

# Stargazing Beginners Guide to Astronomy

Radmila Topalovic and Tom Kerss  
HarperCollins  
£9.99 • PB



Given this book's title, you might expect the contents to be limited to the activity of stargazing itself, but this guide offers much more than that.

The book opens with an introduction to the night sky, its objects and its phenomena, in which the authors present an enormous amount of valuable information, albeit tersely because of the space available. Unfortunately, a few niggles have crept in here: it offers the easily refuted 'foreground object comparison' explanation of the Moon illusion and suggests that averted vision is used "to overcome the blind spot". It gives 'minor planet' and 'asteroid' as separate classifications; perhaps the IAU object classifications would have been more advisable.

The real strength of this book is its sections on observing. These range from choosing your observing site, through naked-eye stargazing to the use of binoculars, telescopes and cameras. You are shown, with the aid of charts, how to observe anything from nearby satellites to distant galaxies. The object suggestions include a good variety of both easy and challenging targets for northern and southern hemisphere observers.

But while the colourful photographic illustrations of nebulae are attractive, they may be misleading to beginners, since the eye cannot integrate light as the camera does and, with few exceptions, we see deep-sky objects in monochrome. The same applies to the implication that binoculars will show the pink star-forming regions of NGC 2403 – a spiral galaxy.

Jam-packed with useful information and advice, this is an attractively produced resource for modern beginner stargazers.

★★★★★

STEPHEN TONKIN *is an experienced astronomer and writes our binocular tour*

# All These Worlds Are Yours The Scientific Search for Alien Life

Jon Willis  
Yale University Press  
£18.99 • HB



We've all heard the argument before: with the seemingly unlimited expanse of the cosmos, Earth surely can't be the only planet to harbour life. That being said, the

scientific pursuit of extraterrestrial life, or astrobiology, is vast, complex and unnervingly youthful.

But its youthfulness doesn't mean that no progress has been made. Indeed, the past few decades have put astrobiologists in the throes of a renaissance. It is timely, then, that Jon Willis has sought to explain the entire gamut of the field of astrobiology for lay readers.

After dealing with the eternal conundrum of 'what is life?' we take a useful tour of the Solar System, seeking

out habitats conducive to the emergence of life and examining how we might investigate them. An entire third of the book is devoted to just four locations: Mars, Europa, Enceladus and Titan. Turning our gaze to the stars, we investigate exoplanets and consider the thorny problem of detecting indicators of life on these distant worlds. In the final few chapters the author discusses SETI and the societal implications of the discovery of extraterrestrial life. Each chapter is authoritative, accessible and fun and together they form a skillfully executed and entertaining book.

At the outset, Willis presents us with an interesting scenario. If we had \$4 billion in our pockets for an astrobiology experiment, what would we spend it on? After reading this book, the reader would be well placed to make a good judgment.

★★★★★

ALASTAIR GUNN *is a radio astronomer at Jodrell Bank Observatory in Cheshire*

# Amazing Stories of the Space Age

Rod Pyle  
Prometheus Books  
£17.50 • HB

BOOK  
OF THE  
MONTH



*Amazing Stories* takes us on a highly readable journey to a time when American military agencies wanted to equip astronauts with guns and put

soldiers on the Moon. Author Rod Pyle details an astonishing scheme to build a lunar missile base and shows how close NASA's Gemini capsules came to being hijacked by the military to support a manned spy satellite. We learn about the weapons carried by Russian crews and marvel at the pellet pistols and other exotic space guns designed for American astronauts, until NASA's increasing stature as a civilian agency dampened down the militarism that threatened to dominate the early Space Age.

More peaceably, NASA had a scheme for sending astronauts around Venus and Mars in the 1970s using Apollo hardware augmented with a nuclear rocket, which could have worked. Pyle explores many other projects that came close to fruition such as the Soviet Buran shuttle, which flew only once and looked suspiciously like NASA's.

Pyle proves that events in space over the last 50 years could have been very different and far more sinister: there was nothing inevitable about Apollo's peaceful path to the Moon. The text is reinforced with illustrations along with plenty of quotes from official archive documents, some of which have only recently been declassified. This is a must-have book for space fans.

★★★★★

PIERS BIZONY *is the author of The Space Shuttle and other books on spaceflight*