



Classic Feynman: All the Adventures of a Curious Character

By Richard P. Feynman

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An omnibus edition celebrating a great scientific mind and a legendary American original including a live recording.

Richard Feynman (1918-1988) thrived on outrageous adventures. In the phenomenal national bestsellers *"Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!"* and *"What Do You Care What Other People Think?"* the Nobel Prize-winning physicist recounted in an inimitable voice his adventures trading ideas on atomic physics with Einstein and Bohr and ideas on gambling with Nick the Greek, painting a naked female Toreador, accompanying a ballet on his bongo drums, solving the mystery of the *Challenger* disaster, and much else of an eyebrow-raising, hugely entertaining, and astounding nature. One of the most influential and creative minds of recent history, Feynman also possessed an unparalleled ability as a storyteller, a delightful coincidence celebrated in this special omnibus edition of his classic stories. Now packaged with an hour-long audio CD of the 1978 "Los Alamos from Below" lecture, *Classic Feynman* offers readers a chance to finally hear a great tale in the orator's own voice.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Not many Nobel laureates in physics amuse themselves by playing the bongo drums and cracking safes. But the capricious personality of Richard Feynman contained more than a few surprises. And it is the sheer unpredictability of this high-spirited genius--partial to the company of Las Vegas showgirls when not in the Caltech lecture hall--that has attracted so many readers to his disarmingly candid memoirs, *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!* and *What Do You Care What Other People Think?* Now chronologically collated into one omnibus volume (packaged with a CD of one of Feynman's signature lectures), these memoirs display perhaps the most flamboyant personality in modern science. So colorful are some of the episodes here gathered that readers might forget (as Freeman Dyson remarks in his perceptive foreword) the careful and painstaking theorist who probed the atom with rare insight. Still, this collection does include Feynman's account of how--in quite casual circumstances--he spontaneously devised scientific experiments to determine the characteristics of ants' feet and humans' noses. Though the essays are available elsewhere, the autobiographical structure adds interest for the author's many fans. *Bryce Christensen*
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About the Author

Richard P. Feynman was born in 1918 and grew up in Far Rockaway, New York. At the age of seventeen he entered MIT and in 1939 went to Princeton, then to Los Alamos, where he joined in the effort to build the atomic bomb. Following World War II he joined the physics faculty at Cornell, then went on to Caltech in 1951, where he taught until his death in 1988. He shared the Nobel Prize for physics in 1965, and served with distinction on the Shuttle Commission in 1986. A commemorative stamp in his name was issued by the U.S. Postal Service in 2005.

Ralph Leighton, Richard Feynman's great friend and collaborator, now lives in northern California.

From The Washington Post

Anyone who writes knows how difficult it is to come up with a good title. Lynne Truss published a moderately enjoyable ramble about punctuation but somehow had the genius to call it *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*. John Berendt's new book is *The City of Falling Angels* -- certainly a haunting phrase, though still a notch below the viscerally thrilling words *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. In like fashion, I'm sure the sassy titles of the two Richard Feynman volumes here gathered together helped more than a little to make bestsellers out of the tape-recorded memoirs of a physicist: *Surely, You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!* (1985) and *What Do You Care What Other People Think?* (1988). It didn't hurt, of course, that both books were also enormously, irresistibly entertaining.

Twenty years on, there are three main reasons to welcome this complete edition of, as the subtitle has it, "all the adventures of a curious character." First off, it's packaged with a CD on which we can hear Feynman relating some of his serio-comic escapades at Los Alamos during the development of the atomic bomb. Nearly everyone who knew this playful and eccentric Nobel laureate seems to comment on his colloquial, self-amused, New York-y way of talking. So, as Ralph Leighton suggests in his preface: "If you listen to the CD first, you can become familiar with Feynman's voice and speaking style, and then hear him in your head as you read the book." Second, *Classic Feynman* rearranges the anecdotes in roughly chronological order and adds a superb foreword by the physicist Freeman Dyson and an affectionate afterword by Alan Alda (who played the Caltech scientist in the play "QED"). Dyson, in particular, underscores Feynman's place in

modern physics. Despite his unexpected avocations (playing the bongos, drawing nudes, studying Mayan hieroglyphs, hanging out with showgirls in Las Vegas), "the central theme in his life was long, slow, hard work, slogging away at a difficult scientific problem with all his strength until it was solved." Feynman, emphasizes Dyson, always "took endless trouble to get the details right. He said that the job of a scientist is to listen carefully to nature, not to tell nature how to behave."

And what, you may ask, is the third reason to acquire Classic Feynman? Simple. Those old copies of his books have almost certainly been read to pieces or passed on to teenage children thinking about careers in science. You probably need a handsome, well-bound new edition. There aren't that many bestsellers of the 1980s about which one can say that.

