

Books to travel with

Out of this world

Riffing on Strings: Creative writing inspired by string theory
edited by Sean Miller and Shveta Verma,
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Reviewed by Amanda Geffer



WHAT first drew me to physics were the words. Cosmos. Entanglement. Spiralling galaxies and stars gone supernova, dark matter and charmed quarks. Physics brims with linguistic magic. And once you peer beneath the words, you find ideas can possess a poetry more poignant than any turn of phrase. String theory may turn out to be wrong. It might not be testable and it might not describe the real world. But it does describe a world that's undeniably poetic.

Still, I'll admit, when I picked up *Riffing on Strings* I was sceptical. Sure, the poetic building blocks are there, but creative writing and string theory? It's got the potential to go horribly awry. So I was pleased to find such an eclectic, thought-provoking and

entertaining collection of writing – perfect for toting along on travels in other dimensions. The book opens with Sean Miller's introduction to string theory and its place in the arts, followed by a series of essays by acclaimed physicists. Michio Kaku's piece on duality is especially informative. Then come short stories, poems and plays that show the myriad ways in which physics seeps into public consciousness, is absorbed by the artist and re-emitted as something entirely new. These are pieces inspired by string theory, not about it. It's not a matter of whether the writers get the science right, it's how they play with it.

When it comes to string theory, people either love it or hate it. Some writers draw on the beauty of the theory, others, the absurdity. In "S-Bomb", Adam Roberts imagines a world haunted by the string-theory version of an atomic bomb, a weapon capable of unravelling the fabric of reality. Jarvis Slacks, in "Like Marriage", conjures a world in which people can opt out of life by walking into a "dome", an object akin to a peaceful black hole. Despite the bizarre premise, it becomes clear

that life in a world chock-full of domes isn't any different from life as we know it: we can ultimately choose to live life or to head for the nearest black hole.

Some pieces are amusingly snide. In his poem "String Theory", Dave Morrison writes: "When my friends and I considered/such possibilities behind the/cafe/teria with a nickel bag of/lame weed, it did not occur/to us that we were budding physicists". On the idea of a world made of tiny strings, Robert Borski writes, "God as a

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boy must have been/a strange child, if not actually gifted." Imagining a future in which string theory is the accepted theory of everything, Bruce Holland Rogers tells us, "Children learned that the eleven dimensions were Length, Width, Height, Time, Happy, Sneezey, Dopey, Grumpy, Sleepy, Doc, and... Even with the new names, one dimension was hard to remember."

My favourite is Daniel Hudon's "A Report on the New String

Theory Library". It tells of the construction of a library created to house all of the available literature on string theory. As various proposals for the building's design are considered, we come to see that the library is nothing more than string theory – or rather, M-theory – itself. "The main collection of the library will be housed in a series of pairs of five-story circular towers connected by an infinite hallway. This tower duality (linked at the first, third, and fifth floors) will contain coupled versions of string theory scrolls and enable the exploration of the theory's various symmetries." The story would make Borges proud.

Some might argue that physics doesn't have a place in literature, or that literature doesn't have the tools to deal with physics. Surely, there will always be a tension between the two. James O'Hern writes, "For science, ambiguity is treated as an enemy while, for poetry, it is the essence." True, but both ultimately spring from the same source: imagination. ●

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