

Nobel Laureates and Twentieth-Century Physics

In this richly illustrated book the author combines history with real science. Using an original approach he presents the major achievements of twentieth-century physics – for example, relativity, quantum mechanics, atomic and nuclear physics, the invention of the transistor and the laser, superconductivity, binary pulsars, and the Bose–Einstein condensate – each as they emerged as the product of the genius of those physicists whose labours, since 1901, have been crowned with a Nobel Prize.

Here, in the form of a year-by-year chronicle, biographies and revealing personal anecdotes help bring to life the main events of the past hundred years. The work of the most famous physicists of the twentieth century – great names, such as Bohr, the Curies, Einstein, Fermi, Feynman, Gell-Mann, Heisenberg, Rutherford and Schrödinger – is presented, often in the words and imagery of the prizewinners themselves.

The author uses plain language to avoid technical jargon as much as possible. He does not hesitate, however, to explain abstruse theories when necessary. With clear step-by-step explanations and lively down-to-earth examples, this engaging work will be of interest to working scientists, students, and the lay reader curious about the wonders of the universe of science.

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Cambridge University Press
0521832470 - Nobel Laureates and Twentieth-Century Physics
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[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2004

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typefaces Times NR 10/13 pt. and Universe *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Dardo, M. (Mauro)

Nobel laureates and twentieth-century physics / Mauro Dardo.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 83247 0 – ISBN 0 521 54008 9 (paperback)

1. Physics – History – 20th century. 2. Nobel Prizes. 3. Physicists – Biography. I. Title.
QC7.D27 2004

530'.09'04 – dc22 2004049240

ISBN 0 521 83247 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 54008 9 paperback

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to my parents

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Preface

This book is about the Nobel Prizes for physics: how they were awarded each year, and for what particular merit; how the discoveries that they have honoured fit into the wider picture of the evolution of twentieth-century physics, enlarged our understanding of nature and, in terms of new technologies, changed and moulded our everyday lives. But above all it is about the prizewinners themselves, how they came to make the contributions to science for which they are renowned and, through personal details and anecdotes, it aims to tell us what sort of people they were, and indeed are.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part contains an introductory chapter which includes a short description of the Nobel Prize. Then follow two chapters which deal with classical physics, in so far as it constitutes the roots of modern physics. These chapters, through a rapid historical journey, will present the reader with some fundamental concepts in physics, together with information about the giants of classical science, so taking the reader up to the doorstep of twentieth-century physics.

The second and third parts form the core of the book. They contain ten chapters, which, year by year, describe the work for which the awards were given, with short biographical notes on each Nobel laureate. In parallel, in each year, are included concise descriptions of the principal achievements in physics during the year itself. Each chapter begins with an introduction, which summarises the major events during the period in question, and each ends with illustrations and descriptions of sites where the most famous events took place. Finally, the reader will find a glossary of terms which we believe will be of assistance, especially if he or she is a non-specialist. Simple sketches and diagrams will help in understanding certain important concepts.

The author has tried wherever possible to use plain language and to avoid technical jargon, whilst nevertheless maintaining scientific and historical rigour.

Nobel Laureates and Twentieth-Century Physics is addressed to scientists active in the worlds of research or teaching, to students, both undergraduates and graduates: and also, and by no means least, to the general reader who is eager to venture into the great scientific themes that have distinguished the last hundred years of the history of physics and science in general.

Acknowledgments

This book might never have seen the light of day – at least in this form – without the co-operation and helpfulness of Richard Izard. His particular care has been for the *Englishness* of the book. Its style owns much to him, as does its readability and its ‘feeling’. I am deeply indebted to him for his constant and skilled assistance.

In the first place I wish to record my profound gratitude to all those Nobel prizewinners who have kindly read the pages concerning their Nobel Prizes, and offered me so many helpful criticisms, further information, and practical suggestions for improving the text: Zhores Alferov, Philip Anderson, Aage Bohr, Georges Charpak, Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, Leon Cooper, Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, Riccardo Giacconi, Antony Hewish, Brian Josephson, Wolfgang Ketterle, K. Alex Müller, William Phillips, Heinrich Rorher, Carlo Rubbia, Jack Steinberger, Gerardus ’t Hooft, Charles Townes, and Martinus Veltmann.

