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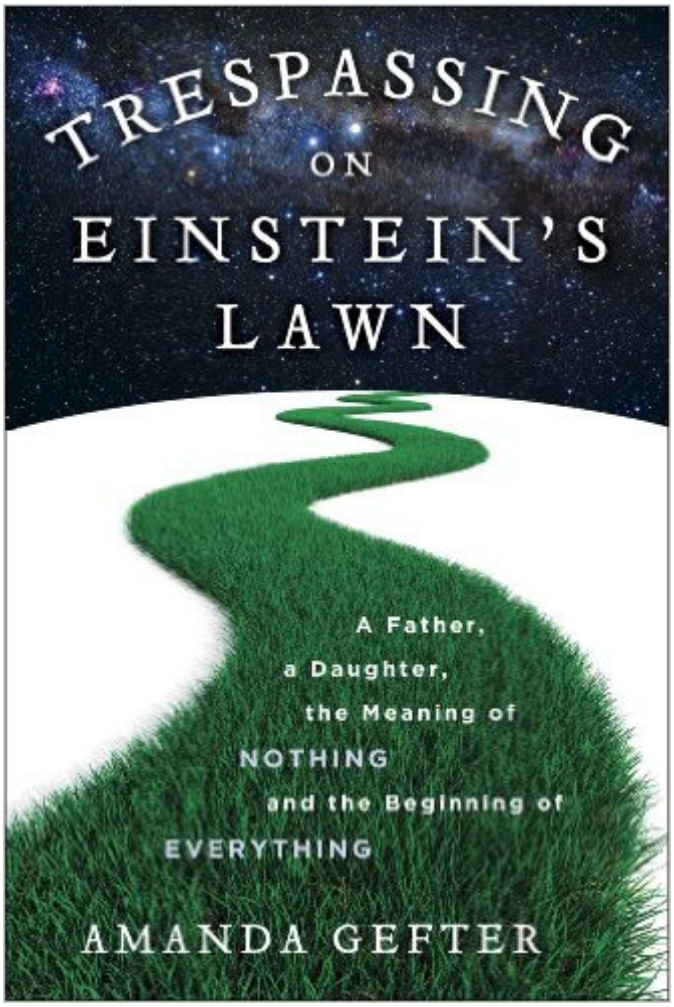
Trespassing On Einstein's Lawn: A Father, A Daughter, The Meaning Of Nothing, And The Beginning Of Everything



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Synopsis

NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BYÂ KIRKUS REVIEWSIn a memoir of family bonding and cutting-edge physics for readers of Brian Greeneâ ™s The Hidden Reality and Jim Holtâ ™s Why Does the World Exist?, Amanda Gefter tells the story of how she conned her way into a career as a science journalistâ ”and wound up hanging out, talking shop, and butting heads with the worldâ ™s most brilliant minds. Â At a Chinese restaurant outside of Philadelphia, a father asks his fifteen-year-old daughter a deceptively simple question: â œHow would you define nothing?â • With that, the girl who once tried to fail geometry as a conscientious objector starts reading up on general relativity and quantum mechanics, as she and her dad embark on a life-altering quest for the answers to the universeâ ™s greatest mysteries. Â Â Â Â Â Â Before Amanda Gefter became an accomplished science writer, she was a twenty-one-year-old magazine assistant willing to sneak her and her father, Warren, into a conference devoted to their physics hero, John Wheeler. Posing as journalists, Amanda and Warren met Wheeler, who offered them cryptic clues to the nature of reality: The universe is a self-excited circuit, he said. And, The boundary of a boundary is zero. Baffled, Amanda and Warren vowed to decode the phrasesâ ”and with them, the enigmas of existence. When we solve all that, they agreed, weâ ™ll write a book. Â Trespassing on Einsteinâ ™s Lawn is that book, a memoir of the impassioned hunt that takes Amanda and her father from New York to London to Los Alamos. Along the way, they bump up against quirky science and even quirkier personalities, including Leonard Susskind, the former Bronx plumber who invented string theory; Ed Witten, the soft-spoken genius who coined the enigmatic M-theory; even Stephen Hawking. Â What they discover is extraordinary: the beginnings of a monumental paradigm shift in cosmology, from a single universe we all share to a splintered reality in which each observer has her own. Reality, the Gefters learn, is radically observer-dependent, far beyond anything of which Einstein or the founders of quantum mechanics ever dreamedâ ”with shattering consequences for our understanding of the universeâ ™s origin. And somehow it all ties back to that conversation, to that Chinese restaurant, and to the true meaning of nothing. Â Throughout their journey, Amanda struggles to make sense of her own lifeâ ”as her journalism career transforms from illusion to reality, as she searches for her voice as a writer, as she steps from a universe shared with her father to at last carve out one of her own. Itâ ™s a paradigm shift you might call growing up. Â By turns hilarious, moving, irreverent, and profound, Trespassing on Einsteinâ ™s Lawn weaves together story and science in remarkable ways. By the end, you will never look at the universe the same way again.Praise for Trespassing on Einsteinâ ™s Lawn Â â œNothing quite prepared me for this book. Wow. Reading it, I alternated

