



Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track: Letters of Richard P. Feynman

Richard Feynman , Michelle Feynman

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"One of the towering figures of twentieth-century science, Richard Feynman possessed a curiosity that was the stuff of legend. Even before he won the Nobel Prize in 1965, his unorthodox and spellbinding lectures on physics secured his reputation amongst students and seekers around the world. It was his outsized love for life, however, that earned him the status of an American cultural icon - here was an extraordinary intellect devoted to the proposition that the thrill of discovery was matched only by the joy of communicating it to others." In this career-spanning collection of letters, many published here for the first time, we are able to see this side of Feynman like never before. Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track covers a dazzling array of topics and themes, scientific developments and personal histories. With missives to and from scientific luminaries, as well as letters to and from fans, family, students, crackpots, as well as everyday people eager for Feynman's wisdom and counsel, the result is a de facto guide to life, and eloquent testimony to the human quest for knowledge at all levels.

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Perfectly Reasonable Deviations from the Beaten Track: Letters of Richard P. Feynman Details

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Cassandra Kay Silva says

I am addicted to Feynman. Everything about him, everything he writes, anything about his life its a total addiction! Can't get enough. Surely your Joking Mr. Feynman was still the best though.

Kadri says

Very enjoyable (if reading someone else's letters is appropriate :))

Ari says

As the subtitle indicates, this is an anthology of Feynman's letters. This is one of the relatively few books that I have read based on a published review -- in this case, Freeman Dyson's review, anthologized in "Scientist as Rebel."

I started browsing in these a few nights ago, on the theory of "I'd just read a few". A few hours later, I realized three things. First, I was utterly absorbed. Second, Feynman had a wonderfully clever and crisp prose style. Third, he was impressively thoughtful, sensitive, and wise in his dealings with others. My only caveat about the book is that the context on both physics and biography is limited -- you will get much more out of the book if you have browsed in "Surely You're Joking..." or at least read the Wikipedia page about Feynman.

Many of the letters are highly quotable, but here is my favorite.

A former student had written to Feynman, and had commented that he wasn't doing anything important or notable. Feynman responded with a long and thoughtful letter. Here are two paragraphs that struck me very forcefully.

"Unfortunately, your letter made me unhappy for you seem to be a truly sad. It seems the influence of your teacher has been to give you a false idea of what are worthwhile problems. The worthwhile problems are the ones you can really solve or help solve, the ones you can really contribute something to. A problem is grand in science if it lies before us unsolved and we see some way for us to make a little headway into it. I would advise you to take even simpler, or as you say, humbler, problems until you find some you can really solve easily, no matter how trivial. You will get the pleasure of success, and of helping your fellow man, even if it is only to answer a question in the mind of a colleague less able than you. You must not take away from yourself these pleasures because you have some erroneous idea of what is worthwhile."

"You say you are a nameless man. You are not to your wife and to your child. You will not long remain so to your immediate colleagues if you can answer their simple questions when they come into your office. You are not nameless to me. Do not remain nameless to yourself -- it is too sad a way to be. Know your place in the world and evaluate yourself fairly, not in terms of the naive ideals of your own youth, nor in terms of

what you erroneously imagine your teachers's ideals are."

David says

This is my favorite of all the various Feynman books, because it's not cluttered up with Feynman playing the lovable, picaresque, eccentric. Instead of the slightly buffoonish public persona (or "curious character") he (or his publishers) seemed to feel compelled to present in his various autobiographical writings, the letters speak for themselves. And, to my mind, the picture they paint is ultimately far more flattering than that which he himself tried to present.

Sure, there are lapses - he is not always charitable towards colleagues, he is sometimes impatient, and there is that characteristic unwillingness to suffer fools gladly. But the traits that shine through again and again in these letters, so much so that one has to think of them as his defining characteristics are generosity and graciousness. Over and over he takes the time to respond to strangers, who have written him out of the blue, with letters that are astonishing, both for their empathy as well as for the obvious care that he spent in writing them.

He may have preferred to be considered a rebel, a free-thinker, a bit of a rogue. And he certainly relished the opportunity to twit the imagination-free defenders of the status quo. But these letters establish, beyond doubt, that at heart Feynman was a true mensch.

Lorena says

Feynman has become a cult figure for some, though I saw no evidence to support why this might have happened. The book was so thick, and he seemed so ordinary, I couldn't wrap my mind around the attraction.

