

# Preface

During more than four decades of involvement in amateur astronomy, I have enjoyed the privilege of rubbing shoulders with numberless amateur and professional astronomers. In so doing I have encountered at first, second, and third hand many of the joys and pitfalls that sky watchers can experience in pursuit of the universe's wonders. I have often howled at tall tales that would not disgrace a pirate's tavern. Many of these astounding stories have become the kernels of my Dear Steve column items.

Learning how to operate the technology for observing and imaging the universe is work enough for any aspiring astronomer; however, many have problems of their own making. Not only do they share these troubles with other astronomers, they are on the receiving end of colleagues and friends doing the same. With all these agonized communications flying about, it is hard to understand how anyone gets any real work done!

For the amusement of my peers I have long fondly parodied these imagined literary exchanges. These fantasy "Agony Aunt" questions began appearing in the pages of the Loughton Astronomical Society's monthly (and Christmas Special) journals about 30 years ago, in the guise of *The astronomer's problem page*. This was by the kind indulgence of the then editor, namely myself.

Happily, even when the magazine of the LAS evolved into something much better, under the tender and loving care of those who came after me, these problem letters were still in demand and even now occasionally appear.

In this omnibus collection of letters, herein addressed to my "virtual" self, I have excluded many of the original letters because they were too scandalous, libelous, or inciteful (and even insightful). Some barely made it under the wire only by dint of subtle amendment to protect the guilty! Inspired by the present opportunity to reveal further mental tortures of my contemporaries, a large number of new correspondences make their first appearance here.

Many of the featured problems are heavily disguised authentic ones experienced by real amateur astronomers, though it need hardly be said many are not; especially (he adds hurriedly) those of a deviant or diseased nature. In fact it disturbs me a little to find an inordinate number of those that survived the initial cull still embody both of these! After all, their conception has been forged by my own experiences. Quite a few are barely fictionalized versions of real problems related by professional astronomers. I leave it to you to guess which these are.

This work serves three masters. First, it can be read with knowing amusement by experienced amateur astronomers, who no doubt will see in these pages an alarming but reassuring reflection of themselves. Second, it can act as a warning to the unwary novice, teetering momentarily in the balance between a vague, barely indulged astronomical curiosity and reckless abandonment into scientific enthusiasm. Thirdly, it offers valuable insight for those interested outsiders who want to know what on Earth makes these strange people tick.

Above all, this book's purpose is to entertain. I have liberally laced it with supplementary factual information that may hopefully prove informative, thoughtful, and even useful. So turn the page (with trepidation) and hopefully enjoy. But warn your friends. Spare them the pain.

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Steve Ringwood



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Ringwood, S.

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