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“The World of One Physicist”

The quotation in the title above comes from the book “Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!: Adventures of a Curious Character,” by Richard P. Feynman (1985). Feynman shared the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1965 with Julian Schwinger and Shin'ichirō Tomonaga “for their fundamental work in quantum electrodynamics, with deep-ploughing consequences for the physics of elementary particles.” I do not know what that means either. He also played the bongos, with vigor. Neither can I do that.

Feynman, a quintessentially mischievous and fun-loving character, besides being an acclaimed physicist, might be best known for two of his most serious involvements. First, he was one of the many scientists and engineers who worked on and built three live atomic bombs at Los Alamos, New Mexico in the 1940s during World War II. One was tested at the Trinity site in New Mexico, one dropped on Hiroshima from the Enola Gay, and one on Nagasaki. That is as serious as things get. The Manhattan Project story is told brilliantly in Richard Rhodes Pulitzer Prize-winning book “The Making of the Atomic Bomb” (1986). Second, it was he who gave, quite in public during the Rogers Commission hearings, the correct explanation to the world about why the Challenger Space Shuttle tragically blew apart in flight on January 28, 1986. It was a simple explanation actually, done by demonstration, about failed O-rings at ice-water temperatures, not requiring any profound dive into physics. Not everyone was eager to face the truth of the matter. So he did.

That brings me to Feynman’s own books, which you can see from their titles as not deep dives into physics at all. That was the special thing about this physicist. He not only could win a Nobel Prize in physics, but he also was a plain-speaking and funny character as real as life itself. He tells the Challenger postmortem, diagnosis story with his usual flair in “What Do You Care What Other People Think?: Further Adventures of a Curious Character” (1988). You get more sense of his light and honest approach to everything with Contents headings such as “Who the Hell is Herman?” and “Feynman Sexist Pig!”.

“What Do You Care?” was preceded by “Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!: Adventures of a Curious Character” (1985). According to his biographer and friend Richard Leighton’s Preface: “The stories in this book were collected intermittently and informally during seven years of very enjoyable drumming with Richard Feynman.” There is humor, warmth, “wonderfully crazy things” that happen to him, innocent mischief, and physics at the margins. Only at the margins. That is what makes his own books so unique. They are at once a delight to read, but also a window for the career-minded into the life of a professional physicist, not a window often afforded by other physicists. Feynman is special in this respect as in all others.

There is a more traditional, bibliographical account of his life too. It is James Gleick’s “Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman” (1992). And, Leighton, his biographer, wrote “Tuva or Bust!: Richard Feynman’s Last Journey” (1991), a moving final chapter in Feynman’s life, a crazy quest to get to almost inaccessible Tannu Tuva,

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just for the fun of it. So, taking each of the books mentioned here, all dealing with stories about or told by Richard Feynman, the aspiring physicist has a full perspective about what it might be like to spend one's life in physics. And even should you not be so inclined to physics, this man's personal stories are wonderful bedtime reading. You will smile a lot; you will be in for a great treat, like no other. That is a promise.

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