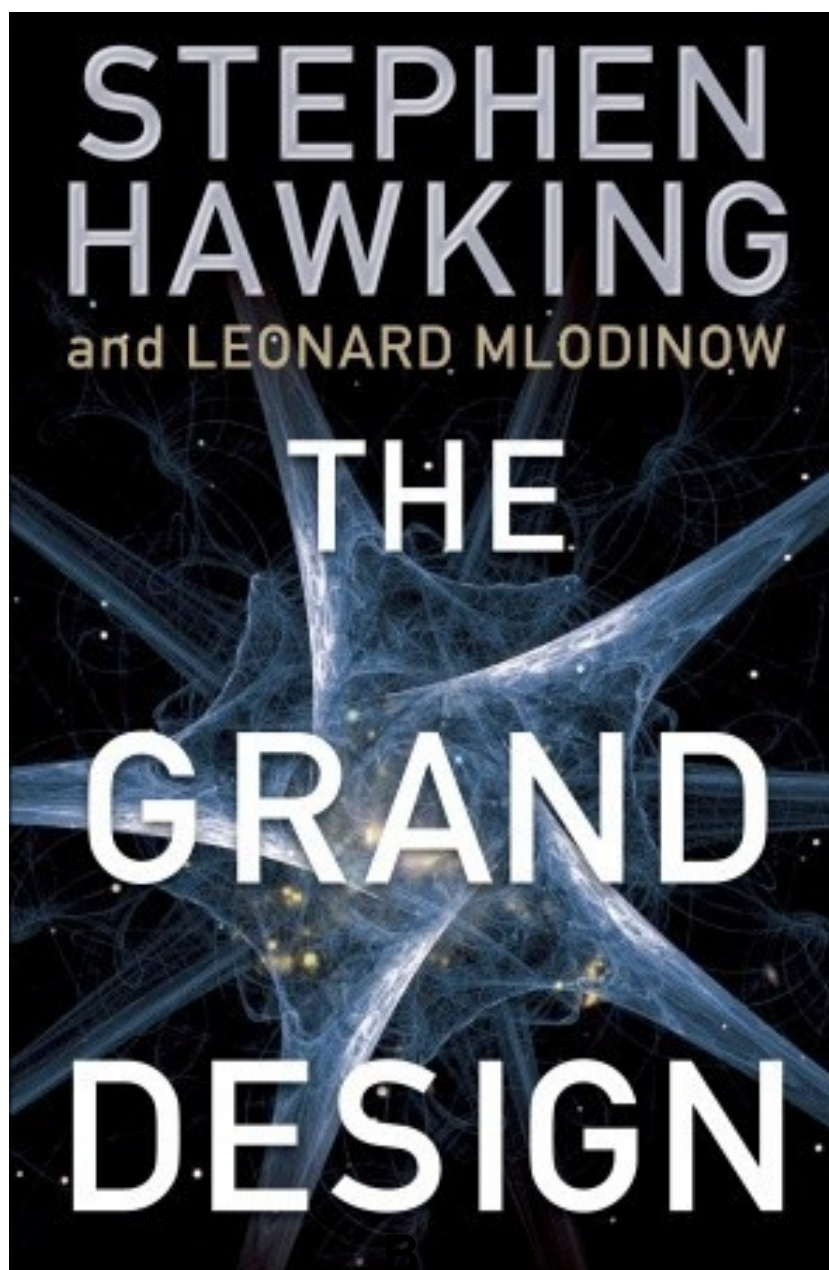


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Stephen Hawking

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What people Say:

Cindy

It's a funny thing being a cosmologist in the greater Los Angeles area. Back when I was a partying single graduate student, I'd frequently hit the town for some fun. Inevitably I'd meet someone, strike up a conversation, and they might ask me what I did for a living.

"Oh, I'm a cosmologist."

"Cosmetologist? Cool, do you do make-up for movies?"

"Um...not unless rouge is a component of dark matter." (ba-da-bum)

"..."

"I make detectors and use them to study the origins and geometry of our universe."

"

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"Cosmetologist? Cool, do you do make-up for movies?"

Kemper

When this book was released, I was reading a story about it on-line, and the headline said something like: "Stephen Hawking Says There Is No God". Then I made the critical mistake of looking at the user comments under the story. It was the usual collection of badly spelled notes from ignorant asshats who tried to say that stupid science didn't know nuthin or that it was all Obama's fault.

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But one in particular caught my eye. It was by someone who undoubtedly dabbles in both neurosurgery and rocket science in his-or-her spare time, and it said something along the lines of: "THAT'S WHYY STEVN HAWKENS IS IN WHEELCHAR!!!!!! BECAUSE HE DON'T BELIVE IN GOD!! JEBUS IS PUNSINGHING HIM!!!"

Which got me thinking about why anyone would expect a guy who has suffered from ALS and been confined to a wheelchair for most of his life to believe in God? Among the many people who have just cause to question that a loving God is waiting in heaven to dish them out a heaping plate of Sky Cake, I'd think that Stephen Hawking would be one of them.

It's that kind of thinking that Hawking and Mlodinow take on here. Some people will point out the odds against any kind of life existing on Earth and say that God must have set it all in motion and made this place just for us and that it's proof of an intelligent creator. Or you listen to a scientist like Hawking who points out that there's whole multiverses where life doesn't exist and that the only reason we know how lucky we are is that we exist to appreciate how lucky we are. Basing the idea that there must be some kind of intelligent creator simply because we're here is bad science.

