

The Beauty of Falling: A Life in Pursuit of Gravity

Claudia de Rham

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Physicist Claudia de Rham's intimate scientific memoir *The Beauty of Falling* reveals the ups and downs of a life obsessed with gravity.

After besting over ten thousand applicants, de Rham's dream of becoming an astronaut was dashed by the discovery of a disqualifying medical condition. Pivoting to theoretical physics focused on cosmology and gravity, she sought to understand the mysterious force that had confounded some of the world's greatest minds. Tracing the steps of Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton, and Albert Einstein, she and two colleagues ventured into the unknown to form a theory that went beyond general relativity.

The book takes several different approaches to its material, moving from the language of math and theoretical physics (as with a daunting discussion of the mysteries of black holes) to tangible explanations of the topic, as with a startling and graphic description of what would happen to a human body nearing a black hole (each bit of the body, the book notes, would be stretched to its vanishing point; De Rham posits what that might feel like, and follows this with a wry warning that it's best not to get near them).

De Rham also expresses respect for those who pursue pure science, highlighting their passion, curiosity, and obsession with their work. She writes about the exhaustion that follows long days and nights spent at equation-covered blackboards and reveals the complexities of her long-distance relationship with a colleague on the project. She also credits their close work together with leading to their marriage, humanizing the topic further.

The scientist's memoir *The Beauty of Falling* details how the destruction of one dream led to new understandings of the origin of the universe.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2024)

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