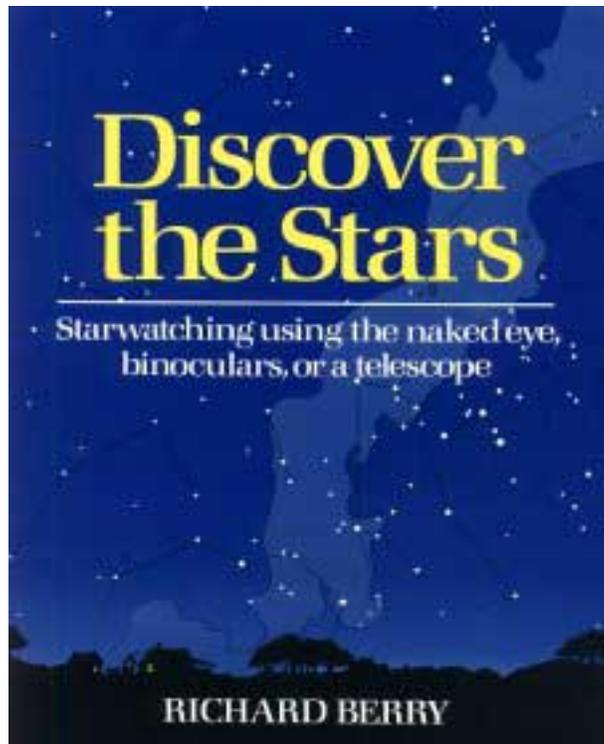


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Discover The Stars

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By Richard Berry, Harmony Books, 1987, 119 pages

Judging by the title, one would believe that this is a beginner's book. And it is. And two years ago when I bought this book, I was one. Without knowing anyone else personally who was also into astronomy, I gained my knowledge through books...and the Internet. Armed with a small etx-70at at that time, I could point to whatever I wanted...including black holes, without having a clue. But when the scope asked for alignment stars: "hmm, Arcturus, hmm, interesting name for a star, but which one is it?" I figured then it would probably be best to have a little knowledge of the stars, a crash course in star names and where all the bright, interesting objects were.

Prompted by suggestions off astromart, I went to the local bookstore and looked at some star atlases. I gasped. \$50 for a book. I peeked inside. Millions of dots everywhere, err stars everywhere. I then started poking around the astronomy section in the bookstore, looking for *Turn Left At Orion*, which was also suggested to me. But I couldn't find it. So then I picked up a big that looked similar, *Discover the Stars*. I glanced through the pages and it seemed just what I was looking for. And at \$12.95, it was a lot cheaper than a star atlas.

The book starts off with a simple introduction. Mainly it deals with how to orient oneself using the star charts. It's always good to learn when north, south, west, and east are when you're trying to interpret the star chart.

Next came the month-by-month star charts, cute little star charts of the entire sky. It starts off January then makes its way to December. It gives the overview of what the sky looks like at the beginning of the listed month at 10pm. So the March star chart would show you what the March skies would look like on March 7th at 10pm. It also gives you a list of the dates and times when the map of the March sky would also be applicable at the bottom of the page. So not only would the March map be useful on March 7th at 10pm, but also on November 23rd at 5am. Also given in the introduction is a table of dates and times and which monthly star chart to use. Each star chart is accompanied by the text, which familiarizes the readers with the constellations. Then the author moves on to point out interesting objects for the month, sometimes prompting the reader to do some small, easy to follow, star hops across the constellations. The star charts only include the major stars so as to not confuse the beginner, and outlines the ecliptic (the path the planets, sun, and moon follow across the sky) and the Milky Way. Overall, very good for the budding astronomer. The only problem: the star charts show the representation of what the sky would look like at mid-northern latitudes. So if you live too far north or south, you're out of luck.

Chapter 2 includes a very brief description of binoculars, telescopes, eyepieces, mounts and using the telescope. It gives the usual pros and cons of refractors, reflectors, and catadioptric scopes. It also gives a quick description of mounts, of how alt-az (Dobsonian and camera tripod mounts) mounts work and equatorial mounts work. A nice little addition, but it shouldn't be all the information a newbie uses to decide what telescope to buy.

Chapter 3 gives a little bit more advanced information. First it describes the numbering and naming of stars. Second it discusses astronomical measurements. It explains magnitude of stars accompanied by a list of some major stars and their apparent magnitudes. Next is an explanation of measurements of the sky such as degrees and arcminutes and how they apply in terms of navigating the sky. Lastly comes a crash course in the categories of observable objects: double stars, variable stars, star clusters, nebulae, the milky way, and galaxies. It gives a major example of each and a overall description of what to expect at the eyepiece.

The next section gives more detailed sky charts as it zooms in on sections of the sky, instead of showing the entire sky like the month-by-month sky charts. However, since the charts are still showing significant chunks of sky (several constellations), the charts are not that detailed, with stars reaching down to only 6th magnitude. It makes it a bit difficult to find faint objects such as nebulae and galaxies with too few stars to guide by. Also, in a pitch black sky a young adult can see stars as faint as 7th magnitude, which goes beyond the scope of the given star charts, even without using optical aid. Now imagine the seemingly zillions of stars that appear when first using a telescope and the difficulty it is to navigate. However, one has to start somewhere. If detailed star charts are too hard to read, and the star charts in a beginner book too simple, a budding astronomer has to take the first and hardest step, trying to navigate the night sky with the info he's got. I guess it's why so many people buy a telescope, but never figure out the night sky. Anyways, the author then points out some interesting double stars and deep sky objects from the accompanying star chart, often followed by interesting tidbits about the objects. He also gives out some description of what the listed objects appear like in a telescope. At the bottom of the page are usually one or two little drawings of the main objects, as they would appear in a small telescope. Even though the author mentions using a telescope, none of the objects are that

faint and can all probably be observed through a good pair of 7x50 binoculars. As binoculars have a wide field of view, it would help compensate for the fact that the stars shown on the chart are few and far between. The only other problem I see is the way he divided up the sky, that makes it a little difficult to get your bearings. He has several charts stating “facing south” or “facing north” or “overhead facing south” making it kind of confusing for a beginner, like me at first. It might have been easier to follow if the charts had been one big constellation a chart or maybe a few small constellations per chart, rather than charts of big swaths of sky that author uses. But of course, that might have confused me even more having way too many charts to look at.

Of course the book would have been complete without mentioning the moon and the planets. Chapter 4 is a description of various features on the moon accompanied with a nice drawing of the moon. Chapter 5 has briefs descriptions of what to expect when pointing a telescope at the planets. Definitely, this book is geared for understanding the night sky as a whole, rather than planetary observing.

Chapter 6 is a nice addition by the author as it gives publications, books, and star charts that the beginning astronomer might want also want to buy.

Overall, I found the book to be perfect for what it was meant to do, to help a beginner who knows nothing about the night sky get his bearings when looking up and scanning the heavens with the naked eye or a pair of small binoculars.

By the way, I have no association with Richard Berry, Harmony Books Publishers, or Barnes and Noble Booksellers.

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