



# Exobiology

## *ET Life in Sci-Fi*

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### **Recommended Reading: ET Life**

In nearly all popular science fiction dramatisations on television, most of the alien protagonists look remarkably like humans. In Star Trek, if you forgave the Vulcan's their ears (and their hair-styles), the Klingons their foreheads and the Bajorans their ridged noses you'd think that they were all human. After all, they have two legs, two arms, ten fingers and toes, two ears, two eyes and a nose.

“*Arms and eyes are universals, but two arms and two legs are parochial*”

From 'ET Life', we realised that there are certain characteristics that are universal in life, and some that are parochial. Seeing as the Vulcans, Klingons and Bajorans all evolved on Earth-like worlds, we can expect them to have the same sort of universals and parochials that we have on Earth.

Well, hang on, you say. Didn't you mention that in 'ET life' that arms and eyes are universals? Why is it so strange that aliens should have them as well?

It's not strange at all. Arms and eyes are universals, but two arms and two legs are parochial. The characteristic in general is a universal, but exactly how that characteristic is manifested is parochial. While it's very likely that a Klingon should have some sort of eye and some sort of legs, it's not very likely that it will have two eyes and two legs.

Humans are only one of the possibilities that could have evolved to be the most intelligent species on Earth - we just happened to be lucky. There is absolutely no reason at all why Vulcans should not

have fur instead of skin. Indeed, as mentioned in ET Life, we would not expect any intelligent life that evolved on worlds similar to ours to have their airways and foodways crossed - and so they wouldn't be able to use their mouths to breath (if they had mouths at all). And they wouldn't be able to choke.

There is a tendency for science fiction authors to anthropomorphise - that is, to imagine that aliens are going to look and act in exactly the same way as humans would. But why would they? Aside from the broadest of physical and behavioural characteristics (as mentioned in The Selfish Alien), aliens are not likely to be very similar to us.

It would be unfair though to lump all science fiction with Star Trek. Authors of science fiction novels tend to be slightly more careful about creating their aliens and with ever more demanding and informed audiences they have to ensure that their creations are at least plausible. Jack Cohen, one of the authors of Figments of Reality, a book that discusses what alien life might look like, acts as a consultant to science fiction authors to create 'realistic' aliens. One of his more notable authors is Anne McCaffery, of the Pern Dragonriders universe.

(Astrobiology interviewed Dr. Jack Cohen, where he describes 'realistic' aliens among other things - download the interview from the Astrobiology site)

In conclusion, when reading science fiction novels or watching movies, try to think whether the aliens you see are realistic or not - if they look or act like humans too much, they probably aren't.

(Note: The author is very well aware of the Star Trek plotline that 'explains' the remarkable similarity among all the aliens, and is not particularly impressed by it.)