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A New Dimension

Lorna Kerry's idea of a 'science' book was *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. Then she picked up Lisa Randall's *Warped Passages*

Warped Passages initially seemed quite a daunting prospect. My knowledge of physics is strictly GCSE, and the book opens a world of vaguely familiar terms that I was resigned to never understanding: special relativity, string theory, supersymmetry and the like. Randall provides access to that world in her discussion of extra dimensions, addressing possibilities that seem alien to the tangible world, yet more fascinating because of it.

Randall admits that some of the ideas she raises seem more science fiction than science fact. But anyone accusing her of straying into fantasy would be brought up sharp by the detailed grounding in physics she provides. In early chapters, she explains concepts such as quantum mechanics, which are vital to understand the theories on extra dimensions.

Randall's relaxed style and humour make even complex ideas accessible. Many of the theories go against the way that we see the world, and that is what makes them so hard to comprehend. Reading *Warped Passages* gives an insight into how people must have felt on discovering that the Earth was not flat.

A certain suspension of disbelief is required to accept the counterintuitive theories Randall discusses. I needed to reread certain sections of her book, but that is the nature of the intangible concepts that she explores.

Interspersed among the physics are analogies relating these ideas to our "commonsense" world. They often provide the moment of comprehension that is needed for fuller understanding.

The final chapters of *Warped Passages* get to the heart of the extra-dimension debate, and are the most engaging. Randall cannot provide definite conclusions about the existence of extra dimensions, but she opens up a whole spectrum of ideas that I would never have contemplated previously. Her enthusiasm should make it possible for even the novice to feel excited about technological developments and the possibility of one day proving the existence of extra dimensions.

Lorna Kerry is studying English at Manchester University. *Warped Passages* is published this month by Allen Lane, Pounds 20.00.