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## Notable Notes from the Goodreads Gang

by John M. Boyer, PhD, SFSPE; and Wanda Boyer, PhD, ISPE Mentor

**Editor's Note:** Thousands who would like to join the ISPE Book Club will find the Goodreads.com link on the Member's Only page of our ISPE website. Just log in at [www.thethousand.com](http://www.thethousand.com) and then scroll down to the ISPE Book Club info.



### 1. Introduction

In the ISPE Book Club, we strive to create a community that enables and encourages all of us to enhance one another's reading experiences by sharing our unique and interesting perspectives and wisdom. The ISPE Book Club was migrated from a Ning group to the Goodreads platform in October 2022.

Joining the Goodreads platform is free, and it offers its members a wide database of books as well as ratings, reviews, and discussions by its members. The platform also enables groups, such as the ISPE Book Club, to have group-only membership, organizing folders, and discussion topics. Based on these features, we have set up a good process for proposing books for reading, voting for and selecting them, and then hosting positive thoughtful discussions among the members of the ISPE Book Club, hereafter referred to as the Goodreads Gang, or simply the "Gang."

Since migrating to Goodreads, the Gang has selected, read, and discussed four books. In the sections below, we share some "notable notes" about these books, followed by concluding remarks that capture not only some key thoughts that span the books but also observations that

make the new Goodreads platform that much more inviting for life-long learners—like you.

### 2. A Fine Man

The first book selected by the Goodreads Gang was an autobiography of Richard P. Feynman,<sup>1</sup> who was a winner of the 1965 Nobel Prize in Physics. This book was recommended to the Gang, in part, because of discussions about Feynman that had occurred in the ISPE Facebook group. The book is mostly composed of day-in-the-life stories that Feynman conveyed to the co-author, Ralph Leighton, while they met to play drums over a seven-year period. The stories seemed intended as a counterpoint to Richard Feynman's official persona as a world-class physicist. Anecdotes about physics seemed intended to simply give the flavor of a problem without diving into its details. Members occasionally investigated mentioned topics further, on their own. For example, one member noted being pleased to learn more about differentiating under the integral sign, which is a general mathematical technique that can help to compute some difficult functions, such as percentiles for a normal curve.

Overall, the Feynman autobiography contains a mixture of disappointing and uplifting anecdotes.

At times, he comes across as a rascal in anecdotes that expose his womanizing, drinking, and work pranks. Yet, he also consistently conveys the courage to get out of his comfort zone in order to learn in diverse fields beyond physics, such as other sciences, engineering and mechanical disciplines, multiple languages, and art and music. Perhaps the most *notable* anecdotes pertain to his feeling of being, at times, burned out, depressed about himself, and not quite up to the level of others. It is admirable that Feynman conveyed these anecdotes, which help to normalize having these feelings, and it is inspiring to read about what he did to overcome burnout by getting back to *playing* with physics. It is an uplifting reminder to all readers that playfulness is essential to both creativity and motivation.

### 3. Toiling Away

In November/December 2022, the Goodreads Gang chose *The Toilers of the Sea* by Victor Hugo.<sup>2</sup> This book was written in the nineteenth century during Hugo's 15-year exile on the island of Guernsey and reflects his awareness of his new sea-bound context and his social, emotional, political, and physical isolation from France. Our Goodreads community noted Hugo's blatant distaste for, and objections to, the abhorrent practices and demographic divisions of the time. To accentuate his social commentary, Hugo used beautiful language and developed some fulsome and charismatic characters to blast social barriers and provide the reader with hope for a brighter future. That being said, Hugo erred significantly at the end when the main character does something that is hopeless and inconsistent with the character's development throughout the book. *Notably*, one member recommended a technique that is also useful for dispelling nightmares and bad dreams, which is to change the ending for oneself to an alternative that retains emotional heft but is also more satisfying and sensible.

### 4. Aliens and Humans

The Goodreads Gang's first book of the new year was *The Humans* by Matt Haig,<sup>3</sup> and since it was our favorite book out of the ones in this paper, we had many delightful and *notable exchanges* about it. For one, we discussed Matt Haig's pithy and expert writing style and how difficult it would be for an artificial intelligence agent, such as ChatGPT, to replicate the linguistic beauty and variation that Matt Haig offers his readers. We also became acquainted or re-acquainted with some of the poetry of Emily Dickinson, which emphasizes hope, life, and opportunities to dwell in possibilities. To add to our reading enjoyment, one member of the Gang created a Spotify playlist (<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4IE...>) of all of "Alien Andrew Martin's" favorite music.

