

Keep a Sense of Humor, While Exploring Mars

Martian Summer

by Andrew Kessler

New York: Pegasus Books, 2011

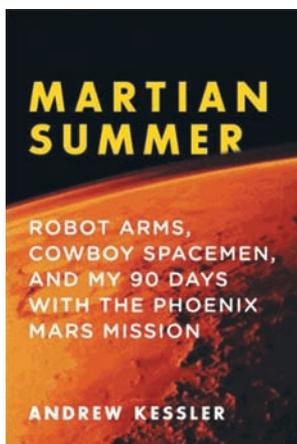
Hardcover, 352 pp., \$27.95

Sending a spacecraft to Mars is hard. Landing it safely is even harder. Keeping the spacecraft's instruments working through bone-chilling temperatures and dust storms, and returning data to anxious scientists back on Earth, is harder, still.

Planetary scientists are serious people. They spend years, if not decades, designing a mission that will answer critical questions, writing proposals, designing and developing the scientific instruments, testing and retesting, and waiting to launch. There's nothing funny about Mars.

When NASA launched the Phoenix mission to Mars, on Aug. 4, 2007, as its name implies, it was the resurrection of a previous mission to Mars, which had failed. No one on the Phoenix team had to be reminded that two thirds of all of the U.S. and Soviet/Russian missions that have been sent to Mars have failed.

Phoenix was the first spacecraft successfully deployed to the arctic north polar region of Mars. It was expected to last only 90 days, before Martian weather would freeze the lander for eternity. And, as an added experiment, the Mars Phoenix mission team decided to allow a re-



porter—an outsider—access to the mission from the inside. For author Andrew Kessler it was a dream come true—to spend the Summer of 2008 on Mars.

Inside the Mars Mission

Throughout the 90-day primary mission of the Mars Phoenix polar lander, Kessler reported every (Martian) day (24 hours, 37 minutes) to Mission Control at the University of Arizona. He sat in on science debriefing and planning meetings, and talked and schmoozed with the scientists.

Kessler's book describes the trials and tribulations and frustration of managing a spacecraft tens of millions of miles away.

Invariably, some equipment does not function as designed. Mars, itself, comes up with surprises, such as sticky soil that would not budge from a scoop, or be dropped into an oven for chemical analysis. And just because they all see the same data, it does not mean the 130 scientists on the mission agree on what the data mean.

Then, there are the pressures from the space agency, which has expectations for mission results, and is paying the bills. And, if things go wrong, a Congress, which holds the purse strings, and expects accountability.

In retelling his experience through this densely packed summer on Mars, Kessler shares his sense of humor. So while the reader is learning about Mars, about why it is important that Phoenix found perchlorate, about how scientific pursuits such as these long-distance planetary missions are done, every few pages produces a chuckle.

One should not be discouraged by the numerous acronyms, or try to remember what each scientific instrument does. This is a story about the scientists, not the spacecraft.

This book would make a great gift for those excited about not only the results, but the challenges, of space exploration.

Near East Artifacts in Ecuador

by Charles Hughes

Atlantis in the Amazon

by Richard Wingate

Rochester, Vt.: Bear & Company, 2011

Paperback, 168 pp., \$16.00

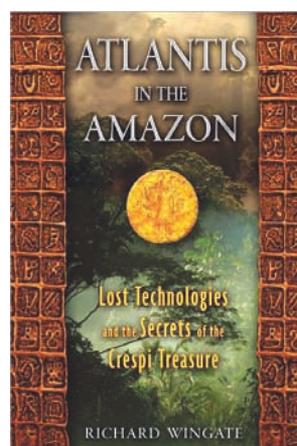
This book is a controversial account of the discovery of ancient artifacts of Near Eastern origins, in South America. The author claims that the described artifacts are proof of the existence of a colony of the lost civilization of Atlantis, located in Ecuador, in western South America.

