typographical error). Nevertheless, they are few, and the general tone of the text is one of technical correctness and authority. Yet, despite these undoubted virtues, there is something lacking: it is simply that the author has not succeeded in making the field as enthralling as he found it during his 24 years with the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority. Instead, one is left with the uneasy feeling that the book reads like a succession of the carefully worded, technically correct, but bland handouts favoured by public relations officers, particularly in the nuclear industry. The sense of excitement aroused by the initial discovery of fission is missing, as is any sense of the enormous technological achievement in harnessing nuclear power.

After all, the reason why nuclear power bears the brunt of the anti-technologists' onslaught is precisely because it is seen as *the* high technology, an almost unique amalgam of science and engineering. Yet none of this emerges. Everything is under control, doubts are smoothly assuaged and technology rules supreme.

Nevertheless, for the reader who is prepared to accept these limitations, the book provides an accessible and comprehensive survey of the nuclear scene at a level which invites a wide readership. □

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Another delicate issue concerns the need for a clear definition of life. Superficial criteria such as the ability to reproduce, response to environment and so on are also displayed by systems that are normally regarded as inanimate, so Feinberg and Shapiro adopt a sort of global definition wherein life is manifested through the activity of a biosphere; that is, one should look to the highly organized and complex structure of interlocking organisms as an unambiguous indicator of life.

At the end of the day we are still left with the depressing fact that the discovery of extraterrestrial biospheres is unlikely to occur in the twentieth century, so all books of this sort really amount to little more than speculation, or at best educated guesses. Nevertheless, there is a real need for us to examine fresh perspectives of mankind and his place in the Universe. With that in mind, I found the book entertaining and generally informative.

In contrast to this ambitious work, *Earth and Cosmos* by Robert Kandel is more modest in aim though wider in scope. The author also provides a cosmic perspective of mankind by discussing in detail a whole range of physical processes that are relevant to the structure of the Earth and its immediate environment. This book is full of fascinating information, ranging from continental drift to the pollution of the atmosphere. There is an extensive discussion of both meteorology and climatology, and a detailed review of the Earth's motion. *Earth and Cosmos* makes good reading for non-specialists who want to know more about the planet we live on. □

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Life as we know it: does anyone else?

Paul Davies

Life Beyond Earth: The Intelligent Earthling's Guide to Life in the Universe. By Gerald Feinberg and Robert Shapiro. Pp.480. (Morrow: 1980.) Hardback \$14.95; paperback \$7.95. *Earth and Cosmos.* By R. S. Kandel. Pp.270. (Pergamon: 1980.) Hardback \$30, £13.50; paperback \$14.90, £6.95.

Life Beyond Earth, proclaims the publisher's blurb, "is the result of a three-year collaboration between a theoretical physicist and a biochemist . . .". That sounds like a recipe for disaster, but the end product is remarkably coherent, if a little prolix. It is also somewhat pretentious, because it presents a range of ideas, varying from uncontentious standard biochemistry to the most outrageous and bizarre speculations, in a deceptively uniform and scholarly format.

It is, of course, the outrageous ideas that make this book such fun to read. The authors pin their colours firmly to the mast in Chapter 1: "We believe that most other attempts . . . have not been sufficiently imaginative in examining the possibilities for extraterrestrial life". To remedy this state of affairs, the reader is invited to consider the astonishing prospect of living creatures inhabiting the most unlikely of habitats — wallowing in the molten interior of the Earth, bobbing about inside the Sun, crawling over the surfaces of neutron stars, or floating serenely and nebulously in interstellar space. This is all good sci-fi stuff, but my main misgiving is that while the mere existence of a source of free energy and a mechanism for self-organization are certainly necessary conditions for the appearance of some form of life, can we really believe, as the authors assume, that they are sufficient?

A related problem to the happy prospect of a Universe teeming with exotic life forms is that it is far easier to believe in the evolution of intelligence, once life

has actually gained a foothold, than in the initial appearance of living things. Yet if intelligence abounds in the cosmos, we would expect it to be conspicuous. Where is the alien technology, some of it presumably billions of years more advanced than ours? Unfortunately, Feinberg and Shapiro almost completely ignore the subjects of intelligence and alien communities, so do not attempt to face this central issue.

It would be misleading, however, to over-emphasize the bizarre in this book. The authors provide a valuable service in, for example, drawing attention to the distorted public image of the Viking experiments on Mars, popularly believed to have excluded the possibility of life there. In fact, as the authors' careful analysis shows, the results were ambiguous, and the experiments in any case left a lot to be desired in their underlying assumptions about Martian biology.

One can also be persuaded by their argument that the search for extraterrestrial life contributes hugely to the motivation for the general exploration of space. Public disappointment that space probes have not yet positively encountered even the tiniest form of life has contributed to the widespread disillusionment with these expensive enterprises. Yet the most likely abode for life in the Solar System — Jupiter — has still to be closely explored.

Inevitably, for a book that tackles a subject for which no known subject matter yet exists, *Life Beyond Earth* contains liberal doses of philosophy. Specially singled out for attack are those whom the authors dub as "carbaquists" — biochemical faint-hearts who believe that life based on the chemistry of carbon and water is the only possibility. As a physicist, the carbaquist viewpoint has always seemed to me chauvinistic; biochemists are doubtless more conservative.

Cosmic questions

Joseph Silk

The State of the Universe. Edited by G.T. Bath. Pp. 199. (Oxford University Press: 1980.) £8.95, \$24.95.

DESPITE its obscure origin and intemperate past, the Universe has made a good recovery. Conditions have stabilized over the past several eons, and practically all observers now agree that a recession is with us for some time to come. However the long-term outlook remains controversial — some predict that the rate of inflation will eventually drop, heralding the onset of a long era of deflation; other forecasters, perhaps a majority, maintain that the inflation rate will hold steady into the remote future. A vocal minority even persist in finding evidence that the inflation rate is accelerating.

This situation must seem familiar to the student of economics. Likewise, cosmologists also have their differences. It