

Book Case

The editor considers six books that exemplify the popularisation of science and philosophy

THE FLY IN THE CATHEDRAL

Brian Cathcart (Penguin, 2005)

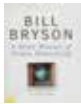
The famous description of the size of an atom's nucleus given by Ernest Rutherford, Brian Cathcart's vivid narrative recounts the events that led Rutherford, John Cockcroft, Ernest Walton (Ireland's only physics Nobel laureate) and James Chadwick to the splitting of the atom in 1932. The Cavendish laboratory in the 1930's is presented as a more genteel, impecunious environment than possibly many contemporary scientists might recognise.



A SHORT HISTORY OF NEARLY EVERYTHING

Bill Bryson (Doubleday, 2005)

As he wrote himself, Bill Bryson's challenge was 'to take subjects that normally bore the pants off most of us, like geology, chemistry and particle physics and see if there wasn't some way to render them comprehensible to people who never thought



they could be interested in science'. His sense of wonder never depreciating, this skilled wordsmith effortlessly converts tricky science into brilliant prose.

COSMOS

Carl Sagan. (MacDonald, 1989)

In this extraordinarily accessible book, Carl Sagan considers the billions of years of our cosmic evolution; earth's cornucopia of peoples, their histories, intellectual and scientific achievements. From the shores of 'The Cosmic Ocean' he sees a small blue world, inhabited by a species that is just beginning to discover its commonality, its precarious position and its potentially glorious future.



ON GIANTS' SHOULDERS

Melvyn Bragg (Hodder and Stoughton, 1998)

Melvin Bragg, a polymath if ever there was, assembles distinguished groups of scientists to consider and distill the contributions of Archimedes, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Poincare, and Einstein thus producing an everyman's understanding of their world.



THE CONSOLATIONS OF PHILOSOPHY

Alain de Botton (Penguin books, 2001)

Echoing Boethius's 6th century masterwork, 'The Consolation of Philosophy', de Botton considers the philosophies of six individuals that might serve as a remedy for our many worries, frustrations and, well, human weaknesses. They are Socrates (unpopularity); Epicurus (poverty); Seneca (frustration); Montaigne (inadequacy); Schopenhauer (a broken heart) and Nietzsche (difficulties).



THE HITCHHIKERS GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

Douglas Adams (Pan Books, 1992)

Cheating I know, but anyone who has understood the concepts of the Babel Fish, the Infinite Improbability Drive and the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster cannot fail to be heartened. As Arthur Dent said, just before discovering that a fellow diner was spending a year dead for tax reasons, 'It's not so much an afterlife, its more an après vie.' This eventual five-part trilogy launched thousands of science careers and there are, at least, 42 reasons why you should read it.