I also wish to take this opportunity to thank all those numerous people – including the majority of all the above-cited Nobel prizewinners – who have given me permission to quote from their books and articles: Georg Bednorz, Hans Bethe, Nicolaas Bloembergen, Owen Chamberlain, Steven Chu, James Cronin, Paul Davies, Robert Marc Friedman, Murray Gell-Mann, Sheldon Glashow, George Johnson, Daniel Kleppner, Robert Laughlin, Leon Lederman, Simon van der Meer, Sir Brian Pippard, Norman Ramsey, Silvan S. Schweber, Daniel Tsui, Steven Weinberg, the late Victor Weisskopf, Kenneth Wilson, Chen Ning Yang.

At the same time my thanks are due to many institutions for permission to reproduce excerpts from their publications: I am particularly indebted to the Nobel Foundation, (holders of the copyright for the Nobel Lectures). I also wish to acknowledge help from the Cambridge University Press, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Institute of Physics Publishing, Lucent Technologies/Bell Labs, the MIT Press, the Oxford University Press, the Princeton University Press, and Springer-Verlag. To these I must add those individuals and institutions which provided photographs and illustrations, together with their permission to publish (acknowledgements will be found in the figure captions or in the section ‘Notes’).

I am also deeply indebted to a large number of individuals for their help and encouragement. I wish to thank particularly Andrzej Stasiak, of the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, for his careful review of the whole manuscript, and for a notable contribution both of invaluable comments and of practical suggestions from which I have benefited greatly. Portions of the manuscript dealing with

diverse topics have been read by colleagues and correspondents, and I think particularly of Paolo Allia, Polytechnic of Turin, Italy; Ugo Amaldi, Sergio Ferrara and Giorgio Stefanini, CERN, Geneva; Ferdinando Amman and Vito Svelto, University of Pavia, Italy; Joseph Avron, Technion, Haifa, Israel; Giorgio Parisi, University *La Sapienza* in Rome, Italy; Lucio Braicovich and Orazio Svelto, Polytechnic of Milan, Italy; Giulio Casati, University of Como, Italy; Russel J. Donnelly, University of Oregon, USA; Attilio Ferrari, University of Turin, Italy; Giorgio Frossati, University of Leiden, Holland; Leo Kadanoff, University of Chicago, USA; Daniel Kleppner, MIT, USA; Emilio Picasso, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, Italy; Guido Pizzella, University of Rome at Tor Vergata, Italy; Sir Brian Pippard, University of Cambridge, England; Martin A. Pomerantz, University of Delaware, Newark, USA; Renzo Ricca, University College, London, England; USA; Michael Stone, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA; Adrian Sutton, Oxford University, England; Valentine Telegdi, Caltech, USA, and CERN, Switzerland; Clifford M. Will, Washington University, USA; Dieter Vollhardt, University of Ausburg, Germany. These all deserve my thanks, and I am happy to be able to record my gratitude here.

Naturally any errors or misconceptions that still remain in the book are my responsibility, and I take this opportunity to apologise sincerely for them.

The technical aspects called into play during the preparation of this book have been attended to by too many people to thank individually, but I must acknowledge my debt to Michele Manzini and Aldo Masoero, each of whom have been of major assistance throughout all stages of the preparation of the work. A word of genuine appreciation is due to my friend Piero Bosso for his line drawings, and to Françoise Hayes for her helpfulness during the preparatory phase of this work. My university, the *Amedeo Avogadro* University of Eastern Piedmont (Italy), has supported the research that was undertaken in the preparation of this book, and I am glad to be able to record my appreciation accordingly.

Finally, it is with particular pleasure that I express my gratitude to Simon Capelin (Publishing Director – Physical Science and Engineering) and to the staff of the Cambridge University Press, whose professional competence, cordiality and patience have made the whole process of bringing this book to birth so smooth and effortless.