



The Strangest Man: The Hidden Life of Paul Dirac, Mystic of the Atom

By Graham Farmelo

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Paul Dirac was among the greatest scientific geniuses of the modern age. One of Einstein's most admired colleagues, he helped discover quantum mechanics, and his prediction of antimatter was one of the greatest triumphs in the history of physics. In 1933 he became the youngest theoretician ever to win the Nobel Prize in Physics. Dirac's personality, like his achievements, is legendary. The *Strangest Man* uses previously undiscovered archives to reveal the many facets of Dirac's brilliantly original mind.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Paul Dirac (1902–1984) shared the Nobel Prize for physics with Erwin Schrödinger in 1933, but whereas physicists regard Dirac as one of the giants of the 20th century, he isn't as well known outside the profession. This may be due to the lack of humorous quips attributed to Dirac, as compared with an Einstein or a Feynman. If he spoke at all, it was with one-word answers that made Calvin Coolidge look loquacious. Dirac adhered to Keats's admonition that Beauty is truth, truth beauty: if an equation was beautiful, it was probably correct, and vice versa. His most famous equation predicted the positron (now used in PET scans), which is the antiparticle of the electron, and antimatter in general. In 1955, Dirac came up with a primitive version of string theory, which today is the rock star branch of physics. Physicist Farmelo (*It Must Be Beautiful*) speculates that Dirac suffered from undiagnosed autism because his character quirks resembled autism's symptoms. Farmelo proves himself a wizard at explaining the arcane aspects of particle physics. His great affection for his odd but brilliant subject shows on every page, giving Dirac the biography any great scientist deserves. (*Sept.*)

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Review

American Scientist

“[A] highly readable and sympathetic biography of the taciturn British physicist who can be said, with little exaggeration, to have invented modern theoretical physics. The book is a real achievement, alternately gripping and illuminating.”

Natural History

“Farmelo’s eloquent and empathetic examination of Dirac’s life raises this book above the level of workmanlike popularization. Using personal interviews, scientific archives, and newly released documents and letters, he’s managed – as much as anyone could – to dispel the impression of the physicist as a real-life Mr. Spock, the half Vulcan of Star Trek.”

Science

“[A] consummate and seamless biography.... Farmelo has succeeded masterfully in the difficult genre of writing a great scientist’s life for a general audience.”

Physics Today

“[An] excellent biography of a hero of physics.... [I]n *The Strangest Man*, we are treated to a fascinating, thoroughly researched, and well-written account of one of the most important figures of modern physics.”

Kirkus *Starred Review*

“Paul Dirac was a giant of 20th-century physics, and this rich, satisfying biography does him justice.... [A] nuanced portrayal of an introverted eccentric who held his own in a small clique of revolutionary scientific geniuses.”

Library Journal

“Farmelo did not pick the easiest biography to write – its subject lived a largely solitary life in deep thought. But Dirac was also beset with tragedy... and in that respect, the author proposes some novel insights into what shaped the man. This would be a strong addition to a bibliography of magnificent 20th-century physicist biographies, including Walter Isaacson’s *Einstein*, Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin’s *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, and James Gleick’s *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*.”

American Journal of Physics

“[A] very moving biography.... It would have been easy to simply fill the biography with Dirac stories of which there is a cornucopia, many of which are actually true. But Farmelo does much more than that. He has met and spoken with people who knew Dirac including the surviving members of his family. He has been to where Dirac lived and worked and he understands the physics. What has emerged is a 558 page biography, which is a model of the genre. Dirac was so private and emotionally self-contained that one wonders if anyone really knew him. Farmelo’s book is as close as we are likely to come.”

About the Author

Graham Farmelo is a Senior Research Fellow at the Science Museum, London, and Adjunct Professor of Physics at Northeastern University. He lives in London, England.

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