



Jim Ottaviani's comic-strip biography of Richard Feynman conveys the physicist's colourful personality.

Q&A Jim Ottaviani Comic creator

Jim Ottaviani is the author of several comic books about famous scientists. His latest, with illustrations by Leland Myrick, covers the life of physicist Richard Feynman, who is known for his bongo playing and enthusiastic lectures as much as his work on quantum mechanics. Ottaviani explains why a graphic-novel format is a perfect match for such a zany character.

Why did you decide to write comic books about science?

In 1997 I was looking for comics I wanted to read. I love a good Spider-Man story, but after you have read a hundred you don't really need another. I

had been a nuclear engineer, then worked as a librarian. Interested in the names behind the equations and discoveries, I read the biographies of physicist Niels Bohr and others. There were some great stories there. That got me wondering: why aren't they in comics?

Why did you choose Richard Feynman?

Every pantheon needs a trickster god. We are now far enough removed from the early foundations of quantum physics that



we mythologize the people and events involved. And we like to have characters in our mythologies. Feynman slots beautifully into that. He worked hard to make his personality accessible to a broad audience, when many of his peers did not. Feynman was astute, even aggressive, about creating a myth about himself, turning his life into a sort of performance art.

Was Feynman's interest in drawing and diagrams also relevant?

With a scientific audience, sometimes you have to defend the use of images. Flip through *Physical Review*: there are a lot of pictures. We communicate science through images as well as words, so it wasn't a leap for Feynman to want to learn to draw. There are quotes from

Feynman
JIM OTTAVIANI.
ILLUSTRATED BY
LELAND MYRICK
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him about the beauty of a flower being accessible to both the artist and the scientist in different ways, and how they add to each other. So the comic format is valid.

Why did you decide not to present his life chronologically?

We asked: what would Feynman do? In his books, Feynman wrote in short scenes and acts, presenting some things out of order. A continuous narrative — born, lived, died — did not serve the person or the story. So using anecdotes seemed natural. Choosing the anecdotes, choosing when to break the continuity, that was when it got more difficult. Our intention was to make him seem more human.

The words and pictures in your book tell different aspects of the story. Why did you choose such a challenging format?

Leland and I assumed that the readership would be willing to read both the words and the pictures. We wanted to bring something new, to enrich the experience. Otherwise, why do another book about Feynman? We wanted to go beyond James Gleick's 1992 book *Genius* or Feynman's own stories.

What is the subject of your next book?

It is aimed at a young readership, and is about primatologists Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey and Biruté Galdikas, with a good helping of their mentor Louis Leakey. The book is targeted at readers aged between 10 and 12, mainly girls. It is nowhere near as in-depth as *Feynman*, because it is about half the length and covers three people. It is about becoming a scientist, and what it means to be one in a world that may not be prepared for you to do that sort of thing, as a woman.

Do you also touch on that issue in the Feynman book?

Yes, with Feynman's sister, Joan Feynman. We give a hint of the difficulties she faced in pursuing her career in astrophysics.

What are you trying to show in your books?

Feynman created a world in science that he enjoyed living in. Then he realized that he could have more by creating another world, where he appreciates art, plays the bongos, acts in plays or sometimes acts the fool. And this is what I have been trying to show with all the books — the humanness of science. Science is a serious endeavour. It is the old Spider-Man saying: "With great power comes great responsibility." But at the same time, scientists should appreciate the joy of it. I hope scientists will get from Feynman the idea of a full life, lived creatively, and the fun it can produce. ■

INTERVIEW BY MARC WEIDENBAUM