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Wondering About

David Strumfels
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How do we know what we know? This is a concept that has plagued humanity since the days of the first philosophers. David Strumfels' Wondering About is more than the science book it purports to be, since it goes deeper than the physical, venturing into that philosophical breach.

"Why is the sky blue?" the author asks early on. The question might appear childish at first glance, and that's a shame. Once one reaches a certain age, such queries are deemed inappropriate; the information is either expected to be known or disregarded as unimportant.

Strumfels, who seems to have no professional scientific credentials, does a good job of conveying this sense of wonder, articulating what many of his readers undoubtedly have asked at some point in their lives. He covers the "standard sciences"—chemistry, biology, physics, astronomy, and geology, among others—but he also branches out, with discussions of time travel (backwards and forwards), the mind–body connection, and consciousness.

Particularly charming is the inclusion of an article from a 1900 Ladies Home Journal that predicted events for the coming century. The piece contains an amazingly prescient item that pertains to modern mania of text-messaging: "'There will be no C, X, or Q in our everyday alphabet,'" the original article states. "'They will be abandoned because unnecessary. Spelling by sound will have been adopted, first by the newspapers. English will be a language of condensed words expressing condensed ideas.'"

Although Strumfels tries to present science in an engaging and inclusive manner, some passages are so circuitous as to cause the reader's head to spin from the dizzying array of information presented. This is not to say that the writing is particularly difficult (although it can be in spots), but rather the issues are exceptionally thought provoking.

Most of the information flows, if not absolutely logically, from one chapter to another (although there is an odd inclusion of original science-fiction amidst all the science fact).On the negative side, there are several typos that might change the meaning of some of the author's premises. But Strumfel's passion for his work—both in science and as a writer—overcomes the minor flaws and tangents that might be attributed to an "absent-minded professor" enthralled by his particular topic. This book could easily serve as the introductory volume to a series of books on specific scientific disciplines.

RON KAPLAN (May 18, 2010)

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