

# The Rough Guide to the Universe

by John Scalzi

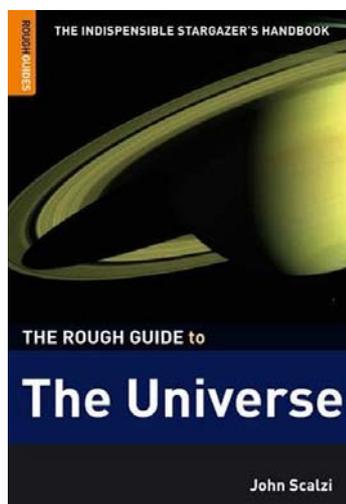
Rough Guides Ltd, 2008. ISBN 9-781-84353-800-4. Pp vii+401, £10.99 (pbk).

The *Rough Guides* series covers a wide range of topics from travel to musical genres, film and lifestyle, and this second edition of *The Rough Guide to the Universe* is hardly a surprising extension. Very much in keeping with the style of other *Rough Guides*, *The Universe* presents topics in logically-arranged chapters, with plenty of fact-packed side-boxes. Beginning with a description, in simple terms, of what we understand of the Universe's origin, the *Guide* moves on to a quick and basic review of observing equipment – including the naked eye – then takes a tour outwards through the solar system starting from the Sun. Chapters on the Moon and Earth follow, then the other planets are covered in turn.

The view of the solar system is up to date as of late 2007, just missing out on the *Messenger* mission to Mercury. The spectacular Comet McNaught of early 2007 makes the cut, and there is good, informed discussion of Pluto's 'demotion' to dwarf planet status.

From here, the coverage moves on to the stars, nebulae and galaxies, and the dark matter debate. Finally, an extended section of constellation-by-constellation highlights is included, together with basic charts to guide the reader around the sky. A brief bibliography and selection of websites for organisations, observatories and planetaria are also included.

The style of the writing is certainly racy and engaging, but sometimes the accuracy leaves something to be desired. For example, Comet Hale-Bopp is captioned as seen against the backdrop(!) of the northern lights in the photograph on p.160, and Kuiper is serially misspelt 'Kupier'. William Herschel didn't use his 40-foot telescope at Slough to discover Uranus (p.142). There's also an irritating American tendency to flit from SI to Imperial units, and in some of the constellation



charts the correspondence between plotted and actual star magnitudes is wildly awry.

Many BAA members will be familiar with most of the material here. I found *The Rough Guide to the Universe* a good 'refresher' on many topics I hadn't read about for a while. The target audience, though, would seem to be the reasonably-informed lay public rather than the amateur astronomy community *per se*. With Christmas coming up, this might just be the ideal gift for a friend or relative who'd like to know more about your astronomical interest and could use a basic primer on the key topics.

**Neil Bone**

*Neil Bone is Director of the BAA Meteor Section and writes for the popular astronomy magazine Astronomy Now.*

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