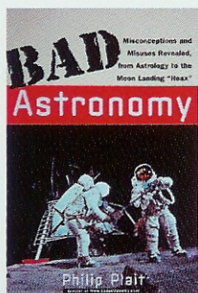


by Terence Dickinson

The editor's bookshelf

Here's a selection of recent astronomy books recommended by Terence Dickinson



BAD ASTRONOMY:
Misconceptions and
Misuses Revealed
from Astrology to the
Moon Landing "Hoax"
by Philip Plait
Wiley, softcover, \$25

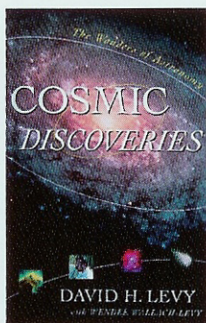
AT LEAST TWICE LAST year, the Fox Television Network broadcast "Did We Land on the Moon?" a one-hour "documentary" supporting the claims of conspiracy theorists who say they have proof that the Apollo Moon landings were faked at a U.S. Air Force base and that the whole Apollo program was a fraud. In fact, the real fraud was the TV program itself, which was full of factual errors, misleading statements and outrageous accusations (for instance, that NASA murdered several astronauts to keep them from "talking").

The day after the broadcast, NASA was flooded with calls, especially from teachers having trouble answering questions from kids who had seen the program. In an unusual move, rather than directing the teachers to NASA websites, the agency's public relations officials referred them to www.badastronomy.com, a website operated by Philip Plait, an astronomy professor at Sonoma State University in California. Plait is the Lone Ranger of Bad Astronomy, constantly on the watch for muddy thinking, crazy conspiracies and bogus simplifications in astronomy. And there were plenty of all three in the Moon hoax broadcast. But Plait doesn't stop there.

You quickly get an idea of Plait's approach through some of his chapter titles: "Mars Is in the Seventh House, But Venus Has Left the Building: Why Astrology Doesn't Work" and "Star Hustlers: Star

Naming for Dummies." Plait looks into the equinox egg-balancing myth, misconceptions about the Hubble Space Telescope, why people think Polaris is the brightest star in the sky, and much more.

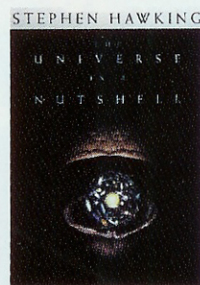
Written in everyday language with a refreshing dash of humour, *Bad Astronomy* gets my full five-star rating. Every school in the country should have a copy of this wonderful reference.



COSMIC DISCOVERIES
by David H. Levy with
Wendee Wallach-Levy
Prometheus,
hardcover, \$45

AT THE BEGINNING of this book, the authors say, "We describe the lives and achievements of a selection of the greatest men and women in astronomical history." There are plenty of the usual suspects here: Galileo, Huygens, Halley, Messier, Herschel, Eddington, Hubble and Tombaugh, along with an eclectic collection of less well-known individuals. But the Levys bring every one of them to life as a fascinating character.

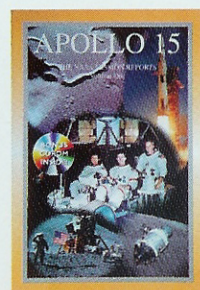
If I can go on a quick rant here: One thing that bothers me about books which include mini-biographies of Edwin Hubble is, they almost always offer apocryphal anecdotes copied from one author to another. Three accounts in particular are on my hit list: (a) Hubble was such an outstanding boxer at Oxford University that he fought an exhibition match with the world champion of the time; (b) Hubble practised law in Kentucky before he became an astronomer; and (c) Hubble was wounded in the First World War. *None of it happened.* And I am pleased to report that these oft-repeated fictions do not appear in *Cosmic Discoveries*. This is a reliable, well-written book that anyone interested in astronomy will enjoy.



THE UNIVERSE IN A NUTSHELL
by Stephen Hawking
Bantam,
hardcover, \$53

AFTER RIDING THE best-seller lists for years with his 1988 book, *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking is back on the charts with this new popular-science offering. Hawking admits in the foreword that the earlier book "was not easy going," and he therefore decided to write something "that might be easier to understand." I was pleased to see the great man himself make this admission. I gave *Brief History* an unfavourable review because I thought most readers would have a rough time getting past Chapter Two.

The new Hawking book, however, is entirely different in both appearance and content. The most obvious and welcome change is the beautiful and highly original illustrations lavished on almost every page. As for the text, Hawking has clearly decided not to overload the reader this time. Each chapter is essentially a self-contained essay that I think most *SkyNews* readers would find comprehensible and enlightening. Subjects covered include general relativity, quantum theory, black holes, time travel and a provocative chapter entitled "Our Future: Star Trek or Not."



APOLLO 15: The NASA Mission Reports, Vol. 1
Edited by
Robert Godwin
Apogee,
softcover, \$25

MANY *SKYNEWS* READERS can trace their interest in astronomy and space to the heyday of the space program in the 1960s and early 1970s. With major launches almost monthly, it was reasonable to conclude that this was just the beginning. The idea that we were emerging into a bold new frontier captivated millions of space-exploration fans who were convinced that within a few decades, there would be hotels on the Moon and bases on Mars. Today's perspective of the early 21st century has instead shown what incredible techno-