



## **Dreams of Earth and Sky**

*Freeman Dyson*

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## Dreams of Earth and Sky Freeman Dyson

In this sequel to *The Scientist as Rebel* (2006), Freeman Dyson—whom *The Times* of London calls “one of the world’s most original minds”—celebrates openness to unconventional ideas and “the spirit of joyful dreaming” in which he believes that science should be pursued. Throughout these essays, which range from the creation of the Royal Society in the seventeenth century to the scientific inquiries of the Romantic generation to recent books by Daniel Kahneman and Malcolm Gladwell, he seeks to “break down the barriers that separate science from other sources of human wisdom.”

Dyson discusses twentieth-century giants of physics such as Richard Feynman, J. Robert Oppenheimer, Paul Dirac, and Steven Weinberg, many of whom he knew personally, as well as Winston Churchill’s pursuit of nuclear weapons for Britain and Wernher von Braun’s pursuit of rockets for space travel. And he takes a provocative, often politically incorrect approach to some of today’s most controversial scientific issues: global warming, the current calculations of which he thinks are probably wrong; the future of biotechnology, which he expects to dominate our lives in the next half-century as the tools to design new living creatures become available to everyone; and the flood of information in the digital age. Dyson offers fresh perspectives on the history, the philosophy, and the practice of scientific inquiry—and even on the blunders, the wild guesses and wrong theories that are also part of our struggle to understand the wonders of the natural world.

## Dreams of Earth and Sky Details

Date : Published April 21st 2015 by New York Review Books

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Author : Freeman Dyson

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# From Reader Review Dreams of Earth and Sky for online ebook

## Dustin Hartley says

This is a book of book reviews, and a very good one at that!

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## Philipp says

A follow-up to Dyson's earlier *The Scientist as Rebel*, both collections of essays from the NYRB that start out as book-reviews and end up as general reflections.

This one wasn't as much fun as the earlier collection - mostly because the *grandiosity* just isn't here. In *The Scientist As Rebel*, Dyson speculates about how to use genetically modified plants to terraform asteroids - there's a little bit like that here in *Dreams of Earth and Sky*, notably in speculation about gene editing tools becoming common playsets for children, but that's it - what you get instead is more Dyson putting himself into the contrarian's position to the mainstream: environmentalism is too much "doom and gloom", global warming is overstated because the models are inaccurate, plants may take care of the majority of excess CO<sub>2</sub>, passive detectors may be more useful to focus on than particle accelerators, etc.

What still makes these essays enjoyable:

- most reviews are about books on the history of science (or more general, the history of thought), which is a great way to find some new books to read
- Dyson himself had contact to so many "greats" of science that to each biography he writes about he can "donate" a few additional personal viewpoints or anecdotes. He visited some of Wittgenstein's courses as an undergrad and hated him back then, he worked under Oppenheimer for 20 years, or this wonderful Feynman anecdote:

He never showed the slightest resentment when I published some of his ideas before he did. He told me that he avoided disputes about priority in science by following a simple rule: "Always give the bastards more credit than they deserve." I have followed this rule myself. I find it remarkably effective for avoiding quarrels and making friends. A generous sharing of credit is the quickest way to build a healthy scientific community.

I'm stealing that rule!

- One of the best essays is the one summarizing the US military's "secret" report on insurgents called *Oregon Trail*, which he had access to when he visited the RAND corporation:

The most important conclusion of the Oregon Trail study was that the rebels usually won if the empire spent most of its effort on military operations, but that the rebels usually lost if the

empire spent most of its effort on political and social responses to grievances. It was obvious to anyone who read Oregon Trail that the American war in Vietnam was likely to be a losing proposition. Unfortunately, very few people had a chance to read it. By one of the worst abuses of the secrecy system that I ever encountered, the military authorities stamped the whole thing secret.

Wish I could read it! Even Wikipedia has only a dead link to a non-existing article...

(This summary is part of a favorable review of Gladwell's David and Goliath, interestingly enough)

Recommended for: People looking for something smart to read

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### **Repix says**

Igual que en libro anterior, El científico rebelde, este contiene artículos, reflexiones, reseñas, etc. que están muy bien, muy entretenidas, y otras muy aburridas o que a mi no me interesaban.

