



Stephen Hawking, the subject of both a new memoir and a documentary film.

## PHYSICS

# A cosmological life

Robert P. Crease weighs up two takes on Stephen Hawking — including the theoretical physicist's own.

True to its name, Stephen Hawking's autobiography *My Brief History* is a model of brevity, at just 20,000 words. A new documentary about the renowned theoretical physicist, *Hawking*, takes longer to watch than the book does to read. These separate projects add little to our understanding of Hawking, but do feed our insatiable curiosity about him.

Both vehicles do a creditable job of reviewing the outlines of Hawking's story, which is a compelling one. In 1963, while a graduate student at the University of Cambridge, UK, Hawking learned that he had motor neuron disease (known in the United States as Lou Gehrig's disease). In 1970, he began work on the theory of black holes, predicting in 1974 that they emit radiation and could therefore potentially evaporate: 'Hawking radiation' is probably his most significant scientific contribution. Gradually losing mobility and speech, he survived thanks to an indomitable spirit, devoted assistants and increasingly sophisticated technology. (He wrote the memoir using a sensor attached to his glasses that responds to cheek-muscle twitches.) Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (Bantam, 1988) is surely the most popular science book ever. And he has become, to the public, the greatest living scientist — as well as a media

## My Brief History

STEPHEN HAWKING  
Bantam: 2013.

## Hawking

DIRECTED BY STEPHEN FINNIGAN  
Cambridge Film Festival, UK, 19 September 2013.

magnet who enjoys making outrageous claims ("Philosophy is dead").

Meanwhile, Hawking has a solid, if not superhuman, reputation among scientists. In 1999, a *Physics World* survey asked eminent physicists to name the five physicists they thought had made the most significant contributions. Of the 61 named — 11 of them living — Hawking received only one vote.

*My Brief History* does not do what we expect of a memoir. It does not take the reader behind any scenes. Hawking narrates his life non-introspectively, celebrating its triumphs and burnishing its sensitive moments. It is a concise, gleaming portrait, not unlike those issued by the public relations department of an institution. "Not knowing what was going to happen to me or how rapidly the disease would progress, I was at a loose end," he writes of his reaction to being diagnosed. Nor is he reflective about his relationships with his ex-wives Jane Wilde and Elaine Mason. "My marriage

to Elaine was passionate and tempestuous," he writes. "We had our ups and downs."

The book provides no revelations, deep insight, messy details or score-settling, and does not explore his celebrity status. Hints of emotion are rare. At one point he recalls thinking himself a tragic figure, and begins to listen to Wagner. At another he remembers seeing a boy in the hospital bed next to him die of leukaemia. "Whenever I feel inclined to be sorry for myself, I remember that boy." You sense something like a soul behind Hawking's dispassionate account, but, like a black hole, its existence has to be deduced from external indications.

*Hawking*, directed by Stephen Finnigan, is a good celebrity biopic. In it, Hawking narrates many of the same events as in *My Brief History*, often in the same words. But the film is diverting in a way that the book is not: we get to see clips of Hawking's appearances as himself or in cartoon form on US television shows such as *Star Trek* and *The Simpsons*. We hear Wagner and Pink Floyd on the soundtrack, watch re-enactments of episodes from Hawking's early life, and see a snapshot of Hawking with President Obama and First Lady Michelle.

Hawking's synthesized voice can lend an aura of gravitas to words that would come off as platitudes on the page. "When you are faced with the possibility of an early death, it makes you realize that life is worth living," he says. Occasionally, even the synthesizer cannot rescue his pronouncements from sounding naive: "Sometimes I wonder if I am as famous for my wheelchair and disabilities as I am for my discoveries." The film concludes with spectacular footage from the 2012 Paralympics in London, at which Hawking opened the ceremonies.

These two offerings add to a growing list that do offer new knowledge about the cosmologist. Jane Hawking's *Travelling to Infinity* (Alma Books, revised, 2008) divulges aspects of their relationship. Kitty Ferguson's *Stephen Hawking: An Unfettered Mind* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) explores his life and illness. Hélène Mialet's *Hawking Incorporated* (University of Chicago Press, 2012) analyses the networks of people, media and technologies without which there would be no Stephen Hawking as we know him.

Mialet demolishes the popular myth of Hawking as a solitary genius. But it is an irresistible one. "Thank you for coming on a journey through my world," Hawking says at the conclusion of the documentary. In truth, *Hawking* is a carefully stage-managed tour of only part of that world, yet it is a skilful, entertaining and moving trip nonetheless. ■

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