between depressionâ ”how could the rest of us science writers ever match this?â ”and exhilaration.â •â ”Scientific American Â â œTo Do: Read Trespassing on Einsteinâ ™s Lawn. Reality doesnâ ™t have to bite.â •â ”New York Â â œA zany superposition of genres . . . Itâ ™s at once a coming-of-age chronicle and a father-daughter road trip to the far reaches of this universe and 10,500 others.â •â ”The Philadelphia InquirerFrom the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Amanda Gefter’s book tells the story of her and her father’s journey to understand the deepest mysteries of physics and existence. In many ways it’s comparable to Jim Holt’s book "Why does the world exist?" although Holt’s book is bigger on philosophy while Gefter’s is bigger on the physics. The major questions asked in both the books are the same: How did something arise from nothing? In Gefter’s book the related question of what role observers play in the making of the universe also looms large. Gefter’s style is highly accessible and entertaining and at times she sounds like a close friend telling you how exciting physics is. Her infectious enthusiasm for science and questions enlivens every page of the narrative.The book is really two books in one. The first part recounts the

personal story of her and her father's thirst to understand the origin and meaning of the universe. Gefter's father comes across as a brilliant man, a non-physicst (although a medical doctor) with an unquenchable passion for deep scientific mysteries and a deep, thoughtful imagination. It's a quality that he seems to have passed on to his daughter in spades. He was the one who got Gefter interested in such questions and read physics books with her into the wee hours of the morning, he was the one who attended conferences with her - sometimes using dubious but harmless credentials - and he was the one who encouraged her to follow her heart, to switch careers and talk to the world's leading physicists purely out of intellectual curiosity. Conversations, phone calls and emails between him and his daughter make constant appearances in the book and it's obvious that without him Gefter might have possibly ended up doing something very different.

Trespassing on Einstein's Lawn is a braid of three strands of narrative -- one part conceptual tour of modern physics, one part philosophical rumination on the metaphysical implications of the pure weirdness that is modern physics, and one part memoir and love-letter to the author's father, with all three modes compelling throughout.Gefter's journey starts in a Chinese restaurant at the age of fifteen, as her father asks her, "How would you define nothing?" Not content to keep the discussion small, Amanda and her father wonder what it really would mean if the Universe were filled with nothingness -- a completely homogeneous state in which the things we think of as something (Matter? Spacetime? Quarks? Strings?) aren't, or perhaps cease to be meaningful concepts when in a boundaryless soup of blended Universe. Could this homogeneous state, the "H-State", be some sort of clue to the origin of existence?From this seed, Amanda's journey begins. Early on, she poses as a journalist at a physics conference, simply to get access to the best minds in physics so they might answer a few questions about the mechanisms of how something could come from nothing. Later, her charades become reality as she is hired to write physics coverage for New Scientist magazine. In each stage of her journey, she interweaves the principles of modern physics with her own life story. Early on, she explains special and general relativity, followed by Thomas Young's mind-bending double-slit light experiment. A few chapters further, she contrasts the philosophical concept of scientific realism with its competing philosophies while in the same chapter narrating her battle unseen rats -- rats which may or may not exist -- in her tiny London flat.

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