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CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editors of ‘The Observatory’

Book Reviews

I look forward to Phillip Helbig’s book reviews. In the 2024 June issue review of Bill Press’ memoir *More Than Curious*, he writes¹ of Press “I’ve never met Bill Press”. As a final year undergraduate at Caltech, I got to know him as well as any undergraduate might know a professor. During the 1973–4 academic year, Press was an assistant professor teaching PH 236, a year-long postgraduate-level course in General Relativity. That year was the first in many the course had not been taught by Kip Thorne: he was on sabbatical, recovering from having spent 90% of the preceding three years on completion of *Gravitation* by Misner, Thorne & Wheeler, more often called ‘*MTW*’. Publisher W. H. Freeman shipped the first paperback copies struck off the press to Caltech. I still have mine on my bookshelf, and consult it on occasion, still.

So far as I know Bill had no prior experience teaching. I did not regret missing out on taking PH 236 from Thorne, however. Press taught a splendid course, unlike any other I had at university. One aspect stands out in memory. Those of us taking the course were used as beta testers of what ultimately became *Problem Book in Relativity and Gravitation* by Lightman, Press, Price & Teukolsky (Princeton University Press). Each week, we were given fifteen to twenty problems with solutions attached. We were to work through as many as we desired, consulting solutions as needed, and flagging any errors we found, or supplying solutions of our own. (As I recall, none of mine made it into the published version.) We would set aside one problem to work without consulting the solution, and mark it as such for the graders (Saul Teukolsky and Alan Lightman, before his career move to literary fiction). The honour system at Caltech ensured we abided by these conditions. For the final exam, we were supplied with all the (corrected) problems *sans* solutions, and enjoined to work as many as we could in three hours. Naturally, everyone took care to review all the problem sets before the day. I can't say how badly this arrangement traduced the norms of postgraduate final examinations, but as a pedagogical matter, I think it worked brilliantly: we got acres of practice applying what we learned from Press and *MTW*, and the exams were the least stressful of any I had as an undergraduate.

The third quarter of the course was devoted to physical cosmology, mostly taught using Weinberg's *Gravitation and Cosmology*, the account of cosmology in *MTW* being its weakest part.

In the same issue, Helbig also reviewed² Carlo Rovelli's *White Holes*. At one point he refers to Dante's *Paradise Lost*. May we look forward to seeing Milton's *Inferno*?

Yours faithfully,
JOHN A. MORGAN

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REVIEWS

Space: The Human Story, by Tim Peake (Century), 2023. Pp. 328, 23.5 × 15 cm.
Price £22 (hardbound; ISBN 978 1 529 91350 7).

More than six decades ago, a 27-year-old lieutenant in the Soviet Air Force, named Yuri Gagarin, made history by becoming the first human to leave our