As a boy, Richard Feynman (1918-1988) was clearly something of a young Tom Edison, and in his anecdotes one can occasionally detect the peculiar self-deprecating smugness of the naturally smart kid. In truth, though, Feynman's great trait isn't his intelligence; it's his passion to understand, his sheer doggedness, and this is what makes reading him so inspiring. Maybe we're each stuck with our own particular less-than-genius I.Q., but any of us can learn to be more determined, can learn to focus his or her energies on a difficult problem and eventually solve it. Feynman watches a dinner plate tossed vertically into the air like a Frisbee and begins to wonder about its wobble. This leads to years of research, and ultimately a Nobel Prize in physics. His sister sends him a letter written in Chinese characters -- she's studying the language -- and he goes off and learns enough Chinese calligraphy to write back, "Elder brother also speaks." (He adds, "I'm a real bastard -- I would never let my little sister score one on me.") Whether it's breaking into safes at Los Alamos (to show the need to beef up security), learning how to play in a Brazilian samba band, taking a year off to work in a biology lab on viruses or laboriously reviewing high school math textbooks, Feynman sets his life upon each task and never lets go. When one day he realizes he's yearning for a drink in the middle of the afternoon, he simply stops drinking forever.

His inquiring character was first formed by his father, who taught him that knowing the names of things wasn't the same as knowing them. The resulting independence of mind is then firmly ratified by his first wife, Arlene, the most wonderful person in this wonderful book. She and Feynman fall in love while in high school and agree to marry. But while they are engaged, Arlene is diagnosed with a fatal disease that they both know will kill her within five or six years. Feynman marries her anyway, against the wishes of both families, and loves her passionately till the end. She clearly deserves his devotion. It was Arlene, in the hospital in Albuquerque, who sends her husband pencils engraved, "RICHARD DARLING, I LOVE YOU! PUTSY." Feynman confesses to being embarrassed to use them at Los Alamos. You see, there are all these famous scientists and. . . . Incredulous, Arlene says, "Aren't you proud of the fact that I love you?" And then, without a pause, adds the words that Richard Feynman came to live by, long after Arlene was dead: "WHAT DO YOU CARE WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK?"

Indeed, Feynman doesn't give a damn about propriety, convention or what Mrs. Grundy approves. When he arrives for his first teaching job at Cornell, he has trouble locating a place to stay and nearly sleeps in a pile of leaves. Years later, at an international conference, the Nobel laureate, knowing that the Hiltons and Marriotts are all booked up, happily reserves a room for a week in a rundown hotel catering mainly to prostitutes and their clients. As he once told himself as a graduate student, "You have no responsibility to live up to what other people think you ought to accomplish. I have no responsibility to be like they expect me to be: it's their mistake, not my failing."

Perhaps the best example of Feynman's self-understanding lies in his attitude toward money. After some happy years at Cornell, Feynman is lured to Caltech, where he is even happier. But one day the University of Chicago offers him "a tremendous amount of money, three or four times what I was making." He writes back:

"After reading the salary, I've decided that I must refuse. The reasons I have to refuse a salary like that is I would be able to do what I've always wanted to do -- get a wonderful mistress, put her up in an apartment, buy her nice things. . . . With the salary you have offered, I could actually do that, and I know what would happen to me. I'd worry about her, what she's doing; I'd get into arguments when I come home, and so on. All this bother would make me uncomfortable and unhappy. I wouldn't be able to do physics well, and it would be a big mess. What I've always wanted to do would be bad for me, so I've decided that I can't accept your offer."

As one reads along, Feynman's own mantra-like motto rings forth again and again: "This could be interesting." The phrase echoes through his mind when he sees a beautiful Japanese girl lingering outside his hotel room or when he accepts the task of trying to understand why the Challenger blew up as it rose into space. (The last hundred pages of this omnibus recount how Feynman slowly determined what went wrong on that heartbreaking day and his reactions, largely negative, to Washington political life.) Feynman spoke most of these stories into Ralph Leighton's cassette tape recorder, and we must be grateful for his friend's care and intelligent editing. Above all, and notwithstanding all the racy and amusing anecdotes, the scientist's conversation could be mined just for its wisdom about how we might live:

"I learned from her [his mother] that the highest forms of understanding we can achieve are laughter and human compassion."

"That's the way the world was: You worked long hours and got nothing for it, every day."

"Have no respect whatsoever for authority; forget who said it and instead look at what he starts with, where he ends up, and ask yourself, 'Is it reasonable?' "

"Our responsibility is to do what we can, learn what we can, improve the solutions, and pass them on. It is our responsibility to leave the people of the future a free hand. . . . If we suppress all discussion, all criticism, proclaiming 'This is the answer, my friends; man is saved!' we will doom humanity for a long time to the chains of authority, confined to the limits of our present imagination. It has been done so many times before."

Like Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson or Robert Craft's diaries about Stravinsky, Classic Feynman brings a highly unusual man to vivid, blazing life. So if you somehow missed the original two books back in the '80s, here's yet one more reason to acquire Classic Feynman -- the chance to rectify your error. Good scientists, after all, learn from past mistakes.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Steven Huckins:

Now a day people that Living in the era everywhere everything reachable by interact with the internet and the resources in it can be true or not involve people to be aware of each info they get. How a lot more to be smart in obtaining any information nowadays? Of course the solution is reading a book. Reading through a book can help folks out of this uncertainty Information especially this Classic Feynman: All the Adventures of a Curious Character book because this book offers you rich information and knowledge. Of course the details in this book hundred % guarantees there is no doubt in it as you know.

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