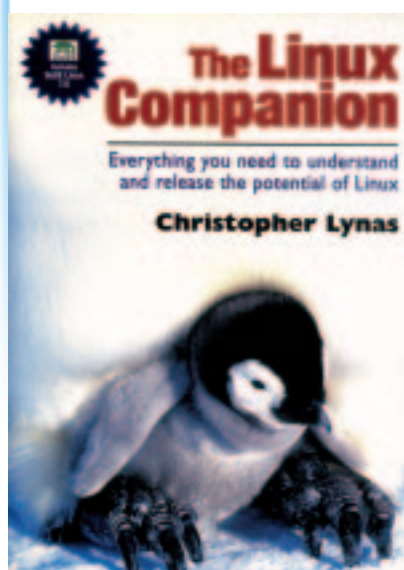**BOOKS**   REVIEW

THE LINUX COMPANION
BY CHRISTOPHER LYNAS

ALISON DAVIES

This book looked promising on the bookshelf. It's subtitled 'Everything you need to understand and release the potential of Linux' and has a cute baby penguin on the cover. The section headings include 'Why Choose Linux?', 'Linux Applications and the Desktop', 'Linux Fact and Fiction' and 'Linux Information and How to Find It'. As a confirmed newbie I had hoped to find information and tips to help me – things I had not heard of before. Unfortunately there was very little to be found.

The book is readable and very well written, though I found all the little 'Did you know?' boxes slightly annoying. However, the content is aimed at people who know little of Linux other than the name. This is not a bad thing, we need to encourage as many people as possible to take up Linux and Christopher Lynas is a sound advocate of the cause, but I would have preferred a title which reflected the content a little better. I fear that it may be passed over by its target audience as being too complex, which would be a shame.

The Linux Companion is a good basic introduction to Linux, it covers its history and early development, briefly mentions the various distributions, devotes a chapter to embedded systems and describes the current limits of Linux. The author strengthens the case for Linux by giving examples of businesses that have already used it successfully, including NASA, the United States Postal Service and Digital Domain – the company that rendered the graphics for Titanic.

A chapter is devoted to why you should choose Linux; it compares Linux to other operating systems and lists the advantages of using Linux. It describes programs that can be used in place of Windows applications and reassures the potential user on the availability of support.

Chapter five is devoted to dispelling any myths about Linux, which might be in the minds of potential users. The usual topics, such as 'lack of support', 'lack of security' or the 'reluctance to produce software' are covered. It then moves on to consider the various applications available to businesses that can take the place of Windows products. Emulators and the use of Linux on laptops and Macs are discussed and the chapter draws to a close by covering viruses (or the lack of). Finally, the growing number of games is explored.

One section covers the variety of open source projects and describes what each one does, often giving example Web pages. Another section covers different companies that now support Linux (again providing sample Web pages). Later on, the section deals with how Linux can be used in business generally and where to go for support and training.

The appendices address frequently asked questions on both SuSE linux and Linux in general, including how to set up partitions to run a dual boot machine. There's also a section on tips – some of which have already been discussed in the main text of the book. Nevertheless, it is useful to have them collected together. The book ends with a glossary, though again, it is a little basic for current users of Linux.

The aforementioned 'Did you know?' panels appear on many pages and are a distinctive feature of the book. These take the form of definitions of various terms. Most of these are general, whilst a few of them are specific to Linux. Most of them are things that you'll already know, but occasionally there is one that will make you think 'Oh yes, of course!' The large number of Web page screenshots makes you realise just how much there is available on the Internet about Linux. If you have not already visited a particular site, these images give you an idea of what to expect.

A CD of SuSE Linux 7.0 is included with the book. The disc comes with installation instructions and requirements, along with information on where to go for the handbook and other support. Christopher Lynas is prejudiced towards SuSE, to the almost total exclusion of other distributions – but perhaps it is best to stick to what you are most accustomed to. This book is about becoming comfortable with Linux; it encourages the user to try it out and see what all the fuss is about. The author acknowledges that The Linux Companion may not suit everyone, especially businesses that have already invested heavily in Windows, but it encourages the idea of change, of a challenge to Microsoft.

The Linux Companion is probably too basic for most readers of this magazine, but it would make an excellent present for your boss or a friend who has expressed an interest and would like to find out more. ■

Info

The Linux Companion is published by Prentice Hall, includes a CD Rom of SuSE Linux 7.0 and is priced at £17.99