

The Rise and Fall of America's Favorite Planet: Pluto

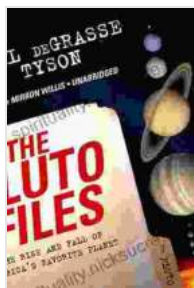


Pluto, once considered the ninth planet from the Sun, has had a tumultuous journey through the annals of astronomy. From its discovery in 1930 to its controversial reclassification as a dwarf planet in 2006, Pluto has captivated the imaginations of scientists and the public alike.

The Discovery of Pluto

Pluto was discovered on February 18, 1930, by Clyde Tombaugh, a young astronomer at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona. Tombaugh was

searching for a ninth planet predicted by Percival Lowell, the observatory's founder, based on irregularities in the orbits of Uranus and Neptune.



The Pluto Files: The Rise and Fall of America's Favorite Planet: The Rise and Fall of America's Favorite Planet

by Neil deGrasse Tyson

★★★★☆ 4.6 out of 5

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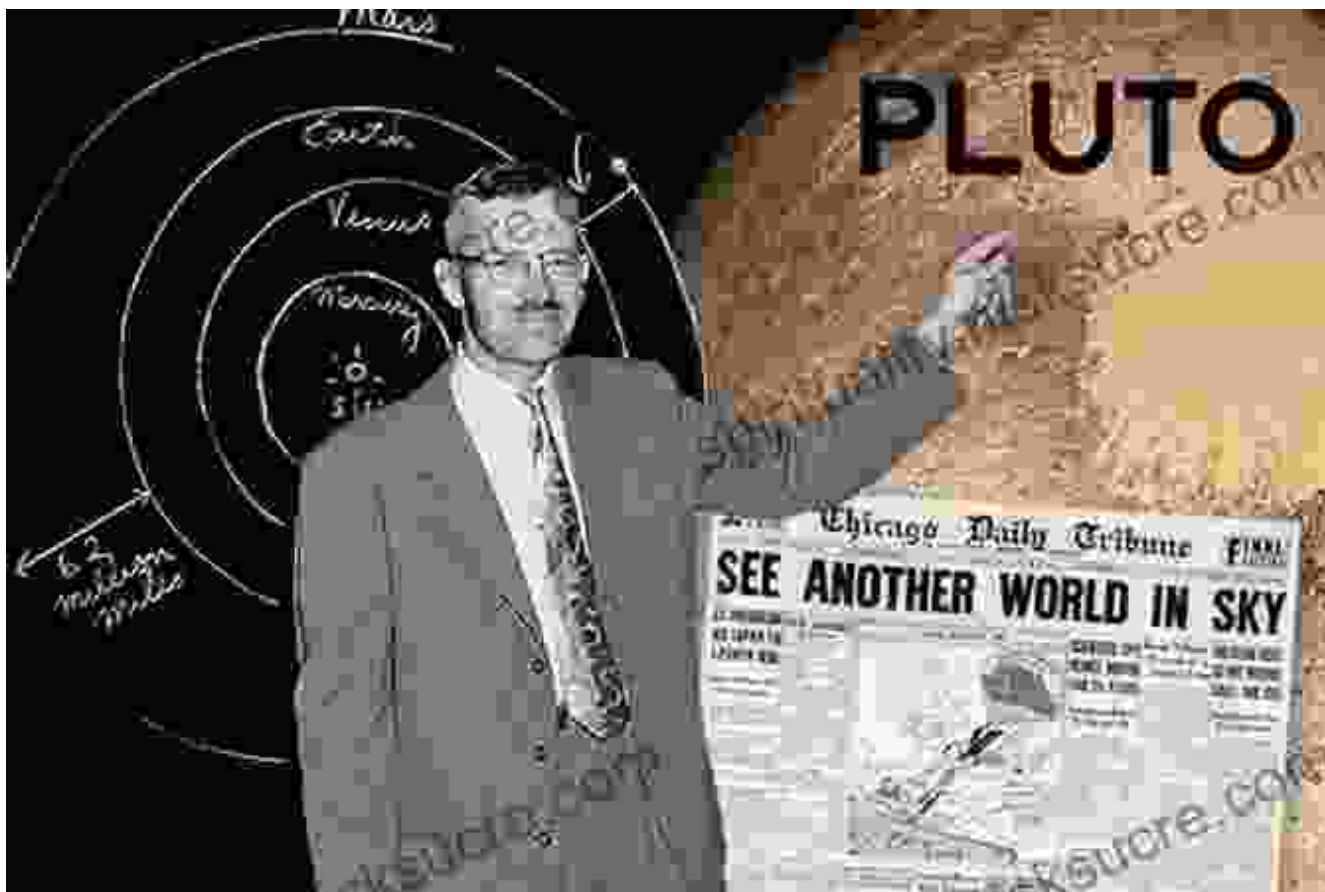
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Tombaugh spent years meticulously examining photographic plates taken with the observatory's 13-inch telescope. On one fateful night, he noticed a small, faint object moving slowly against the backdrop of stars. After confirming its existence on subsequent plates, Tombaugh announced his discovery to the world.

