ForeWord Reviews

The Last Word
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If you have ever wondered whether birds sleep or why superglue doesn't stick to its own container, you'll want to read The Last Word.

The book is a compilation of questions and answers that appeared in the British magazine New Scientist. Even if you've been a long-time subscriber to New Scientist you will still want the book because it also includes reader responses to some of the original answers. Remember, this is a British publication so you end up with spellings like "tyre" and "colour" and there are lot of questions about tea, something called Swarfega and this: "How do TV detector vans work?" That question is followed by several good answers, but American readers are left with questions of their own: "what is a TV detector van?" and "Why do the British seemingly go around detecting peoples' televisions?"

The book has nine sections arranged in these broad categories: Plants and Animals, Mysteries and Illusions, Strange Nature, The Physical World, Inside Machines, Household Science, Gadgets and Inventions, Bubbles, Liquids and Ice and Your Body. There are illustrations, but they are decorative rather than illustrative. There are no tables, charts or formulas, so even if you hated science in school you will find the answers to such questions as "Why is the sky blue?" or "Where does the force come from when you are thrown horizontally across a room after touching a live electrical connection?" palatable and understandable.

There are practical explanations of what to do if you are driving and running out of petrol (sorry—that's gas) or ways to keep from crying when you slice an onion. There is also an index, which is very useful if you are in a desperate need for practical advice or are simply trying to win a bet.

If you are more curious than practical—you might wonder whether fish fart or how big a bang the Big Bang really made—then you'll want to read this book.

But if you think that hot air rises or that the Great Wall of China is the only non-natural object visible from space or that lemmings favor mass suicide you need this book.

Joe Mielke