

BOOK REVIEW

The Amateur Astronomer

Antonin Rukl, Octopus Books Limited, London, England, 1979 184pp
\$9.95.

The Amateur Astronomer was written in Russian by Antonin Rukl, and was translated into English by Olga Kuthanova, with English author John Gribbin acting as a "consultant editor." The book is characterized by its publisher as "both an astronomic atlas and an illustrated guide" that shows the reader how to observe. One might therefore expect to find a combination of atlas charts, observing aids, and observational instruction that could qualify as an "observer's handbook." It is in this light that this review is cast.

The book consists basically of five parts: 1) an explanatory introduction, 2) a pictorial text consisting of 58 colored plate diagrams/illustrations, with a page of explanatory text for each plate, 3) an atlas consisting of eight charts with lists of selected objects for observation, 4) an innovative graphic ephemeris of the moon and planets for the years 1979 to 2000, and 5) a final chapter titled, "Amateur Observation."

The 58 colored plates of pictorial text are the heart of this book. The pictorial design on many of these plates is outstanding in its ability to convey, in clear and sometimes very innovative ways, the essence of technical ideas. Each plate is accompanied by a page of text covering different aspects of the subject. In addition, each page includes 2 or 3 historical footnotes. The subject matter in this pictorial section is divided somewhat unevenly, with 43 of the 58 plates devoted to the solar system. Of more concern, however, in light of the expressed purpose of the book, is that half of the colored plates are devoted to exposition of basic astronomical theory. Of the remainder, most are devoted to maps and locator diagrams, with very little of the material devoted to instruction on observing techniques--the "how to" of amateur astronomy.

The second potential source of observing instruction in The Amateur Astronomer is the last chapter titled "Amateur Observation." Here the list of items that are missing is so extensive that a review in the context of an "observer's handbook" is almost pointless. The roughly 5 pages in this chapter are intended to cover the whole range of observational experiences and obviously cannot, even for a novice. The text does provide a superficial coverage of telescopes (2 1/2 pages), one page on astrophotography (a large fraction of which is devoted to surprisingly detailed instructions on the construction of a simple camera mounting), a full-page diagram of the North Polar Sequence, and less than one full page other guidance on observing practices. This last chapter is most disappointing. The reader is left with almost no sense of how to go about "observing," is given the sage advice to "be sure and keep a log," with no advice on what to record except "accurate notes on time." No advice is given on where to look for guidance or additional information, or even much of a hint of what it might be.

In short, The Amateur Astronomer falls far short of its stated purpose. This reviewer feels that the fault is in the publisher's statement of purpose, and it would appear that the publisher's purpose was not what the Russian author really intended. The Amateur Astronomer could more reasonably be characterized as an introduction to astronomy, without reference to either amateur

astronomy or to observing. The difference between these two approaches is surely apparent to Editor John Gribbin, but in fact he is very enthusiastic in his endorsement of this book as "---very much a handbook to aid observations of the night sky ---." Editor Gribbin puts his finger on the real problem in his foreword. He comments that interest in astronomy at the amateur level is probably running stronger than ever before." This reviewer agrees, and feels that The Amateur Astronomer is an effort to cash in on that growing public interest. It is a poor investment for either a serious amateur or a beginner. The text, as well as the charts and tables, are marred by serious errors and inconsistencies, and readers of JAAVSO will be sure to find better ways to spend their time and money than on The Amateur Astronomer.

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