

‘Einstein’ Reveals a Complex Thinker, Not a Natural Leader

Albert Einstein’s signature mop of white hair and bushy moustache are instantly recognizable, making him both a legend in the academic world and a pop culture icon.

But the man behind the image we all recognize was a little less black and white. Some thought he was genius. Others dismissed him as an aloof daydreamer. He was a celebrated thinker and celebrity scientist, of sorts - the creator of the Theory of Relativity and winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics, well-known for his mischievous nature and childlike curiosity. Yet, his critics labeled him a misogynist, curmudgeon and a passive-aggressive parent.

Einstein was recognized around the world as a scientific leader but after reading more about him, I would not regard him as someone to emulate from a leadership perspective.

There are more than 20 books about the legendary physicist, but the simply titled “Einstein” - by Jurgen Neffe (translated by Shelley Frisch) may be the most in-depth and informative.

Having been disappointed after reading the previous works on Einstein, Neffe said he wrote his own biography the way he would want to read it.

He also approached the biography thematically, as opposed to the more traditional chronological outline. While providing some depth, the structure at times does not clearly explain when or where in the world the story is taking place.

Michael Dirda of the *Washington Post* noted the sheer amount of material Neffe had to master to write this book. He needed to know 20th century German history, the development of physics since Galileo and the works of contemporary psychologists and philosophers on the nature of genius and media celebrity.

Neffe is also generally perceived by critics as having worked harder than previous authors to learn about his subject and his subject matter. For example, it is believed that Einstein was **heavily influenced by Aaron Bernstein’s 20-volume *Popular Books on Natural Sciences***. Neffe actually read the entire set as preparation and cited those books by volume and page several times in his own book.

Neffe describes young Einstein as a man of unexpected, and sometimes unlikable, contradictions and polarities. As a student, he got a classmate pregnant, sent her away to have the baby and then made the woman give the baby up for adoption. He saw both his wives as caretakers. He rarely spent time with their mentally ill younger child, Eduard, whom he dismissed as a degenerate.

Einstein slept a lot - 10 hours a night - and took daily naps. He loved publicity and women. Critic Lee Smolin of *The New York Review of Books* said he thought there might be a difference in how men and women experienced Einstein. The men in his life - namely, his friends and his sons - saw him as detached. Women, however, found him engaging, since they were attracted to his masculine good looks.

One thing I found fascinating was that Einstein's English vocabulary was no more than a few hundred words. All of his assistants at Princeton had to speak German to effectively communicate with him.

In 1940, Einstein was closely monitored by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Neffe's German perspective on this was that Einstein "shed any illusions about a freedom-loving America" and spent his last years increasingly isolated from colleagues and countrymen.

Neffe concluded that Einstein, who died in 1955, peaked professionally in the 1920s after winning the Nobel Prize in Physics. He wrote that Einstein never completed generalizing **special relativity; his "star power" kept his reputation in the spotlight after that.**

I thought that while this book was well-written, it required a lot of effort to finish. Neffe did **a good of describing the thought experiments in layman's terms, but the storyline was labor-intensive to me.**

While he was a fascinating public figure, Einstein would not, overall, have made a good leader.

Intelligence, charisma and a curiosity that inspires exploration, learning and out-of-the-box thinking certainly are all good leadership characteristics. But Einstein - who perhaps was too consumed by the spotlight and too inconsistent in his mannerisms and treatment of others - illustrates that it takes more than a few positive qualities to make an effective leader.

About the Author

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