband or whoever else happened to be near.

I felt that he did a wonderful job describing the feelings that come with the viewing of a total solar eclipse. Those parts in particular I kept saying, "YES! That's exactly how it felt!" Viewing totality is not something I will forget and I appreciated the author's ability to put it into words.

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### **Alana says**

My well-read hairdresser recommended this to me, knowing my family is getting ready to go camping and view this even this year. When the author was featured at a speaker at our local library, my husband and I decided to check it out and see if we could learn something. He was a dynamic speaker and sparked our interest.

The book focuses on three figures who were historically significant to American (and world) culture because of their involvement with the viewing of America's eclipse of 1978, including an inter-mercurial planet hunter, an astronomer and leader of a woman's college who led the way for many American women to endeavor to enter studies in the sciences, and a soon-to-be-well-known inventor who wanted to prove one of his inventions worked as described. The stories are fascinating (probably moreso because much of it takes place in my adopted home state of Colorado and the surrounding area) and the descriptions of the eclipse itself has certainly made me much more excited for my own upcoming trip to see it than I was before. Here's hoping the skies are clear!

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### **Alisha says**

This book perfectly captured the thrill of seeing a total solar eclipse, and gave me some interesting background on the scientists who pinned all their hopes on what the 1878 eclipse would bring them.

In the end, it was probably a lot more background than I really wanted, for instance, on Thomas Edison, whose invention (to be tested at the time of the eclipse) turned out to be just really...unimportant.

I did find it interesting to read about the female astronomer Maria Mitchell, fighting for women to be recognized as equals in the field of science. Also the scientists who were just sure that there was another planet between Mercury and the sun, and who figured they could find it during the eclipse. (They named their postulated planet Vulcan. Hehe.) Or the poor guy, Cleveland Abbe, who wanted to watch the eclipse from the top of Pike's Peak but succumbed to altitude sickness, and had to watch it from his sickbed much further down the mountain.

Yes, those things were pretty interesting. But the greatest achievement of this book was to make me remember in vivid detail what it was like to see the total solar eclipse of this year, 2017. Most everyone in the U.S. had the opportunity to see it as a partial eclipse, but I will forever be grateful that I had the circumstances and relative proximity to go stand in the path of totality. Honestly, I still think about it pretty much every day and I shiver: that "WHAM" moment when the moon's shadow came for us with a sinking, racing darkness, and we could tear off our glasses and stare transfixed at an alien sky.

I marvel that such an experience will NEVER be able to be properly captured by a camera of any sort (it doesn't look like what it looks like in a photo). How many things are there that you can experience only with your own two eyes, and never, never, never replicate? It was, and I do not exaggerate, a spiritual experience. So, when this book describes how even professional men and women of science found themselves trembling and emotional as hour zero approached, or how one scientist reveled in the fact that he had no experiments to perform but could throw his whole heart into watching...yeah, it resonates with me. Or, when I heard (since this was an audiobook I listened to in my car) about poor Cleveland Abbe on his sickbed observing the lightbeams coming out from behind the moon at 90-degree angles, and thinking they were tricks of light but then realizing they weren't, and I banged on my steering wheel and cried, "That's WHAT I SAW!"

I loved the descriptions of the sky and the sun and the moon at the time of eclipse...a very dark warm blue (the mind reels at that combination, but it's accurate)...an ebony pupil surrounded by a pearly iris...

The book made me feel a kinship with those who watched a total solar eclipse nearly 150 years ago. It's a beautiful thing to realize that some experiences evoke feelings in the human heart that are universal and timeless. Observing a total solar eclipse is certainly one of those.

P.S. If you haven't seen a total solar eclipse, do it. It was one of the best days of my life.

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### **Joel says**

I read this book after returning from my own total solar eclipse expedition in Missouri. I spent a couple of days driving each way, and booked hotels on Starwood Hotels's website. I found an ideal spot to view it using NASA's interactive online map – I got exactly 2 minutes and 39.6 seconds of totality, and checked the satellite weather on my smartphone with The Weather Network app. A hundred and thirty-nine years ago, however, such an expedition would have taken months to plan, required tons of equipment to be hauled, and would have taken you to the edge of the civilized world.

This book tells the story of the Great American Eclipse of 1878, which was viewed by several great scientists: Thomas Edison, Samuel Pierpont Langley, and several other characters who should be a lot more famous than they are: Maria Mitchell, advocate for women in science and one of the most respected woman astronomers of her day; Cleveland Abbe, who practically invented the science of weather prediction; James Craig Watson, one of the greatest asteroid hunters in America; and the British scientist Norman Lockyer, the discoverer of helium and founder of the journal *Nature*.

Along the way, we learn about the hunt for the planet Vulcan – which wasn't proven to be non-existent until Einstein came up with his General Theory of Relativity; Thomas Edison's celebrity status, even before inventing the light bulb, as well as some of his flops; and the Meeker Massacre, in which the Ute Indians killed the US Indian Agent who was trying to force the hunter-gatherer tribe into a farming lifestyle, and kidnapped his wife and daughter. I was already aware of the science discussed in the book, but the author is clear and concise in explaining it, and presents lots of original historical research to make the story exciting. It is not a very long book at all, and packs a lot into its two hundred and fifty pages of main text and beautiful illustrations and color pictures.

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### **Peter McLoughlin says**

July 29th, 1878 A total eclipse that made an arcing line from Alaska swooping down to Texas and the Gulf of Mexico. It was a great American eclipse and the time was an alignment of more than celestial bodies in American history. This was a period in US history where a recognizably modern technological industrialized nation was emerging to become the major power we all recognize. This book drinks in the spirit of the times and the science community in the US be it the astronomy groups that flocked to sites out in Wyoming to catch the eclipse or people like Thomas Edison just beginning his career that would be very fruitful. A fun book to read especially given that in about a month in August of this year (2017) we are going to have another Great American Eclipse.

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### **Matthew says**

This was a great history book to read if you plan on chasing the upcoming American eclipses in 2017 or 2024 or any other eclipse in the future. This is a timeless book. I was afraid it would be some rush job to try to capitalize on the furor this year, without a lot of effort put into it. I was afraid it would be a piece of crap. I read it aloud to my kids. We all loved it. It was great history-writing, standing alone. Whether following the

Vulcan-chasing Watson, the feminine-advancing Maria Mitchell or the bumbling, but cocksure, Edison, the book was very entertaining. The author, an experienced eclipse-chaser, provides details of what to look for in an eclipse and scientific reasons behind certain eclipse phenomena. Very well-done, and certainly not a rip-off.

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