



A question and answer guide to astronomy

by Pierre–Yves Bely, Carol Christian & Jean–René Roy

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Here is a very worthy successor to such classic compilations as Asimov's *Please Explain* (1973) and Pickering's *1001 Questions Answered About Astronomy* (revised by Moore, 1975), which explored astronomy through the device of question and answer, and fired the imagination of many a budding amateur, this reviewer among them.

In 250 questions, all accurately and readably answered, using non-technical language and bang-up-to-date illustrations, this book guides the reader through the cosmos, from the earliest times and the

most basic principles, to the more exotic discoveries and theories of modern times. Its world-wide view includes such topics as Islamic astronomy, the work of famous astronomers of many nationalities, a 'world tour' of the largest ground-based optical telescopes, and a visit to the Chicxulub Crater. Predictably perhaps, there are sections dealing with stars, planets, the Moon and the universe in general, but there are also welcome forays into other fields, for example our Earth itself (a planet not well covered by some 'general guides'), extraterrestrial life, the history of astronomy, and the ins and outs of the practice of amateur astronomy.

The *Question and Answer Guide* is a mine of illustrations, mostly in colour, and excellently reproduced. They are reassuringly small, allowing the text to expand around them and speak for

itself: it is not always true that a picture is worth a thousand words, if it fills most of a page!

The fact that the authors are, respectively, an engineer specialising in telescope design, an astrophysicist, and a senior scientist at the Gemini Observatory, ensures that the underlying principles of astronomy are solidly covered, while the contents of the cosmos and our methods of exploring it are not neglected. Can enthusiasts, perhaps new to astronomy, resist a guide that tells them how to go about finding their own meteorite collection; explains string theory for the uninformed; discusses light pollution and its depredations; and tells them what to do if they discover something 'new' in the sky above?

An excellent bibliography and website list complete a very interesting book that ought to have a place on the shelves of astronomers, whatever their level of acquaintance with the noble science.

Bob Mizon

Bob Mizon is a planetarium operator, and co-ordinates the BAA Campaign for Dark Skies.