Resumiendo: desigual.

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### **Phillip says**

Dyson has a wonderful mind.

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### **Svetlana says**

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### **Garrett Haynes says**

A decent read. It is a collection of book reviews by Dyson, mostly historical, slightly biographical, and generally informative of the basics of scientific history. If you are looking for something deep or technical this not the book for you. If you want a book that is easy to read in sections or with chapters you can skip and you are a fan of Dyson this will be a good read.

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### **Dylan says**

Good overview and history behind of a variety of modern topics in science, technology, and politics. I really like that Dyson offers responses to readers comments at the end of each section. Sometimes the sections leave you wanting a little bit more info, but fortunately he does leave references.

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## Harvey says

A new hero for me.

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## Mills College Library says

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## Tuck says

nice essays, well written and informative, about history of science and philosophy of scientific inquiry. dyson is big huge well spoken cheerleader for science, the study and teaching of, history of etc. 3stars you say instead of 5? whats up? too too cheerleady for me. im already a fan. but some very interesting bits about feynman, steven weinberg, dirac, digital, and mistakes made and how to learn from that, and serendipity. there has been a whole industry of writing about dyson's ideas of serendipity, look it up.

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## Bill Leach says

This book is a set of essays by Dyson where he presents the theme of a book then adds his own thoughts on the subject. Some of the chapters I found interesting where:

"Our Biotech Future" references articles by Carl Woese, wherein he raises the question of when Darwinian evolution started. Woese postulates a golden age of pre-Darwinian life, when horizontal gene transfer was universal and separate species did not exist.

"The Dream of Scientific Brotherhood" discusses John Gribban's book "The Fellowship" which charts the history of the Royal Society on London from Gilbert, Galileo and Bacon through it's establishment in 1660.

Frank Wilczek's book "Lightness of Being" provides an overview of modern particle physics, and provides a basis for Dyson's thoughts on the LHC and whether too much is being expected from it.

Margaret Wertheim's book "Physics on the Fringe" looks at amateur scientists who carry out investigations of ideas that are out of mainstream science. Dyson talks of two friends who were dissidents - Eddington and Velikovsky. Returning to Wertheim a comparison is made between a conference on string theory at Santa Barbara and a Natural Philosophy Alliance (NPA) conference in Long Beach where amateurs presented on their theories. With string theory not being supported by experiment, Dyson reflects that "Both groups are telling stories of imagined worlds, and neither has an assured way of determining who is right." and "The fringe of physics is not a sharp boundary with truth on one side and fantasy on the other."

Daniel Kahneman's book "Thinking, Fast and Slow" proposes that the mind has two mechanisms for decision making. One is essentially subconscious, making fast decisions based on past experience. The other

is that of making decisions based upon conscious thinking, critical examination of evidence and reasoning - but is costly in time and energy. Kahneman goes on to typify various bias that result from the fast decisions, with the intent that better understanding will help minimize mistaken judgments.

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### **Jim says**

This is a collection of book reviews by Freeman Dyson. I was not familiar with Dyson before reading this book. He is a 91 year old physicist and several of the books are about people he knew well. He is famous for contrarian views. The reviews are not typical reviews, he often talks about what wasn't in the book instead of what the book was about and gives background about the topic instead of critiquing the book. I found his asides interesting. Sometimes he goes off on a silly digression, particularly when he talks about predictions of human future. But overall I enjoyed the book.

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### **D.L. Morrese says**

This collection of essays and extended reviews of recent books on science and scientists includes several anecdotes from the author's life. The last century has been a particularly transformative time in science, and Freeman Dyson lived through much of it. His impressions and interpretations can be quite interesting.

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### **Anton says**

This is only notionally a book of book reviews. In truth it's a set of insights and opinions from a one-in-a-million intellect who's stood at the nexus of science for most of the 20th century.

Freeman Dyson provides insights into the nature of human inquisitiveness, politics, vanity, the future and many other topics. Rewarding read.

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### **Patrick says**

Freeman Dyson is a genius and has so many original ideas in this collection of essays I couldn't even count them all. All are explained with a clarity and brevity that will leave you impressed. The subjects are varied and of great interest to most of a scientific bent.

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