

BRIEFLY NOTED

The Universe: 365 Days

by Jerry Bonnell and Robert Nemiroff. Harry N. Abrams, 2003. 740 pp., \$29.95.

Since 1995, NASA's Astronomy Picture of the Day Web site (<http://antwrp.gsfc.nasa.gov/apod/astropix.html>) has offered breathtaking glimpses of the universe and man's attempts to explore it. Editors Jerry Bonnell and Robert Nemiroff have paired the site's most



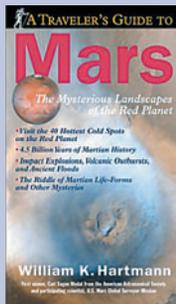
captivating images—the prismatic sky near Antares, a moonscape of Io, a lonely

portrait of Apollo 15's lunar module Falcon, and others—with good-humored captions. Would the Rosetta nebula by any other name smell as sweet? Perhaps, but the sun's solar-magnetic bananas certainly wouldn't be as tasty.

A Traveler's Guide to Mars: The Mysterious Landscapes of the Red Planet

by William K. Hartmann. Workman, 2003. 468 pp., \$18.95.

In August, Mars' closest approach in 60,000 years will bring it within 35 million miles—a

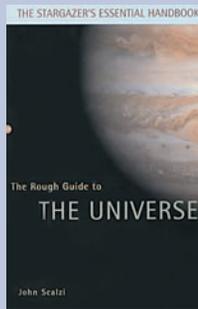


daytrip by galactic standards. Know a good place for lunch? Astro-geologist William Hartmann's dressed-up textbook fails to honor the inherent humor of its concept; there is little imagination and almost no helpful information for tourists. Stunning photography and insightful vignettes about the author's career reveal Mars for what it really is—a rock lover's paradise—but can't save droning copy which seems to leave no stone on the planet unturned.

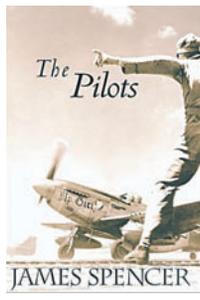
The Rough Guide to The Universe

by John Scalzi. Penguin Books, 2003. 390 pp., \$16.95.

During August, even novice astronomers can see Mercury, Venus, and Mars, spot four comets, and catch the Delta Aquarid and Perseid meteor showers—if they know when and where to look in the sky. Nearly 70 star charts depict well-known (Ursa Major, the 12 zodiac signs) and not-so-well-known (Ophiuchus, Serpens Caput) constellations, and explore the legends behind each. *Rough Guide's* real strength, however, lies in its breezy explanations of how telescopes work, the universe's beginnings, the Drake Equation (for estimating the number of alien civilizations), asteroids, wormholes, and other astronomical luminaries.



impossible to categorize; it is not a history, not a novel, and far more than a collection of short stories. The book's 15 interwoven tales, some of which previously appeared in literary journals like the *Ontario Review*, follow recurring characters from their aviation-obsessed



childhoods to aerial conflict over what should be paradise. Main characters Blake Hurlingame, a B-24 pilot with a tender concern for his crew, and P-38 Lightning pilot Steve Larkin, who downs 11 Japanese

warplanes and is shot down himself, grow up together but never meet in the combat zone. Here, in what should be paradise, the real enemy is not so much the Japanese as the danger that—for

moments at least—the pilots will grow to like war too much.

Spencer flew as copilot and later in the left seat of a B-24 Liberator above the ocean expanses and tropical forests his prose portrays so vividly. He came home with a Distinguished Flying Cross to undergo experiences unusual for a military man, including a career as a psychotherapist and a friendship with counterculture novelist Ken Kesey.

Spencer says he wrote a novel he couldn't sell, only to have an agent suggest that he make *The Pilots* a collection of related stories. That decision was a misstep. Spencer has a little of the poignancy and wit of *Catch 22's* Joseph Heller, the lean starkness of *The Hunters's* James Salter, and, ultimately, a voice all his own. He has given us a superb book. Had he chosen the bolder path, he could have given us the great novel about men who fly and fight.

—Robert F. Dorr is the author of *Air Force One*.

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