

forays into political history, his book is still useful as a narrative of human space exploration from the 1970s onwards. As such, it is best read piecemeal, skipping the bits on politics and following the story of the missions that extended the human capability to live in space. ■

Asif Siddiqi is in the Department of History, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15213, USA.

Website

Tempting teens with love in the lab

Planet Jemma

www.planetjemma.com

Carina Dennis

Lust, lip balm and science ... welcome to Planet Jemma! This new frontier is an Internet-based soap opera designed to get girls interested in physics. The online drama, which went live in February, orbits around Jemma, a 19-year-old first-year astrophysics student enrolled at a British university. Users track the hormonally laden and angst-ridden experiences of Jemma over 14 episodes — through her video diaries and e-mails — as she grapples with insecurities over physics classes, the temptations of an attractive egocentric colleague, and the expectations of her female mentor.

The drama is narrative-driven rather than being overtly science-based, and interactivity lies at its core. Users receive regular personalized e-mails from Jemma that are tailored to information provided by the user on registration and in response to quizzes, and they can correspond with Jemma via SMS text messages.

The website is targeted at 13–16-year-old girls, who are lured by routes outside the usual educational contexts, such as advertisements in teen magazines with offers of free lip balm on registration (although this offer has now ended). Its creators, Tim Wright and Rob Bevan of the online entertainment company XPT, wanted to create something that was different from formal science education programmes, “something outside the classroom that girls could relate to and felt was cool”. But Jemma’s charismatic qualities are likely to attract a wider audience, including members of the opposite sex.

Planet Jemma walks a delicate line between science and entertainment. The science is not obvious, mostly tucked away in Jemma’s online notebook, and could readily be skipped by the uninterested visitor who just wants to know who Jemma will snog (British for ‘neck’). But that may well be one of the strengths of the site — to create a



Soap science: turning teens on to physics.

context that teenage girls can relate to and then draw them into the science of black holes and antimatter.

The scientific information embedded in the crevices of the site is informative and interesting, and is crafted in an accessible format with links to other useful science sites. The most interesting, but perhaps overlooked, aspects of the site are the profiles of female scientists working in the physical sciences and their perspectives on science as a career.

Wright would like to extend the online relationship that girls have with Jemma to real-life undergraduates and research assistants at universities. “We could take them from a fictional world to an online mentoring system where they get to talk to real people doing real science”, says Wright, although he acknowledges the difficulties of blurring fiction and reality.

Women may feel their hackles rise when Jemma encounters the sexism of her male peers, drops her jeans after a liquid-nitrogen spill and succumbs to drunken embarrassment over her unrequited affections. But there is solace in the fact that Jemma overcomes adversity, dumps the guy and sticks with her physics course in the quest to find a planet she can call her own.

Couched in the vernacular of British adolescents, the drama is unlikely to travel well. But versions tailored for audiences in different countries are likely to be just as successful.

Planet Jemma was created with a grant of £90,000 (US\$150,000) from the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, a British agency that supports scientific and cultural innovation and is funded by the national lottery. The website has attracted nearly 30,000 registrations, of which about 10% stick it out to the end. This doesn’t sound like a lot but Wright and Bevan think that if just a few hundred of these girls decide

to pursue science as a career then the project will have succeeded.

The website’s impact has yet to be evaluated by education experts, but Wright claims that more than half of the users that vote in the final episode say that the site improved their perception of studying science. At any rate, Planet Jemma may help to redress the imbalance of the male-dominated world of undergraduate physical-science courses. ■

Carina Dennis is Nature’s Australasian correspondent.

New in Paperback

The Road to Stockholm: Nobel Prizes, Science, and Scientists

by István Hargittai

Oxford University Press £9.99

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature

by Steven Pinker

Penguin \$16 (US), \$24 (Canada)

“Pinker presents an overarching view of the world in a way that quite a few readers will find seductive”. David Hull *Nature* **419**, 251–252 (2002).

Genetic Destinies

by Peter Little

Oxford University Press £8.99

Sexual Selections: What We Can and Can’t Learn About Sex From Animals

by Marlene Zuk

California University Press \$16.95, £10.95

Self-Organization in Biological Systems

by Scott Camazine, Jean-Louis Deneubourg, Nigel R. Franks, James Sneyd, Guy Theraulaz and Eric Bonabeau

Princeton University Press \$35, £22.95