

Properties of Light

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Dreams are notoriously boring to everyone, except possibly to the dreamer. The same thing can be said for most novels being written. Far more satisfying to write than to read, being nothing more than self-indulgences in irresponsible imagination. Of course there is cleverness and poetic language, but both tend to be tedious in the long run, and doubly so when combined.

Goldstein is a physics groupie, in fact she was once married to a theoretical physicist and still carries his last name. Being a groupie you are bound to pick up a thing or two, usually enough to carry on cocktail-conversations. The author knows that there is a discrepancy between quantum mechanics and relativity theory, the latter prohibits for one thing communication beyond the finite speed of light, while the former through so called entanglement allows instantaneous interaction over arbitrary distances. Furthermore there seems to be some uncanny relationship between the observer and the observed, which cannot be disentangled as in classical physics. This throws serious doubt on the classical objectivity of the outside world. Does it really exist beyond the observer? Is there really something 'out there'. The ontology of quantum mechanics is notoriously evasive and many types of interpretations have been put forward, the Copenhagen one, championed by Bohr, being the most influential. Quantum mechanics, in spite of being based on chance, is one of the most successfully predicative of all physical theories, which has made most physicists eschewing philosophical reflection and justification and just treat it formally. However, not everyone is inclined to take on such a pragmatic attitude. Einstein for once, was very unhappy about it, famously saying that God does not play dice, that in fact the probabilistic nature of the theory is due to our ignorance, if we only could probe deeper, find the hidden variables so to say, the theory would be brought back to fold of classical deterministic physics with clear causes and effects.

In fact in the early 50's a young Princeton physicist - David Bohm, did just that. The establishment was not too happy, and as Oppenheimer noted, if we cannot disprove him, we have to ignore him. And ignored he was, because how many people outside Quantum Mechanics know of him. The author decides to model one of her main characters - Samuel Mallach, on Bohm and presents him as a burnt out case, kept on the faculty out of pity, resigned to teaching physics courses to poets, and shunned by the rest of his colleagues¹. Mallach is indeed a pitiful character, whose chief hope of rescue presents himself in the form of the main protagonist - Justice Childs who falls in love with his beautiful daughter,

¹ The actual Bohm, although not of public fame, was never a pathetic case, but highly regarded. That he suffered from severe depressions at the end of his life, is another story, probably not at all related to the failure of acceptance of his theory. One should of course not hold this against the author, she presents a fictional figure, not a caricature of a living person. Still, rationally or not, there is always a residue of unease in taking such liberties.

no mean physicist herself. The plot of the book consists in the quest for finding such a deterministic theory of quantum mechanics. Childs, who earlier at Paradise (an obvious reference to California Institute of Technology) has encountered the forgotten work of Mallach and become entrenched, is obviously thrilled and surprised when he encounters him at the very department he had happened to be hired at. He is a prodigy and a math whiz, whose technical brilliance in mathematical technique is widely appreciated and sought out by colleagues. Mallach on the other hand, as is his daughter, have a much more intimate relation with physics, they feel it not only in their bones, but also in the muscle. While Childs may do physics by formal mathematical manipulation, Mallach and daughter can dance it. They are also sensitive to the mystical qualities of quantum mechanics and the external world, imbued with Indian theology and the deification of sex, especially female sex. Mallach speaks of the divine 'cunt' and Kundalini as feminine erotic energy, impressing his young adept the importance of a woman in your life to inspire you. Schrödinger had several, and obviously he is given out his daughter to Childs with the hope that she will inspire him likewise. Needless to say the daughter is something of a 'soul-mate' to the young Childs, and in addition experienced (in fact already married to an older high-powered physicist at Paradise, but who is physically, so to speak, out of the picture) and sexually accomplished. Thus in order to titillate the readers they get tantalizing hints as to what is going on between them.

In the end the chairman of the department gets the magic phone call from Stockholm, this depresses Mallach so much that he commits suicide. The chairman it transpires was about to run away with Mallach's wife and the mother of his daughter before she had a fatal crash. Upon the discovery of the suicide the chairman and Nobel Prize winner urges the two, daughter and collaborator to drive to his house to sort things out, warning Childs not to let her drive, lest there be a repetition of what happened to the mother. This warning is ignored, the daughter takes the wheel as a matter of course, and Childs does not protest as he cannot really drive. Predictably there is an accident, but it is not clear whether both die, or only one, or both survive. In the first case one surmises that the voices one hears are those on the other side of the grave. To be honest, one does not really care.

And not really caring that is the essence of a novel that fails. It may be clever and a verbal pyrotechnic display but if you do not really care about its protagonists and what happen to them, why bother in the first place.

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