As a scientist, Albert Einstein is undoubtedly the most epic among 20th-century thinkers. Albert Einstein as a man, however, has been a much harder portrait to paint, and what we know of him as a husband, father, and friend is fragmentary at best. With Einstein: His Life and Universe, Walter Isaacson (author of the bestselling biographies Benjamin Franklin and Kissinger) brings Einsteins experience of life, love, and intellectual discovery into brilliant focus. The book is the first biography to tackle Einsteins enormous volume of personal correspondence that heretofore had been sealed from the public, and its hard to imagine another book that could do such a richly textured and complicated life as Einsteins the same thoughtful justice. Isaacson is a master of the form and this latest opus is at once arresting and wonderfully revelatory. --Anne Bartholomew
Amazon.com: What kind of scientific education did you have to give yourself to be able to understand and explain Einstein's ideas?

Isaacson: I've always loved science, and I had a group of great physicists—such as Brian Greene, Lawrence Krauss, and Murray Gell-Mann—who tutored me, helped me learn the physics, and checked various versions of my book. I also learned the tensor calculus underlying general relativity, but tried to avoid spending too much time on it in the book. I wanted to capture the imaginative beauty of Einstein's scientific leaps, but I hope folks who want to delve more deeply into the science will read Einstein books by such scientists as Abraham Pais, Jeremy Bernstein, Brian Greene, and others.

Amazon.com: That Einstein was a clerk in the Swiss Patent Office when he revolutionized our understanding of the physical world has often been treated as ironic or even absurd. But you argue that in many ways his time there fostered his discoveries. Could you explain?

Isaacson: I think he was lucky to be at the patent office rather than serving as an acolyte in the academy trying to please senior professors and teach the conventional wisdom. As a patent examiner, he got to visualize the physical realities underlying scientific concepts. He had a boss who told him to question every premise and assumption. And as Peter Galison shows in Einsteins Clocks, Poincare's Maps, many of the patent applications involved synchronizing clocks using signals that traveled at the speed of light. So with his office-mate Michele Besso as a sounding board, he was primed to make the leap to special relativity.

Amazon.com: That time in the patent office makes him sound far more like a practical scientist and tinkerer than the usual image of the wild-haired professor, and more like your previous biographical subject, the multitalented but eminently earthly Benjamin Franklin. Did you see connections between them?
Isaacson: I like writing about creativity, and that’s what Franklin and Einstein shared. They also had great curiosity and imagination. But Franklin was a more practical man who was not very theoretical, and Einstein was the opposite in that regard.

Amazon.com: Of the many legends that have accumulated around Einstein, what did you find to be least true? Most true?

Isaacson: The least true legend is that he failed math as a schoolboy. He was actually great in math, because he could visualize equations. He knew they were nature’s brushstrokes for painting her wonders. For example, he could look at Maxwell’s equations and marvel at what it would be like to ride alongside a light wave, and he could look at Max Planck’s equations about radiation and realize that Planck’s constant meant that light was a particle as well as a wave. The most true legend is how rebellious and defiant of authority he was. You see it in his politics, his personal life, and his science.

Amazon.com: At Time and CNN and the Aspen Institute, you’ve worked with many of the leading thinkers and leaders of the day. Now that you’ve had the chance to get to know Einstein so well, did he remind you of anyone from our day who shares at least some of his remarkable qualities?

Isaacson: There are many creative scientists, most notably Stephen Hawking, who wrote the essay on Einstein as Person of the Century when I was editor of Time. In the world of technology, Steve Jobs has the same creative imagination and ability to think differently that distinguished Einstein, and Bill Gates has the same intellectual intensity. I wish I knew politicians who had the creativity and human instincts of Einstein, or for that matter the wise feel for our common values of Benjamin Franklin.

More to Explore

Benjamin Franklin: An American Life

Kissinger: A Biography
Personal Review: Einstein: His Life and Universe by Walter Isaacson
If you don't know much about Albert Einstein and probably aren't going to get a PhD in Physics anytime soon, but want to know more about this historical figure, this is certainly the book for you.

I found Issacson's easygoing writing style to be very helpful during the discussions on Einstein's relativity theory and his philosophical battle against the randomness in emerging Quantum mechanics. In truth, one cannot understand this great man without some knowledge of these areas of physics, though a typical reader won't want to understand their entirety.

In addition to his genius, it was wonderful to learn about Einstein's astounding curiosity, his perseverance towards an academic career, his steadfast rejection of nationalism, his incredibly simple approach to his personal life, and his commitment to the idea that everything in nature has a purpose and an underlying structure--that "God doesn't play dice".

At the same time, Einstein was a man, and he had many shortcomings. It was particularly discouraging to learn about his failings as a husband and as a father. His outspoken naiveté regarding global politics also remind the reader of today's society where celebrities in one field often feel the power/right to voice their opinions in another where they have little in the way of training or expertise.

I found his assessment of America in a letter to his son, particularly timely, paraphrasing: "in America everything is mass produced, even lunacy. But at the same time, everything fades away very quickly."

This is a book that is for mature readers due to it's length, some of it's subject matter and some language.

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Einstein: His Life and Universe by Walter Isaacson 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!