A Guide to \LaTeX{},
Document Preparation for Beginners and Advanced Users.
Helmut Kopka and Patrick Daly.
Addison Wesley 1993, 436 pages (including indexes),

\LaTeX{} Line By Line,
Antoni Diller.
John Wiley & Sons 1993, 291 pages (including index),

Whenever I read a book that describes a computer-
related topic I ask myself these questions: does this
book contain information I haven’t seen elsewhere,
does it explain things in a way that gives new insights?
And I do this especially with books on \TeX{} or \LaTeX{}.

In April 1992 I gave a favourable review of two books
about \LaTeX{}, two good books, written by Helmut
Kopka. However, they were written in German, which
made them inaccessible to a large portion of the \TeX{} user community. Fortunately the first of these two
books is now available in an English version: A Guide
to \LaTeX{}, Document Preparation for Beginners and
Advanced Users. This version was written by Helmut
Kopka and his colleague Patrick Daly at the German
Max-Planck-Institut für Aeronomie, and is based on
the fourth edition of \LaTeX{}, eine Einführung. The
English version is not a mere translation, but an interna-
tionalized version, where parts specific to the German
language have been replaced by descriptions of, e.g.,
the new font-selection scheme (NFSS) and the Babel
system.

As in the German original, Kopka and Daly follow Lam-
port’s basic notion that with \LaTeX{} the user is freed from
worrying about the layout while writing a piece of text. A Guide to \LaTeX{} has chapters on document and page
styles, displayed text, mathematical formulas, pictures,
user-defined structures and a few advanced features of
\LaTeX{}. In the appendices the authors treat the letter
document style, including possibilities for customiza-
tion, \Book\LaTeX{}, \SL\LaTeX{}, \LaTeX{} extensions, and the CM
and DC fonts.

Their book provides a wealth of information, and if
the updated English version of the companion volume
\LaTeX{}, Possibilities for Extensions will be published
by Addison-Wesley soon enough, there is practically
no need for further books about \LaTeX{}, since almost
everything beginning or advanced users need to know
is in one of these two books.

In contrast with this, Antoni Diller does not present
\LaTeX{} as a system for the production of structured doc-
uments. \LaTeX{} is a system that emphasizes structure
over presentation, and that is ideally suited for the pro-
duction of many instances of a certain type (class) of
document, for example office memoranda or scientific
articles. Instead, in \LaTeX{} Line By Line \LaTeX{} is pre-
tened as a collection of \TeX{} macros, with which one can
achieve all sorts of effects. Therefore, all examples and
explanations in the book use a mix of \LaTeX{} commands,
plain \TeX{} commands and \TeX{} primitives.

There is of course nothing wrong with this approach,
if the book is intended as a book on tips and tricks in
\LaTeX{} and plain \TeX{}. However, the preface of \LaTeX{} Line
By Line clearly shows that the book is intended
as a book for novice users, and attempts to explain all
about \LaTeX{}. In other words: it is intended as ‘your
first and only book on \LaTeX{}’.

There are no glaring errors or omissions in the book,
but it lacks structure, and the mix of \LaTeX{}, plain \TeX{}
and \TeX{} primitives will really confuse any novice user.
Because of this, \LaTeX{} Line By Line is not a book for
beginners, even though the author writes in the preface
‘This book can be read by someone who has no previous
knowledge of either \LaTeX{} or \TeX{}.’

In the introduction of this review column I explained
what the things are that I am looking for in a new com-
puter book: what makes this book special or unique?
What does it explain that I haven’t seen before, or in a
way I haven’t read before? For what special group
of people is it written? Antoni Diller’s book on \LaTeX{} is-
n’t special in any sense: it is just another poorly written book about \LaTeX, of which there are unfortunately a few too many already. \LaTeX{} Line by Line contains a lot of useful tricks, especially in the area of mathematics, but they are presented in an unstructured and confusing way. Also, the title is not appropriate: it is not a book about \LaTeX, but a book about how to combine \LaTeX, plain \TeX{} and \TeX{} primitives to achieve certain special effects in layout.

A detail: both books give the old address of the \TeX{} Users Group (that is a problem with putting addresses and similar factual information in a book).

Another detail: the book by Helmut Kopka and Patrick Daly has the nicest \LaTeX{} logo I have ever seen – including the one on Lamport’s book! No wonder, since the designer at Addison-Wesley called Barbara Beeton and asked her what it should look like. And I must say: she did a very nice job!

The logo on Antoni Diller’s book looks horrible, since the ‘A’ in \LaTeX{} is much too far to the right. Not only that, but it is also reproduced like that many times on the front cover. Add to this the poor design of the book and the fact that it was reproduced from low-resolution output, I am afraid that there is another book about \LaTeX{} on the market that I cannot recommend.