Marta Barber presents: Reflections on
Astronomy in the Maya Codices
by Harvey and Victoria Bricker

The last time Harvey and Victoria Bricker visited the IMS in July 2010, Harvey showed the attentive audience photos in his computer of their visit to the Museum of America in Madrid where the Brickers were conducting research on the Madrid Codex in anticipation of a new book they were writing. There was Harvey on his back, knees raised, under a glass case, paying close attention to the pages of the original manuscript of the Maya book. I can’t remember how many hours he said they would spend studying this invaluable document.

Whatever time they spent working in Madrid can’t compare to the thirty years it has taken these two accomplished scientists to do the research and finish Astronomy in the Maya Codices. What a book it is: 907, 25cm-wide-by-30cm-long semi-glossy pages, weighing approximately 9 lbs, with text running in columns 12.7cm wide and the blank spaces to either side occupied, when necessary, by notes or drawings needed to accompany the text. Unless you have a portable easel, pick one of those tables in a set used to serve drinks to visitors, and reserve it for the book. In other words, you won’t be able to take it to bed with you. Reading it may be an undertaking, but one I anticipate to finish in order finally to understand what the Maya codices – the four known surviving books written before the arrival of the Spaniards – contribute to better comprehend that Mesoamerican civilization.

“Destined to become a classic within the field of Maya studies,” says Dr. Gabrielle Vail, a former student of the Brickers, who has gone on to become an expert in her own right, “Astronomy in the Maya Codices provides an encyclopedic resource on a topic that has remained relatively little known before now.”

As I write this, I’ve only read Chapter I dedicated mainly to the description and known histories of the four codices: Dresden, Paris, Madrid and Grolier. The first three are named after the cities where they are located, while the Grolier is named after the New York club where it was first exhibited. It has been returned to Mexico where it now resides in the National museum. The chapter reads like a fact-based mystery novel, a fascinating story of where and when they first came to the attention of Westerners, in what condition they were found, who has done work on them, what pages can still be read, and how they became an integral part of this book.

I have, nevertheless, flipped through the book, looking at drawings of familiar scenes and charts that I know I will have to pay a lot of attention to understand. Such as, “Full calendrical expansion and additional data for the 12 Lamat original multiple of the eclipse table (formatted as output from a computer program of the authors, which was used in the analysis)” occupying pages 277–282. Now perhaps is the time to mention that Harvey wrote computer programs that “allowed easy and accurate simulation of changing variables through time.” They also had help from engineers from New Orleans and Gainesville, who assisted the authors customize the several computers needed for this job. Impressed yet?

If, as you read this, you get the idea that I am in awe of the book and of Vicki and Harvey Bricker, you are absolutely correct. I am impressed by the dedication and the knowledge of the authors as much as how deep their research delved. As a former journalist, I accept criticism for making such comments on Astronomy in the Maya Codices before reading it all. Reading it all would take me months; fully understanding its contents might never be achieved by this “nonspecialist.”

However, you can take the word of Dr. Vail, who evaluates the book: “The result of several decades of meticulous research and ground-breaking methodologies undertaken by Harvey and Victoria Bricker, it affords students, Mayanists, and the interested lay reader with lines of argumentation and details about the calendrical structure and hieroglyphic texts that portray the depth and breadth of astronomical knowledge contained in the Maya codices. This is a book to savor. It should be read slowly, over many sittings, to best appreciate the subtleties of the subject and the adroit way that each topic is addressed.”

It’s too late for me to become a groupie, but for these two gentle people and scholars, I bow my head in admiration. We are thankful they consider the Institute of Maya Studies worthy of publishing such a tribute.