We held a collegial literary discussion about some of the parallels and differences between *The Humans* and *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. The Gang also had a mathematical discussion about the relative importance of the Riemann hypothesis versus its proof, which led to a playful consideration of how the book might be different if "Alien Riemann" had been the protagonist. And, yes, Thousands, we had some fun with prime numbers, especially 97, the largest prime number less than 100, because it also happens to be a "happy prime." We noted that the ages of "Alien Andrew" and his wife, Isobel, were twin primes and that their son Gulliver's age, 15, was the product of twin primes. We also noted Gulliver's age was not a happy number, and it was not a particularly happy time for Gulliver, either. There was discussion of the famous mathematician Ramanujan, who celebrated the existence of highly composite numbers, which are conceptually the opposite of prime numbers. In addition to prime numbers being regarded as beautiful, we noted that highly composite numbers maximize the possibilities for sharing, which makes them numerically and humanely beautiful.

Throughout our discussion posts on *The Humans*, we considered the ways in which Matt Haig highlighted the simple joys in life, such as experiencing nature, art, music, animal companions, whole-nut peanut butter, and the gentle touch of a hand on one's own hand. We embraced Matt Haig's urging us to consider what it is to be human through connections, agape, kindness, and empathy. We engaged in a final act of sharing, companionship, and connection-making when we chose to talk about a few of our favorites of the 97 items of "Advice for a Human" identified by Matt Haig. We considered the importance of knowing thyself, liking thyself, and forgiving thyself as ways of practicing self-compassion, which are foundational to having compassion for others. We were also reminded of the importance of prioritizing what we do in our lives and having a sense of purpose in life so as to know what and how to prioritize. These discussions were significant because each member of the Gang took time to share their beliefs and values.

### 5. When to Take a Pass

The Goodreads Gang's latest book selection, for March/April, was *The Passenger* by Cormac McCarthy.<sup>4</sup> Although the author is a Pulitzer Prize winner, the ISPE members participating in the reading unanimously classified the book as, well, not a *good* read. The writing is disrespectful of people with neurodiversity, needlessly vulgar and perverted, and superficial when mentioning topics worthy of philosophical discussion; and the text becomes insipid and repetitive toward the end (for those who held out longer before throwing in the proverbial towel).

Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of reading this book is that, although we cannot recommend the book, by reading it with fellow members of the Gang, we felt unified and enriched by one another's discussion posts. As a *notable* example, some members asserted that space seems provably continuous rather than being composed of an infinitude of discrete space quanta; and so, by an Einsteinian extension, time is most likely

to be continuous, as well. The book itself does not contain in-depth analyses, instead resorting mostly to name- and topic-droppings. Based only on reviews and author reputation, it's hard to know for sure how it will go with a book until you get into it; but in this case, the Gang got to share some good humor, new vocabulary, and a few interesting ideas in physics and psychology.

### 6. Conclusion

The books that the Gang submits for ranking and reading are diverse and reflect the diversity of ISPE itself. Some of the books have been easy to read and *good* reads. Others have been not so easy nor *good*, because of the author's writing style, language, and content choice. Still, the democratic voting process allowed us to be privy to the conversations and life choices of physicists, people of the sea, aliens who yearn to be human, and—well—passengers. It was also interesting that readers tracked and took note of topics that were reflected across the books selected for reading. For example, in one discussion post, a Gang member noted that, across three of the books (*Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman*; *The Humans*; and *The Toilers of the Sea*), the book authors expressed interest in and respect for the admirable work ethic, creativity, and utilitarian nature of ants. As a result, the "Gang-star" asserted that it was the parallels between the skills of ants and human societies that inspired authors like Feynman and Leighton, Haig, and Hugo. As this example shows, the reading and discussion posts can open up opportunities to make connections across learning experiences.

Based on our reading experiences in the fall, the Gang decided that—starting with the new year—we would flexibly change to a bimonthly cadence to make sure everyone had enough time to secure the book and fit the reading of and commenting on our selected books into their schedule of other readings and work. Furthermore, it became clear that it was reasonable to continue contributing our thoughts beyond the initial two-month focus period, because some members joined after the

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two-month period and others had new thoughts that occurred to them only later. This conveyed to all of us that what we had to say was important, no matter when we contributed our thoughts. Thoughts about a book that one is reading evolve and become richer over time.

In closing, the message we wish to convey is that all thoughtful contributions are valued because they ultimately unify, enhance, and enrich each of us—and these contributions are important as we advance our group participation and continue

to support our community of ISPE Goodreads members.

The benefits of the ISPE Goodreads Book Club include immersion in a greater variety of books, access to augmentation of the content by the thoughts of other members, and the ability, optionally, to share your own thoughts with others who will value them. If you find any of these benefits appealing, then we invite you to join, read, and enter into discussions with the Goodreads Gang today!

## NOTES.....

1. Richard P. Feynman and Ralph Leighton, “*Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!*”: *Adventures of a Curious Character* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1985).
2. Victor Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, trans. James Hogarth (New York, NY: Modern Library, 1866/2002).
3. Matt Haig, *The Humans* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2013).
4. Cormac McCarthy, *The Passenger* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2022). Ω

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“He who reads much  
and understands much,  
receives his fill.  
He who is full,  
refreshes others.”  
—Ambrose