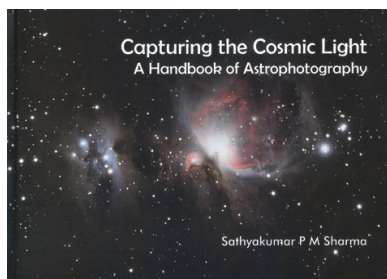


BOOK REVIEWS



Capturing the Cosmic Light: A Handbook of Astrophotography. Sathyakumar P. M. Sharma. Manipal University Press, Behind Post Office, Manipal 576 104. 2016. vi + 141 pages. Price: Rs 670.

Astrophotography is a great way to learn about astronomy as I am yet to meet a person who is not fascinated by gazing at the sky and wondering about it. It is a way of not just seeing, but also recording what one sees for oneself and for the others. It is what makes people, specially young students into amateur astronomers, if not into professional ones. Many discoveries of the evolving universe where stars are exploding and going supernova or just expanding into novae, or comets and asteroids making an appearance into our solar neighbourhood, sudden brightening or eruptions of very distant objects like quasars have been first recorded by amateur astronomers using astrophotography and then followed by the professionals. In either case not only the basic understanding of many concepts in science is enhanced by this activity, it gives a hands-on experience to people to handle and learn about devices like telescopes, cameras, associated software, etc. This curiosity and the current development of digital sensors in cameras has brought the thrill of getting beautiful pictures of the myriad of objects in the sky within the reach of amateur societies, schools and colleges at nominal cost – though not yet within the reach of most individuals in India. This



Lagoon nebula

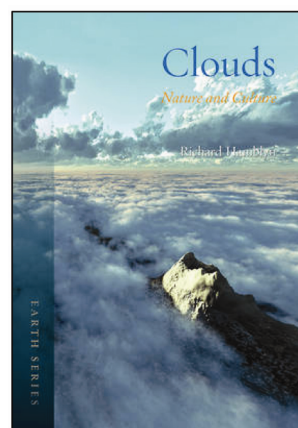
activity is slowly catching up in our country too, but is still confined to only the elite. As a result, there are several books on this subject in the market, ten of them are listed in Appendix A of this book. All books have varying degrees of detail, depth, and coverage of the subject, and there is always room for another book depending on the targeted readers (users in this case, this being a handbook), and also the cost (this one is not expensive). The author of this book is an amateur astronomer and though trained as a professional aerospace engineer, appears to be passionate about this subject. This book is his attempt to make what he has learnt over the years in pursuit of his passion available to the budding amateurs.

The book has been deliberately kept very simple as a handbook should be, and is written in an easy and almost colloquial language. It basically guides a person on choosing the right kind of a telescope, and mount and camera for an amateur astronomer starting out in this field. The chapters on alignment and astrotrac should be useful, in particular. All in all, the book is geared towards getting a person started quickly into this great hobby. It covers the practical aspects and does not delve into details of the various kinds of telescopes and their functioning. The diagrams for the telescopes appear to be oversimplified and some of the essential information regarding rays and directions deliberately suppressed, which in my view is not a good idea while learning about their functioning. The mounts are well described and the basic functions of cameras are given without getting into the details of the sensors; the more curious can find these details elsewhere, for example, the books mentioned in Appendix A. The book covers both the photography of bright planetary objects, as well as, the wonders of the deep sky, and also narrow field and wide field photography. The most useful part of the book is the detailed guidelines for processing the images. This covers nearly half the book and should be a immense to use amateurs to obtain stunning results. Appendix B of the book covers the software that can be used freely in most cases, but also lists more professional software packages that come at a cost. The websites and discussion forums listed in Appendix A would be helpful to amateurs. This book is a useful contribution by a passionate amateur astronomer

to youngsters who wish to become one.

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Clouds: Nature and Culture. Richard Hamblyn. Reaktion Books Ltd, Unit 32, Waterside, 44-48 Wharf Road, London N1 7UX, UK. 2017. 240 pages. Price: US\$ 25/£14.95.

It is perhaps the only instance when science surrendered to symbolism, and for some good reasons. The expression ‘to be on cloud nine’ has been in vogue since the 1890 discovery that the highest-rising cloud was the ninth and last on the list. However, later scientific research proved it to the contrary, identifying cumulonimbus to be tenth, and the last cloud. Despite such finding, the World Meteorological Organization sustained euphoric status to cumulonimbus as the true cloud nine. As a result, numerical expression cloud eight for ‘drinking too much liquor’, and cloud seven for ‘seventh heaven’ stay.

However, there is more to clouds than just these numbers. From the realm of literature and arts to the domain of astronomy and science, clouds have emerged from the muddle of uncertainty into the world of scientific certainty in the context of climate change and cloud computing. Capturing their picturesque journey from ‘an ultimate art gallery