

Foreword

Astronomy is one of the oldest scientific disciplines. Observations of the sky by ancient civilizations provided important milestones. Solar and lunar eclipses were prominent events as were the discovery of comets and "guest stars," now recognized to be supernovae. These "guest stars" were observed by Chinese, Japanese, and Korean astronomers (or astrologers) for the last two millennia and possibly were sighted by the ancestors of the native Americans of the U.S. Southwest. The prime example of this was the Crab supernova in 1054, a drawing of which can be seen at the Chaco Culture National Historical Park in New Mexico.

Humans have had a fascination with astronomy for thousands of years. At the end of the twentieth century, public interest in astronomy is at an all-time high. Few scientific disciplines have so many active and successful amateurs. Many important discoveries are made by amateurs, including comets, minor planets, and supernovae.

Of course, Hollywood has also played a role in popularizing astronomy. A prominent recent example is the 1997 Warner Brothers film *Contact*, starring Jodie Foster. The film was made in 1995–1996, partly at the National Science Foundation's Very Large Array in New Mexico. Ironically, the main subject matter of the film is SETI (the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence), one of the very few areas of astronomical research in which the VLA plays no role.

Chris De Pree and Alan Axelrod present a comprehensive tour of the universe in *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Astronomy, Second Edition*. Readers will enjoy the historical approach, starting with the ancients, moving on to Copernicus and Galileo, and ending in the modern era with Neil Armstrong and others. This book provides an excellent guide not only for first-time observers, but also for experienced amateur astronomers.

Astronomical techniques, the solar system, stars, and the distant universe are described in a concise but thorough manner. The simple physical concepts underlying these phenomena are presented as they are required.

Finally, a few words about the senior author, Chris De Pree. Chris was a summer student at the Very Large Array a few years ago while he was a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He later moved to the VLA for two years, where he completed his UNC Ph.D., working on radio observations of compact HII regions. He received his doctorate in 1996 and then moved to Decatur, Georgia, to join the faculty of Agnes Scott College as (not surprisingly) a professor of astronomy.

Astronomy at Agnes Scott has begun a new and vital era, and readers of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Astronomy, Second Edition* are in for a treat that is informative and exhilarating as well as challenging.

W. Miller Goss, Ph.D.

Director, Very Large Array, Very Long Baseline Array

National Radio Astronomy Observatory of the National Science Foundation