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Rocky Mountain News (Denver, CO)

January 14, 1998, Wednesday,

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Ed. F; Pg. 47A**LENGTH:** 250 words**HEADLINE:** RETHINKING THE BIG BANG**BODY:**

Cosmologists, the scientists who think Really Big Thoughts, now say the **universe** will keep on **expanding** forever, rather like credit card debt. The **universe** is also older, 15 billion years, than previously thought. Come on, be honest. Some of you thought it was only 8 billion years old. And admit it. Some of you still believe in the Big Crunch. Forget the Big Crunch.

Astronomers believe the universe "began" when a single point of time and matter blew outward in a great fireball, the Big Bang, and here we all are, 15 billion years later, a great cloud of stars and odd bits of debris, like planet Earth, ever expanding into the great hereafter. The old thinking was that the universe would steadily lose momentum from the Big Bang, and then collapse back into itself in the Big Crunch. Researchers could identify only 20 percent of the necessary matter; the other 80 percent needed to deflate the universe was thought to be so-called dark matter, invisible and undetectable but definitely out there. But the latest observations of exploding stars, long since gone but whose light is only now reaching Earth, show that the expansion continues undiminished. Maybe, some scientists theorize, dark matter has an anti-gravity effect and, instead of pulling, pushes. Dark matter is to science what wild cards are to poker or blank tiles to Scrabble; it makes the unplayable playable. If the new theory of an eternally expanding universe is correct, the Big Bang will end in the Great Escape.

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