

An incessant search for new approaches

Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman! Adventures of a Curious Character

Richard P. Feynman (as told to Ralph Leighton)

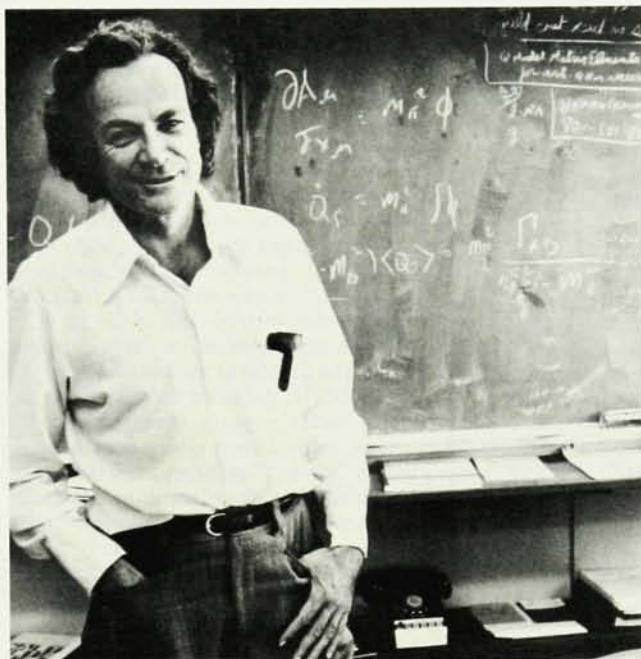
350 pp. Norton, New York, 1985. \$16.95

Reviewed by Malvin C. Teich

This may be one of the briefer reviews to appear in the pages of this magazine. The reason is simple: This book is *must* reading for every physicist who might entertain the notion that the codes and laws of social behavior merit the same kind of scrutiny as the laws of physics.

Richard P. Feynman is known to all of us as a superb physicist (Nobel Prize, 1965), an anti-philosopher (1964 Messenger Lectures at Cornell University, published as *The Character of Physical Law*, MIT Press, 1965) and the lucid originator of a now-classic series of undergraduate physics books (*The Feynman Lectures on Physics*, Addison-Wesley, 1963, 1964, 1965). Most recently, he has been an outspoken member of the Presidential commission investigating the Challenger space shuttle disaster: Newspaper headlines have reported his impromptu experiments with O rings in ice water during an open hearing, and we have seen him on the evening television news.

In this recent book, which has little to do with physics *per se*, Feynman is the autobiographical storyteller of his incessant search for new ways of approaching life's daily interactions. Some will find his tale of irreverent escapades and assaults on social convention outrageous and amusing, and others will find it simply outrageous. Feynman cherishes this aspect of his persona; as he does in physics, he revels in challenging the givens to see where they might yield. With almost child-like fascination, he approaches virtually every situation in the context that most of us reserve for scientific exploration:



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as an opportunity to carry out an experiment. He thrives on exploring the consequences of bringing his own approach to bear on whatever situation is at hand, be it scientific or social.

Feynman is an expert entertainer who loves an audience and always manages to garner one. This is because he is adventuresome and fearless—and essentially un-embarrassable. He is always out to enjoy himself; to him this means attempting to play every possible role. Although the book is virtually a litany of Feynman's tricks and ruses, it is nevertheless pervaded by an essential honesty, because Feynman is willing to expose candidly his own weaknesses and limitations.

If you are nonjudgmental in your appraisal of others, I think it likely that you will enjoy this book immensely. If, on the other hand, you respect decorum and formality in interpersonal relations, your response may be more guarded. In surveying a number of my colleagues, I discovered that a few were put off by Feynman's bravado and unbridled dedication to one-upman-

ship; however, all found the book fascinating. It is an entertaining piece of work and it provides a lively focus for discussion. I recommend it highly.

Gravitational Physics of Stellar and Galactic Systems

William C. Saslaw

491 pp. Cambridge U.P., New York, 1985. \$90.00

It is a pleasure to read this book, simply to appreciate the scholarship. A rigorous exposition of all the mathematical and physical tools needed to analyze gravitational phenomena in astronomy sounds like heavy reading. But the writing is so well crafted, and the insights and interconnections are so satisfying, that one cannot help enjoying it just for the sake of absorbing intellectually challenging information.

William Saslaw, as a teacher and an eminent, original researcher in these areas, is admirably qualified to write the book—the first comprehensive re-

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