

Thoughts On ``Albert Einstein: The Persistent Illusion of Transience'' by Ze'ev Rosenkranz & Barbara Wolff

During the summer of 2005, "Uncle" Albert Einstein accompanied me around the world and then some in about thirty-four days.

The year 2005 was declared the Einstein World Year of Physics. Though I had first learned of this the previous year while in South Africa, I had thought it would have little connection to me. I was completely wrong. Shortly after I gave the final plenary address to the 2005 annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science I realized this. By the end of the year, I had given thirty-six presentations on ``Uncle Albert" on six continents. To make these, I had acquired and read a dozen books on Albert Einstein.

That summer, I circumnavigated the globe in a single trip for the first time.

By a quirk of fate, I had acquired a draft copy of ``Einstein: His Life and Universe" by Walter Isaacson since I had agreed to review it, looking for issues on science (Walter though not a scientist did an amazing job) and other aspects of the book in preparation. So the manuscript was my constant companion on many long hours of riding in various airplanes and on the ground in several cities (perhaps most memorably Casablanca and Singapore) around the globe. This is how my comment came to be included on the dust cover of Walter's book.

Thus, when I was asked to provide a review of "Albert Einstein: The Persistent Illusion of Transience," I had a wealth of memories from other works that were in the background.

It is my opinion that "Illusion" possesses the quality of a far more intimate presentation of the remarkable life of one of the most iconic individuals of the twentieth century. Where other books feel like those written by a close and extremely knowledgeable neighbor of Albert Einstein, this book feels as though it could have been written by his life-long butler (had such an individual existed).

The numerous photographs, some familiar to me and others not, add a dimension to making Dr. Einstein almost a corporal presence as I read the book. Though most of the stories were previously known to me, the presence of his image sprinkled throughout the book - showing him as he progressed through his life - lend direct evidence of his having been a living, breathing person and a continuing messenger causing us to reflect on our own aspirations, foibles and humanity. Many of the previous works I have read bring the reader closer to the facts of his life.

However, the more or less constant stream of his images in this book quite heightens one's engagement with him, his life and ideas. Many of the pictures are simply arresting while forcing the reader to stop and look upon Einstein's face or those of the many companions seen around him. For example, I had never before taken notice of the very slight resemblance between Einstein's mother, Pauline, and his first wife, Mileva.

Another feature for which I was unprepared was to feel the impact of seeing letters written by him which bring with them an added level of intimacy not ordinarily encountered in a book. As a physicist, there was a particular thrill to seeing equations that I know so well, written as he presented them.

As I have often commented to the public in many addresses, ``mathematics is a sensory organ for the theoretical physicist," and the presentation of his particular set of visions as handwritten (not the usual typeset seen in textbooks) brings home powerfully the titanic struggle whose triumph these represent. A complete menu of his scientific life is presented for the reader.

The presence of his handwritten notes, whether in German or English, will, I believe, for many readers add to the enjoyment of this book. Of course, these written elements are not restricted solely to mathematical “scores” that for physicists are as moving as any by a great musical composer. There are many letters, notes and documents that describe the arc of his life outside of his scientific pursuits.

One of the most impressive things to me about Albert Einstein was his absolute commitment to use his preternatural fame to do good in the world as he judged himself able to do. This, as many have noted, sharply contrasts with his distant personal relations, though by all accounts he was loving father - but a wayward husband.

For anyone familiar with Albert Einstein, one of the most affecting parts of his life was his engagement of his Jewish heritage and identity.

This is all on display. The persecution of Jewish citizens by the forces of Nazism is rendered with a stark immediacy when one sees the urgent appeal he makes to save a single life. His emotional and intellectual transformation under the impact of the Holocaust is here for the reader to see. Of course, the familiar story of how he determined not to become the person to lead an infant state of Israel is accompanied by a picture with the leader, David Ben-Gurion. Finally, the special place he held for the Hebrew University can be seen illustrated for any engaged reader.

The section on Einstein in America has all the lights of a Hollywood-produced jazz-accompanied spectacular. We see the world traveler and astute side of him as he becomes if not an ordinary American, certainly an American. We ride along with him as he experiences what would be the first of many an ``Einstein Craze." His travels from east to west

and back can be found. The famous “sockless” picture contrasts with a copy of his certificate of naturalization to become a U.S. citizen. And of course we see his initial participation that launches the Manhattan Project and his determined effort to contain the terrible progeny of a new generation of weapons of mass destruction - nuclear bombs - that emerges as the result.

As an African-American I was particularly affected by seeing the section of the book that highlights Albert Einstein's engagement with people of color in his adopted homeland as they strove to fight what he called America's ``worst disease" - racism. This is an aspect of his life that has largely been overlooked, though recently, in ``Einstein on Race & Racism" by Fred Jerome and Rodger Taylor, one can perhaps begin to see the lifting of the veil over this part of Albert Einstein's activities.

This book includes a picture of Einstein with Horace Mann Bond (father of civil rights leader Julian Bond) on the occasion of the former's visit to Lincoln University in 1946. This happened during a period Einstein when rarely accepted invitations to speak on college and university campuses.

Einstein's engagement with music, children and indeed life itself is vividly illustrated in words and pictures. It is perhaps most fitting that the penultimate image of Einstein within the pages we see in this book is a very famous one - Einstein with his tongue stuck out and bright eyes sharing with us all the joy of a life well, but not perfectly spent. The final picture shows my "uncle" with what I believe is a slight smile of satisfaction and daring us all to embrace our common humanity as did he.

I highly recommend this book. It has become an extremely prized part of my personal Einstein library .

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