

The Adventures of Mr. Tompkins

Igor Gamow

Scorpio Steele

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Mr. Tompkins, who first appeared in Discovery magazine in 1938, is a product of the imagination of George Gamow, a scientist most famous for his work on the development of the big bang theory. Over three decades, Mr. Tompkins starred in four books on a variety of scientific topics. In this new graphic textbook, *The Adventures of Mr. Tompkins*, the character is once more brought to life, this time by George Gamow's son, Igor Gamow, who was a professor of engineering at the University of Colorado. The premise of this book is similar to that of previous Mr. Tompkins stories: Mr. Tompkins goes to a lecture and then later dreams about the topic and the scientist he has learned about. Presented here are the works of three notable scientists: Albert Einstein, Ernest Rutherford, and Marie Curie.

Mr. Tompkins, a dapper bank clerk with an amateur's love of science, is an amusing character. The dream interactions he has with the scientists are very funny, as these legends of science generally talk down to him as they try to make him understand complex concepts. For instance, when Tompkins questions Rutherford about his "Gold Foil" scattering experiment, Rutherford replies, "Mr. Tompkins your question is Dead Clever! I haven't even yet discussed nuclear fission and here you are bringing it up like an idiot savant!"

Illustrator Scorpio Steele's images are engaging and often very funny. For example, Mr. Tompkins' lecture notes on the anatomy of the atom betray his meandering thoughts about macaroni and a doodle of a cannon. There are also some very skillful drawings that represent the book's lessons. Though they are somewhat jarring in that their style is different from the rest of the book, they are quite successful in teaching science and the history of the scientists.

The idea of this comic book is brilliant. Daunting topics, such the theory of relativity, nuclear fission, and radioactivity, are presented here in a form that speaks to and entertains a very general audience. The author even uses analogies that help readers relate to very abstract concepts. For example, attoseconds are explained as, "ten-to-the-negative-eighteenth seconds long. It is to a second as one second is to the entire age of the universe." Overall, however, there is not a great deal of story, and the comic book format needs more action to keep readers interested. There is definitely more "tell" than "show" here, despite all of the high quality elements. Still, strong science, an appealing main character, solid illustrations, and a good sense of humor mean there is a great deal of potential for the series that the creators have planned.

CATHERINE THURESON (May 18, 2010)

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