And that's Hawking's point. This isn't an anti-God book, it's a pro-science and pro-critical thinking book. Hawking does a nice job in the early chapters of giving a brief overview of the development of the scientific method and how beliefs in mysterious beings have been incorporated into theories and then debunked over the centuries. Then he lays out the flaws in the models that insist that there has to be some kind of creator being in the mix.

Even though Hawking does his best to dumb down the quantum physics that he claims proves his point and provides lots of handy pictures and graphics to help out the math and science challenged like me, it's not exactly light reading. It's short at 181 pages, and that helps, but while I'm fascinated by this kind of stuff, I'm also stupid enough that I had to read over some sections a couple of times before I thought I had a handle on it.

It's enlightening and a nice overview of both the scientific method and quantum physics, but unfortunately, I can't see any of the people who should read this actually picking it up.

Manny

Look John look!

See the pop science bestseller.

See the glossy paper.

See the large font.

See the wide margins.

See the world-famous physicist.

See the ghostwriter.

See the double slit experiment!

Maybe you have seen it before.

But you can never see the double slit experiment too many times.

Marvin

Stephen Hawking is smarter than I am. That's no big feat because two of my cats are smarter than I am. The other cat is a certifiable idiot. But Hawking is way smarter than I am.

is Hawking's explanation, more or less, about why the universe is the way it is. The answer comes down to M-theory which is more of a combining of explanations than one single unifying theory. Many reviewers seem to think Hawking is saying there is no God but he really seems to be stating that God is i

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James

Note: I'm a physicist, so my experience reading this was colored by my training.

Hawking and Mlodinow begin by declaring, on the very first page, that "philosophy is dead," and that modern science alone must carry our search for knowledge into the future. Several pages later, they launch into a purely philosophical discussion on the nature of reality and discovery. Dead, indeed. In my opinion, this accurately colors the entire book, and if you can't stomach this kind of hard-and-fast science for

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The authors quickly (but sufficiently) review the history of scientific discovery from roughly the Ionians to Newton, to give the reader a context on the history of scientific philosophy and discovery. After this, they slow down to cover the subject material contained in what a physicist calls "modern physics," roughly the period 1800-present. This is about the time I started really noticing the liberties taken in the simplification of explanations, and basic factual mistakes. I jotted down a few notes on these, which I've tacked on the end of my review, as the actual text has no references or a published list of errata (none that I can find, anyhow) for a diligent reader to check against. As an aside, some of these errors sent me to the acknowledgments section, where I was somewhat perturbed to see that only ONE other physicist was thanked for reading and helping shape the book. This does not necessary mean he was the only one to have done so, but I found it disconcerting all the same. The last half-dozen sci-fi books I've read have had more scrutiny by scientific eyes than this book.

After establishing the models developed by modern physics (quantum mechanics and quantum field theories at large, QED and electroweak unification, QCD, special/general relativity, and a few other notable points), the text turns to a discussion of cosmology. There are some points of merit here, notably the explanation of the cosmic microwave background, and what it means to look at the CMBR and see anisotropy, but only a little bit. The thought-stimulating bits of the text largely lie in this section of the book: One note I jotted down was a reminder to look into whether the anisotropy of the universe can be considered a form of symmetry breaking.

After this whirlwind history of modern physics, the last few chapters dive into the nitty-gritty details of trying to answer some of the "big questions." Things like "why are we here?" Very light on science, very heavy on philosophy, again in contrast to the opening of the book. A lot of textual real estate is donated to considering the question of whether the universe in which we live is "fine tuned" for us

(the "strong" anthropic principle). The facts presented (e.g. the sensitivity of stellar fusion and heavy element generation to "small" changes fundamental constants) are interesting, the discussion much less so. An example:

The authors claim (p. 160) "change the universe just a bit, and the conditions for our existence disappear!" On the surface, this appears to be a reasonable statement. They even quantify it; a change of 0.5% in the strength of the strong force, or a change of 4% in the strength electric (Coulomb) force, would destroy nearly all the carbon and oxygen (generally, if not universally, accepted in astrobiology as prerequisites for what we would recognize as life) in the universe's stars. However, to call this an example of a "little" change in the universe based only on these values is, in my opinion, a completely unsupported assertion. My technical understanding of cosmology is limited, but in the framework Hawking and Mlodinow present, the typical "drift" in these parameters could be several orders of magnitude less (or more!) than the values the authors have chosen. If there is a quantitative basis for their argument, it should have been presented here. I suspect that there is instead no basis.

Another point of particular interest in this section was the claim that the sum of masses of the quarks that make up a proton (2 ups, 1 down) is very nearly the value that maximizes the number of stable nuclei that can be constructed. On this, I cannot give an entirely educated opinion (my own study of QCD is extremely limited). If true, this is in my opinion the single strongest argument for a "fine-tuned" universe contained in this book. Unless there is some reason to think that the maximum number of nuclei is a preferred configuration of the universe (I can't think of one myself, as it is of more chemical than cosmological significance), then the fact that our universe lives so "close" to this configuration is an unusual coincidence.

- If you want to learn about string theory, find another book. I recommend some of Brian Greene's work - particularly "The Elegant Universe", which is written in a similar style, but substantially longer and better, with unique thought experiments and examples (unlike the familiar cliches and talking points Hawking and Mlodinow fall back on).