Sarah Kelleher says

What a cool dude. I happened upon this book on my dad's shelf and it gave me giggles and chuckles, And it made me cry big dripping tears that landed in fat globs on the page. Feynman was awesome.

Stian says

A collection of letters by Richard Feynman, ranging from private things to his loved ones to tips and answers to fans and students from all over the world.

The part with his letters to his wife is extremely beautiful, and there is in particular one I'd like to share. Arline Feynman, the love of Richard's life, died of tuberculosis on the 11th of June 1945. Roughly one year and a half later Richard wrote a letter to her, and sealed it. It was opened after his death in 1988. Here it is:

October 17, 1946

D'Arline,

I adore you, sweetheart.

I know how much you like to hear that — but I don't only write it because you like it — I write it because it makes me warm all over inside to write it to you.

It is such a terribly long time since I last wrote to you — almost two years but I know you'll excuse me because you understand how I am, stubborn and realistic; and I thought there was no sense to writing.

But now I know my darling wife that it is right to do what I have delayed in doing, and that I have done so much in the past. I want to tell you I love you. I want to love you. I always will love you.

I find it hard to understand in my mind what it means to love you after you are dead — but I still want to comfort and take care of you — and I want you to love me and care for me. I want to have problems to discuss with you — I want to do little projects with you. I never thought until just now that we can do that. What should we do. We started to learn to make clothes together — or learn Chinese — or getting a movie projector. Can't I do something now? No. I am alone without you and you were the "idea-woman" and general instigator of all our wild adventures.

When you were sick you worried because you could not give me something that you wanted to and thought I needed. You needn't have worried. Just as I told you then there was no real need because I loved you in so many ways so much. And now it is clearly even more true — you can give me nothing now yet I love you so that you stand in my way of loving anyone else — but I want you to stand there. You, dead, are so much better than anyone else alive.

I know you will assure me that I am foolish and that you want me to have full happiness and don't want to be in my way. I'll bet you are surprised that I don't even have a girlfriend (except you, sweetheart) after two years. But you can't help it, darling, nor can I — I don't understand it, for I have met many girls and very nice ones and I don't want to remain alone — but in two or three meetings they all seem ashes. You only are left to me. You are real.

My darling wife, I do adore you.

I love my wife. My wife is dead.

Rich.

PS Please excuse my not mailing this — but I don't know your new address.

Weinz says

To my dearest R.P. Feynman:

Our love affair (read: my infatuation with you) started blooming years ago when I happened upon your lectures. Your wit, charm and intelligence was the triple combination that wooed me into bewilderment. For years I devoured anything I could find about you. I swooned over tales of your bongo skills. Your grace and

humility when accepting the Nobel made my heart flutter. So when I came across your letters nothing could keep me from them. It has been a rare joy the past week to be deep inside your writing filled with humor, intellect and your unique charisma. When faced with the nutzoz that come with fame you handled them in a way that left them dazzled and slowly putting the pitchforks away. What can I say? I'm a sucker for a man with brains who makes me laugh.

Very Truly Yours,
A very smitten Michelle

James Swenson says

As you can tell by the title, *Perfectly Reasonable Deviations...* is a collection of letters written by Nobel-Prize-winning physicist Richard P. Feynman. To me, it was intriguing, and there are letters here that would appeal to anyone, but I think you'd have to be (like me) a Feynman fan already, anxious to know everything about the man, to enjoy reading the book from cover to cover.

Anyone considering reading this book should first read *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman! Adventures of a Curious Character*. After they enjoy that, they should try *What Do You Care What Other People Think? Further Adventures of a Curious Character*. If they also like that, then they might try *Perfectly Reasonable Deviations....* Among titles not written by Feynman, I enjoyed the biography *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* by James Gleick, and have heard very good things about *No Ordinary Genius* by Christopher Sykes, which daughter Michelle Feynman recommends in her introduction to *Perfectly Reasonable Deviations....* If, after reading those, one still wants more, the letters will be waiting here.

Kristin says

Know those cheesy movie reviews that say "I laughed, I cried" and make you think that the reviewer never bothered to even watch the film? Yeah? Well, I actually did read this book. And it really did make me laugh. And it really did make me cry. And it really did teach me some physics and a few life lessons as well. The book covers about 50 years of Feynman's life from grad school through death via letters to and from him. It's a wonderful, compelling read and one that I'd recommend over and over and over again. And one that I know I'll eventually read over and over and over again.