Pluto's Golden Age

In the decades following its discovery, Pluto was hailed as the ninth planet in the Solar System. It was depicted in textbooks and popular culture as a distant, icy world on the fringes of our cosmic neighborhood.

Pluto's status as a planet was cemented by its unique orbit. Unlike the other planets, which orbit the Sun in a relatively flat plane, Pluto's orbit is highly elliptical and inclined. This peculiar orbit kept Pluto far from the other planets, isolating it from the rest of the Solar System.

As technology advanced, astronomers began to study Pluto in greater detail. In 1978, the Voyager 1 spacecraft flew past Pluto, providing the first close-up images of the dwarf planet. These images revealed a complex and fascinating world with a surface covered in nitrogen ice and a thin atmosphere.

The Dawn of Controversy

In the late 20th century, astronomers began to discover a growing number of objects in the outer regions of the Solar System that shared similar characteristics to Pluto. These objects, known as Kuiper Belt objects, challenged Pluto's unique status as a planet.

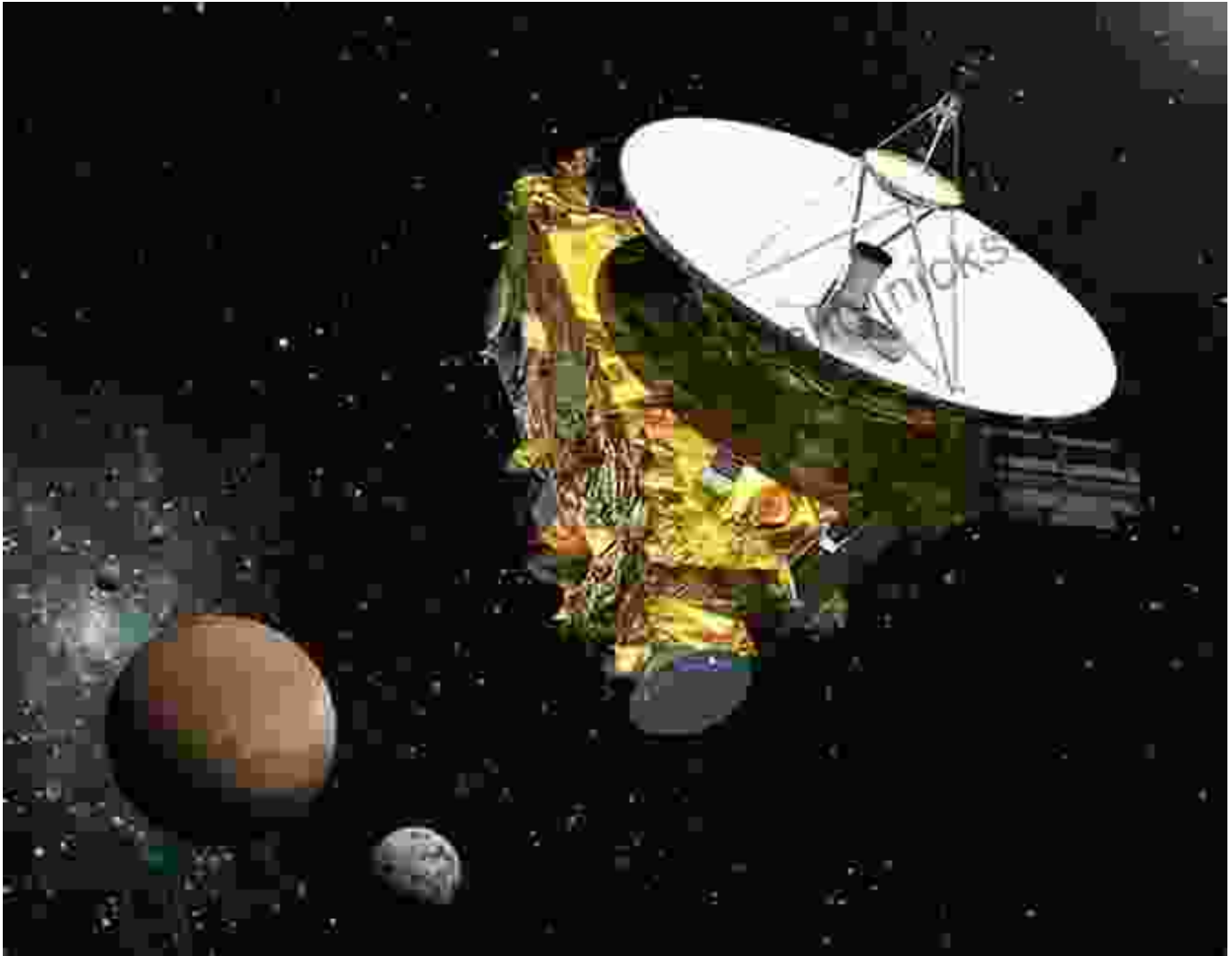
In 2005, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) proposed a new definition of a planet. According to the IAU, a planet must meet three criteria: it must orbit the Sun, it must have sufficient mass to be spherical, and it must have "cleared its orbit" of other objects.