Reader beware: Author Richard Wingate is strongly opposed to nuclear energy technology, a belief he presents throughout the book. He also states that high-tech-

nology civilizations existed in the remote past, and became extinct because of nuclear warfare. Therefore, his ideas have a pronounced green tinge, bordering on the flaky. That said, his description and photos of the artifacts are most interesting.

Wingate tells the story of a Catholic priest from Italy, of the Salesian order, who migrated in the 1920s to the Ecuadorian city of Cuenca. Father Carlo Crespi was deeply interested in science, and held degrees in archaeology, engineering, and other disciplines. He used his personal fortune to build a high school and museum in Cuenca.

Cuenca is historically significant, as it was the capital of the northernmost ex-



tenion of the Inca Empire. The city has extensive building ruins from that period, and possibly older, predating the Incas. One such building possesses a true arch with a keystone.

Throughout his life and ministry (Crespi died in 1983), the priest purchased unusual artifacts brought to him by local inhabitants. Eventually he collected thousands of items, many obvious fakes of modern manufacture.

Genuine Artifacts

Barry Fell, the great epigrapher who successfully deciphered many ancient scripts,* heard about the Crespi collection of artifacts and investigated a square bronze artifact covered with what appeared to be letters of an alphabet. Fell declared that the script was similar to a script discovered in Cyprus and he pro-

* See "Barry Fell, Epigrapher: Biography of a Renaissance Man" by Julian Fell, *21st Century*, Winter 1999-2000 and Summer 2001.



One of the Crespi gold plates with writing.

duced a tentative translation. This artifact, found in Ecuador, has a high probability of being genuine, since no knowledge of this script existed prior to Fell's work.

When Crespi died in 1983, his collection was dispersed. The most interesting pieces were purchased by the state of Ecuador for the Cuenca Museum, for the equivalent of half a million dollars.

Wingate's point here is that Crespi's artifacts may indicate contact between the Middle East and South America in ancient times.

The book is illustrated profusely, including color photos of the controversial metal plates which Fell deciphered. Although not quite Atlantis, as Wingate desires, this discovery may prove important.

BOOK NOTES *by Marjorie Mazel Hecht*

The Cat Who Designed A Nuclear Plant

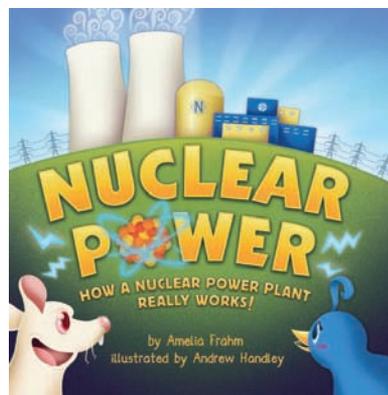
Nuclear Power: How a Nuclear Power Plant Really Works

by Amelia Frahm

Apex North Carolina: Nutcracker Publishing Company, 2011

Paperback, 36 pp., \$9.95

Move over "Cat in the Hat." Here comes Penelope the cat, who, according to a chubby rat and pretty blue bird, must be responsible for designing the Nukie Nuclear Power Plant. Why? Because nuclear electricity powers the female feline's house so that she can laze around in the air-conditioned cool. With charming illustrations, this little book in



rhyme, presents the basics of nuclear power for a young audience.

Refreshingly, there are no politically correct caveats, just simple rhymes that cover the basics of how a reactor works. The book is designed for ages 4-9, but

there are probably people of all ages on your gift list who are in need of this non-scary introduction to nuclear power.

Seriously Funny

Future Shock Comics

by Jim and Pat McGreal

Paperback, 105 pp., \$10.00

www.futureshockcomics.com

This little book of cartoons arrived with a note saying that "science could use some humor." We concur, and we thank the authors for providing us with some high-tech and scifi laughs!

It was hard to select just one illustration to give readers a sense of the McGreal brothers' style. If you want someone to laugh at your gift, this book is a good choice.

