



How to Build a Universe: An Infinite Monkey Cage Adventure

Brian Cox , Robin Ince

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The Infinite Monkey Cage, the legendary BBC Radio 4 programme, brings you this irreverent celebration of scientific marvels. Join us on a hectic leap through the grand and bizarre ideas conjured up by human imagination, from dark matter to consciousness via neutrinos and earthworms.

Professor Brian Cox and Robin Ince muse on multifaceted subjects involved in building a universe, with pearls of wisdom from leading scientists and comedians peppered throughout.

Covering billions of concepts and conundrums, they tackle everything from the Big Bang to parallel universes, fierce creatures to extraterrestrial life, brain science to artificial intelligence. How to Build a Universe is an illuminating and inspirational celebration of science – sometimes silly, sometimes astounding and very occasionally facetious.

How to Build a Universe: An Infinite Monkey Cage Adventure Details

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Author : Brian Cox , Robin Ince

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Simon Fletcher says

An enjoyable lark of a read. Great for dipping in and out of. Ince provides the light relief to Cox's sometimes ponderous text.

Howard says

I guess when you are trying to popularise science, you inevitably end up dumbing down the method of delivery, if not the actual science. I picked this book up on a whim at a bookstore, and I guess a glance through the book would have made me put it down again, but it was in a plastic wrap so I bought it based on the back cover blurb alone.

Anyway, bits of it were interesting and some less so. It seems a pretty commercial enterprise and comes across as anything other than a serious book on science. But I guess if it gets just a few kids interested enough in cosmology to take it up as an academic challenge it will have done a good job.

But for me all the doodles and other peripheral illustrations were rather off putting, and the folksy humour permeating the book did nothing to endear me further.

Aimee says

I love podcasts and I'm a sucker for those inevitable Christmas tie-in books, especially if (like this one) they are available as audiobooks. This one was a lot more dry than usual IMC episodes though, especially the section on building a universe which was hard to follow (to be fair I tend to listen to books while driving so I wasn't giving it my full attention). Overall though it was good, with some interesting details of behind-the-scenes physics arguments between Brian and Robin.

Chris Harris says

An absolute delight. The good-humoured nature of the radio show translates easily to print, and Robin and Brian manage to start bickering through the medium of footnotes almost immediately.

This is a joyful and enthusiastic celebration of science that will present you with all sorts of thought-provoking material, such as explaining how the observable universe, whilst only being 13.8 billion years old, manages to be currently some 93 billion light years across.

And yes, the question of whether strawberries ever die rumbles on...

Robin says

I really enjoyed this book

Bob Small says

Fun, 'formative. It contains a great round up of the cold/hot big bang model and how all the evidence interlocks. I read most of it sitting on the beach at Durdle Door, in the warm sunshine. What a day... But the poor strawberry....

Kristina says

I found this via Ricky Gervais's Deadly Sirius podcast when Robin plugged it. Luckily my library had a copy on the Libby app so I was able to borrow it. I didn't even realise there was a radio show (currently working my way through that now!).

Anyway, brilliant book for non expert's and general science fans like myself. Much easier to understand than some of the other astrophysics books I've read recently. Wish I'd started with this one but as Robin points out you can't just read one astrophysics book and expect to be an expert, you just need to read them and eventually it will start to make more sense!

Andrew Rangel says

It sounds a bit square of me, but I almost didn't buy this book because I saw that it had pictures in it. I can't help but chuckle at the thought after reading this magnificent book, but I like something that has more substance. How to build a universe delivered the whole package.

In it you will find bit sized anecdotes that are almost too good not to share with friends, alongside deep and meaningful discussions about the core of science. I couldn't recommend this book more to someone that is a non fiction reader looking for a light hearted spin around the science world. I have had zero experience with their podcast and that didn't limit the book at all for me.

Tyson Adams says

I'm going to bake some chocolate muffins from scratch, so this book should be useful.

Professor Brian Cox, Robin Ince, and Alexandra 'Sasha' Feachem are the team behind the popular The Infinite Monkey Cage, a BBC science show that pairs scientists and comedians for laughs and education. From 2009 they have produced +100 shows covering all sorts of topics. This book encapsulates some highlights and essays around their favourite topics and common science communication issues* they have covered in that time.

From the opening forewards to the covering of Schrodinger's Strawberry I was heartily entertained. As a science nerd and fan of comedy, this book seems to have been written specifically for me. It actually left me feeling a bit annoyed that I haven't, as yet, listened to The Infinite Monkey Cage show, despite having been aware of it for quite some time. So I guess I'll be rectifying that soon.

What I like most about this approach to science is that it doesn't seek to sex up science (or dumb down, depending upon the preferred flavour of marketing), but instead make it accessible and entertaining. There is a line between those two that too often those in the media can't tell the difference between. Science is interesting, but it is complicated, it is often dry, and communicating scientific knowledge as done here is hard to do.

