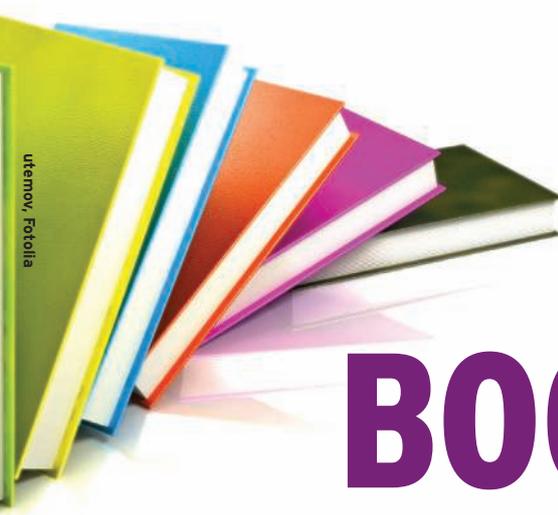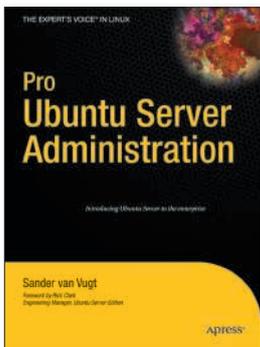BY JAMES PYLES

BOOK REVIEWS

Pro Ubuntu Server Administration

The target audience of this text, as stated in van Vugt's introduction, is the "experienced administrator" who is already familiar with basic server admin tasks. The beginning chapters address installation and configuration, including imaging and diskless remote booting, but the chapters thereafter cover specific tasks, so feel free to jump around. Because this book uses the Ubuntu 8.04 LTS server as a model, I was pleased to see that all of the instructions and examples were specific to the distro, although most of what was written should apply more or less equally well to other Ubuntu editions. Also, I was pleased that the author held true to his assumptions and did his best to address an advanced admin audience, rarely drifting back into beginning or intermediate server admin content. The mid-range Ubuntu admin would be most attracted to this book, in that it really does show the reader how to get an enterprise-level server up and running quickly. What was missing in part was the in-depth information about what to do with it afterwards. However, the book does put forth quite useful information for the level of its audience – it's just that the level isn't quite as "high" as advertised. If you are an experienced Linux server admin and you want to ramp up to the high-intermediate or beginning advanced level, van Vugt's book is of value. Also, this book might be for you if you have Linux server admin skills but want to hone your understanding of the Ubuntu server specifically.

Beginning Portable Shell Scripting: From Novice to Professional

Even a casual skimming of the material in this book will tell you that the author knows what he's talking about. The professional will have no trouble navigating within and learning from Seebach. Ideally, the books in this series should take readers from knowing little or nothing about a subject to a point at which they can function adequately by the last chapter. This book doesn't quite cater to 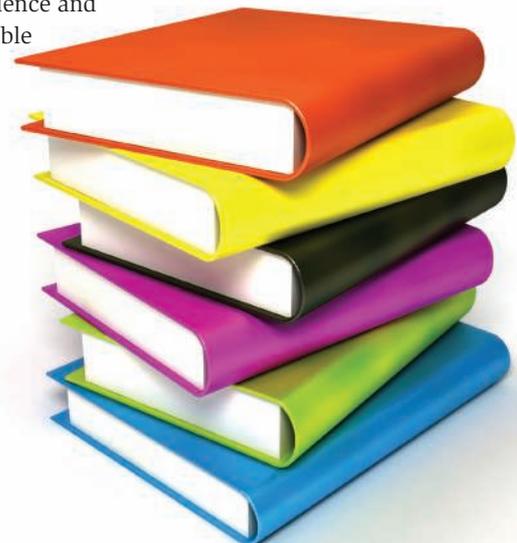the "novice" population. I wonder how this managed to get so far past the editorial staff that the content couldn't have been adjusted to more accurately fit the audience profile. On the other hand, with a slight adjustment in perspective, the text could be considered "From Quick Study to Professional."

Often shell scripting is a labor of necessity, and many an admin has taught him- or herself enough scripting to do whatever job needed. Although that sort of learning can be effective, it is often limited. Seebach's book pulls together essential and advanced information, and presents it in a learnable fashion. This text is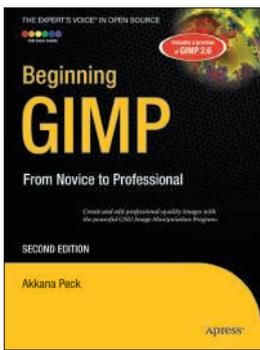 also general enough so as not to be exclusively restricted to any one the Bourne family of shells. The "Portable" part of the title is also well expressed within these pages. Because your personal or professional preferences and requirements aren't going to remain stable over time, it would be a shame if all of your hard work crafting shell scripts for your systems should have to go by the wayside just because you needed to change platforms. But this area is where Seebach and his book really shine.

If you truly are new to shell scripting and need a book to take you from the ground up, you might want to consider one of the O'Reilly Bash or shell scripting titles on the market. If you've got at least a little experience and want to hone your portable shell scripting skills, Peter Seebach's book will make a fine addition to your library.

utemov, Fotolia

Beginning GIMP: From Novice to Professional

The blurb on the back cover says that the book covers GIMP 2.4, with notes about version 2.6. From the beginning, these notes are mixed in with the text and describe the differences between the feature in 2.4 and how the feature is managed in version 2.6. Because of this, the book serves those who cannot upgrade to GIMP 2.6. Chapter 2 is used to teach basic photo editing skills, such as scaling, saving files, and cropping, illustrated with lots of full-color graphics.

Although GIMP is an image editing application, not a drawing application, a whole world of "gimpers" use GIMP to create new images. For these users, Peck spends some time describing brushes.

GIMP has a number of really cool features. The "Advanced Compositing" chapter reveals some of the real power of GIMP, but you have to work up to it. Depending on how far you want to go, Peck includes a chapter on plug-ins scripting. This chapter reminds you that GIMP can be configured on the programmatic level to yield very specific results. That means you can write your own GIMP scripts to solve problems that address just your situation.

Appendix C shows you how to build GIMP from source, and Appendix D briefly describes GIMP 2.6, which was initially released in October 2008. Although only five pages long, it's not even a real taste of what's to come (or rather, what is current). In fact, this is the real shortcoming of the book. If you're using GIMP 2.4 and expect to for some time, this book is very impressive, but GIMP 2.6 is different enough to cause some "relearning" confusion. This part of writing books on technical subjects is painful because the literature always lags development, making it hard to keep current. That said, this weakness is not a show stopper.

By the way Peck described some of the GIMP "gotchas," I could tell that she is an advanced and long time user. But the organization of this book is what really sold me. Another book about GIMP published by No Starch Press had frustrated me because it wasn't particularly linear or complete, but while reviewing Peck's book, I learned a lot. Of the GIMP books I've looked at, Peck's is by far the most readable, informative, and authoritative. If you use GIMP or expect to, her book is the one to get, either to learn from the beginning or to build on what you know.