Petras says

Richard Feynman yra ne vieno „geeko“ idealas: fizikas, Nobelio premijos laureatas, labai sveiko požiūrio ? visoki? pompastik? ir biurokratij? (nors kaip tik kiti sako, kad „pasik?l?s“), aštriai juokingas ir ?žvalgus. Kitos jo knygos („Surely, You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman“, „What Do You Care What Other People Think“) yra labiau anekdotini? pasakojim? rinkiniai, o ši – dokumentin? jo laišk? rinktin?. Gal d?l to j? perskai?ius Feynman atrodo labiau žmogiškas ir ne tiek užriet?s nos?: kartais jis pats pripaž?sta, jog savo pasisakymais yra perspaud?s, atsiprašo, supranta savo klaidas.

Labai jaudinantys ir jo asmeniniai laiškai savo mylimosioms: pirmoji žmona sunkiai sirgo ir ji anksti mir?.

Apie antrąją žmoną beveik neužsiminta, mat knygos sudarytoja – Feynmano sivaikinta dukra, kuri atsirado jau jam gyvenant su trečia žmona. Sakoma, jog neilgai trukusi santuoka nutrūko dėl to, kad antroji žmona labai greit suprato, jog neįmanoma gyventi su žmogumi, kuris rytais pabudęs spręsdžia diferencialines lygtis. Matyt, tiesos tame galėjo būti.

Tam, kam Richard Feynman yra sektinas pavyzdys, ši knyga nuostabiai atskleis jo vairiapusį asmenybę. Tie, kas dar jo nepažįsta, tikriausiai pažintų turėtų pradėti kitomis jo knygomis.

Christina says

Yeah, sometimes Feynman's a cocky jerk, but aren't we all? These letters are just so darn lovely and human. For as many (often justified) snotty replies he gives, there are just as many instances of unexpectedness, tenderness and support for people in the same quest to figure things out.

About a comment he made in the early '60s about the minds of women, he received loads of letters calling him sexist, an idiot, etc. When, in the more enlightened times of 1987, he was asked permission to reprint this article, Feynman touched on the issue with wry humor:

"Dear Professor Jodl:

You have my permission to translate and publish the article in your journal. But the world has changed--and I made a remark about 'a girl instructing another one how to knit argyle socks.' Could you add a footnote, by the author (me) to that paragraph: 'How wonderfully the world has changed. Today conversations among women on analytic geometry are commonplace.'

Sincerely,
Richard P. Feynman"

Arjun says

Very good, and likely the best I've read of/by/on Feynman. I've always felt that the Feynman depicted in *Surely You're Joking* and Gleick's *Genius* felt pained – maybe a bit larger than life, if you will. While it's perfectly understandable, the picture of a fun-loving, quirky, womanizing physicist always felt overly romanticized. Reading his unadulterated communication felt voyeuristic, but my model of Feynman evolved and felt altogether more humanistic.

An absolutely brilliant physicist and a gem of a human, though he has his moments of anger, misunderstanding, and even in some cases, pettiness (the overly blithe attitude that's been associated with him always felt a bit off). Admittedly, some of his communication with his first wife made me tear up – I can only hope to feel the same level of connection with someone. While 50% or so of his letters felt trivial, the few letters I'm going to be re-reading for years made this worth the slog. Highly recommended for Feynman enthusiasts.

Nick Black says

Very likely the finest book to emerge from the Feynman crap-publishing machine from which a public can't seem to buy enough (only QED The Strange Theory of Light could compare, and that's kind of a apples-and-oranges or, if you'll allow, baryons-and-leptons deal). An incredibly well-edited selection of great intimacy and scope, giving a much more insightful and indeed sympathetic look into the great man than his self-serving, posturing autobiographical releases.

Aram says

I listened to this on cd. Professor Feynman had a fantastic sense of himself and his strengths, and weaknesses, and it is interesting to hear how he lived his life through his own words. The letters that he wrote, and were wrote to him, are well narrated and given a real life to them. It shows a man who knew exactly who he was and what honor, truth, and scientific research means without becoming egocentric or self-involved. Truly a fantastic audiobook and person.