* Yes, I do mean how people aren't willing to honestly engage with science, either through pseudoscience co-opting, or denial of evidence, or wanting certainty instead of the probability that science offers.

Margherita Serafini says

This is an open-mindingly incredible book about our universe and how it works in its very detailed (yet simplified) theories, fascinating curiosities and original ideas on how to percieve a universe full of question marks and unknown faces. It is so weird yet curious how little we know about what surrounds us and still manage to discover more and more though time. How can something come out of nothing? This is what fascinates me most and pushed me further deep into the reading as I was kind of struggling in the middle paragraph. The great thing about it is its incredible power to inspire deeper research and plant curiosity into the minds of its readers. It was definitely a bit of a challenge for me to read since it was my first scientific read ever, but it inspired me to keep reading and looking for answers whether that is in books or in unbeaten paths discovering new theories and possibly getting progressively closer to the truth, taking one step closer to discovering a future of endless possibilities for our species and many others and for the discovering of places and life into the apparently dark and cold space that surrounds us. It inspired me to keep looking and fighting to contribute in the helping of future generations and species as well as it made me deeply interested in physics, astrophysics and cosmology pushing me to keep studying them as they might be what I want to pursue as a life carreer. I would definitely reccommend though language is not quite easy at first. I personally loved it. It completely changed my perspective of the world and made me consider everything in a ore methodic, scientific way.

Erin says

There were times this made my eyes cross. But it was really really funny, and I wish I remembered all the really good quotes so that I could throw them in this review.

Yes, I am a Prof Brian Cox fan, so listening to his dulcet tones was quite enjoyable. The other cohort was a bit more brash, and I found myself turning the audio down a bit because it was too jarring compared to Brian.

It brought a tear to my eye finishing listening to this on the day Professor Stephen Hawking died, especially as they quoted him in this.

Also, reading this on Pie day was amusing.

I wish this was a better review than it is, because it deserves much more. All I can say is I really enjoyed it.

Michael Legge says

Shame he dies in the end.

Rob Frampton says

A brilliant distillation of topics from the 'Infinite Monkey Cage' radio series, this may just be the most accessible science book Brian Cox has produced, and that is due in no small part to the back-and-forth-with Robin Ince and the quirky cartoon-like illustrations that pepper the text. It balances the serious with the humorous to compelling effect. "Life, Death and Strawberries" is both entertaining and enlightening about what constitutes being alive, and the section which dismantles homeopathy is a must-read. "We are often less comfortable with evidence-based scrutiny than with a pleasing anecdote that lends credence to our preconceived views on what we wish something to be."

It's not all fun, though, and the chapter on cosmology makes for difficult reading because, let's be honest, to properly understand the subject you'll need better maths than most of have got. That's not to say it's not worth reading, and I'll definitely be going back to it to prise out some more detail, but it's definitely mind stretching stuff. It does, however, contain m favourite quotation from the book: "We are temporary assemblies of ten billion billion billion atoms, and in a century or less they will all be returned for recycling. But for the briefest of moments these atoms are able to contemplate themselves... Our purpose should be to extend their moment in the light as best we can", which is almost Sagan-like in its beauty.

The book ends with a cartoon landscape 'Guide to the Year 2050', of which the highlight is, "Social media has been replaced by a small and aggressive robot that perpetually screams abuse at you." I don't want to criticise, Brian and Robin, but I think we're already there...

Colin Murtagh says

I love the radio show, I'm just not overly sure about the book.

The radio show normally takes a topic, and with the help of guests tries to explain it. With Robin Ince there partially as an "everyman" character and partially to lighten the load with a touch of humour.

I'm not so sure this works so well in book format. There's several sections, looking at what death is, difficult to know if you're a strawberry, infinity, cosmology, thermodynamics, quantum mechanics, and space exploration amongst other things.

The actual written parts themselves are clearly explained, although some prior knowledge would help, never getting to the stage where it feels like a text book. It's interesting, well written, and has a few humorous side conversations going on.

The issue I have is more of the formatting. I'm actually quite pleased I read this as a paper book as opposed to a kindle. There's lots of little doodles throughout the book, which are quite fun, hoverere there's also a lot of

strange formatting and weird page layouts. Pages with one large font sentence printed sideways for example. It is heavily illustrated, but not all the illustrations work, and on a kindle will probably look really awkward. It's a brave experiment but just doesn't work. Saying that, if you're looking for what a popular science book should read like, you can't go too far wrong with this.

Jo says

I try to read something sciency every now and again because it's not a subject I'm terribly good with and I hope to attempt to educate myself. This was a great book for doing that although some of the particle physics went over my head.