Pluto failed to meet the third criterion. Its orbit is intersected by numerous Kuiper Belt objects, indicating that it has not cleared its surroundings. As a result, the IAU reclassified Pluto as a dwarf planet, a new category of celestial bodies that are smaller than planets but larger than asteroids.

Pluto's Legacy

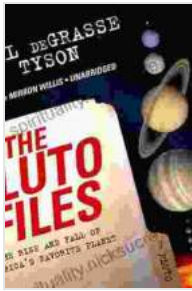
The reclassification of Pluto sparked a heated debate among astronomers and the public. Some scientists argued that Pluto was still a planet, while others maintained that the IAU's definition was necessary to maintain scientific clarity.

Despite the controversy, Pluto remains a popular and fascinating object of study. The New Horizons spacecraft, launched in 2006, performed a flyby of Pluto in 2015, providing the most detailed images and data ever obtained of the dwarf planet.



The New Horizons mission revealed that Pluto is a complex and diverse world with a rich geological history. It has a surface covered in mountains, plains, and glaciers, and a thin atmosphere that contains methane and nitrogen.

Pluto's reclassification as a dwarf planet has not diminished its scientific and cultural significance. It remains a unique and fascinating object in the outer regions of the Solar System, a testament to the ongoing exploration and discovery of our cosmic neighborhood.

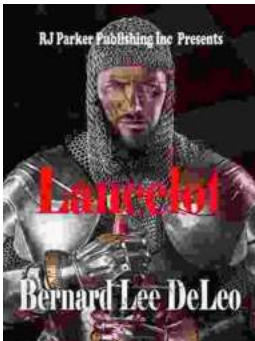


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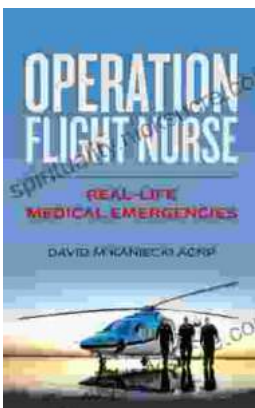
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