

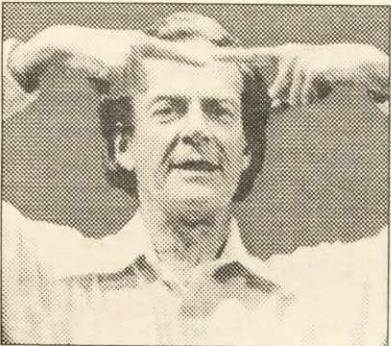
Feynman book not for everyone

by Colin MacDonald

There is some difficulty in reviewing a biography of a person you have never heard of. The problem is whether you will care enough about the subject to keep reading through a particularly slow portion of the book. Unfortunately, with James Gleick's *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* there are too many slow portions to keep the reader's interest. This is a shame really, because Richard Feynman turns out to have been one of the greatest physicists of all time and he has led a rather fascinating life.

Feynman himself is as complex as some of the physics he introduced to the world. In *Genius* we read of his early schooling and how he taught his own algebra class. We learn of his education at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and of his post-graduation work at Princeton. Throughout the book, the reader discovers more and more about Feynman's work in the scientific medium. We are reminded of

Feynman's genius, when reading of such things as his work with Robert Oppenheimer on the first atom bomb at Los Alamos to winning a Nobel prize for his theory of quantum electrodynamics.



The main selling point of this book is that it does not just deal with the intelligence of Feynman. It also deals with the personality of the man. The reader is delighted to read Feynman's quirky sense of humour that seems to be associated with all 'mad' geniuses, while at other times we are dismayed to read of how he picked up women in bars and seemed

to have a 'love 'em-and-leave 'em' attitude towards women after the passing of his first wife.

The problem is that these moments of introspective by Gleick into Feynman's personal life seem too impersonal and distant to make us believe he cares about Feynman as a person rather than as a scientist. Gleick uses an assortment of sources for his book because he had never met Feynman himself. Old notebooks, diaries and comments from numerous colleagues and contemporaries provide a wide range of insights into Feynman, but there are some topics that need Feynman's personal insights to make them work.

Further difficulties arise in the book with its wording. At some points it flows while Gleick attempts to describe Feynman's emotions concerning the death of his father. At other points, the language is rather disjointed as the book displays numerous mathematical equations and the related discussion of them. It seems that when we read Feynman's own words, we get a truer sense of the

man than when we read Gleick's interpretations of Feynman's notes and letters.

It should be noted that this book was read over a 4-5 week period. Perhaps this is the reason for finding parts of this biography boring, but I believe that the reverse is true: that because the book is boring in places, it is a long read. This book is recommended to those who have followed Feynman's career from its beginnings

at America's finest schools to his significant work in investigating the Challenger disaster in 1986. Anyone who enjoys reading about the scientific and the personal side of a genius is also encouraged to peruse this if they don't mind some difficult reading. To all others I would suggest two of Feynman's own works: *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!* and *What Do You Care What Other People Think?*

YOU DECIDE...

bored v. to feel tired or uninterested by being dull or tedious.

board n. a committee or meeting of directors.

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POINTLESS PONDERABLES

Answer:

The answer is to use 51 beers. From the first tray take 0 beers, from the second take 1, from the third 4, then 7, 13 and 24 from each of the remaining trays. The total weight of the 51 beer if all them were regular beer would be 510 ounces. So take the weight you measured (which will be less than 510 since there are some fake beers on the tray) and subtract it from 510. With this new number, find the unique combination of three of the above numbers of beers that add up to this remainder. Those trays are the ones with the draught beer on them. For instance, if you weighed your selection of beers and got a total of 489, and subtracted it from 510 you'd get a total of 21 ounces. The only combination of numbers that adds to 21 is 4, 7 and 13 so those trays are the ones with the draught beer. It's hard to understand why this works, but the secret is that you chose beers such that any combination of three always adds up to a unique number.

Question:

With all those free beers you scammed from last week, you decide to waste a few in a silly contest. One of your friends lines up 6 beer in a small circle. Then while you and your remaining two friends aren't looking, your third friend shakes up 3 of the beers. When you all turn back around all your friend tells you is that the 3 shaken beers are all in a row. The idea is to play a game of Russian Roulette, where one person will choose a beer and open it to see if it sprays suds all over them. The next person will choose the one immediately beside that one (going clockwise) and open it. The game will continue until a person is sprayed with suds. If you're given the choice, should you choose first or second to maximize your chance of not getting sprayed?

Please send you answers to this weeks Pointless Ponderables c/o *The Gazette*, and if you're the first correct answer we'll print your name in the next issue. Entries must be in by Monday at 4:00 pm, and must include your full name.

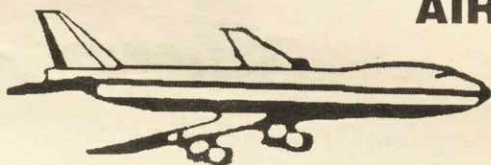
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