

FAST TRACK



EDITED BY CHRIS SMITH

BRIEF LIVES

Science Nonfiction

TO MOST PEOPLE, A SEXY physicist is an oxymoron—like a jumbo shrimp. But the Richard Feynman of James Gleick's new biography, *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman*, is just that—an insouciant, bongo-playing, safecracking Casanova who also happened to inhabit the hot seat in American theoretical physics, from the Manhattan Project to the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*.

"He was very, very charismatic," says Gleick, 38, whispering reverentially in the Brooklyn home he shares with his wife and son. "I remember talking to one woman at a party—a professional woman, the wife of a physicist—and she closed the door and said to me, 'Feynman was the sexiest man I ever saw.' Whenever the phone rang, she hoped it would be him." He

was dead at the time.

Gleick's previous book, *Chaos* (1987), shocked its publisher by becoming a best-seller—quite a feat for a portrait of a scientific discipline that describes natural phenomena through nonlinear equations. Interviewing scientists exploring chaos theory, Gleick noticed that one name cropped up again and again. "All these young, hip, macho scientists so involved in chaos—they all had Feynman as a personal hero."

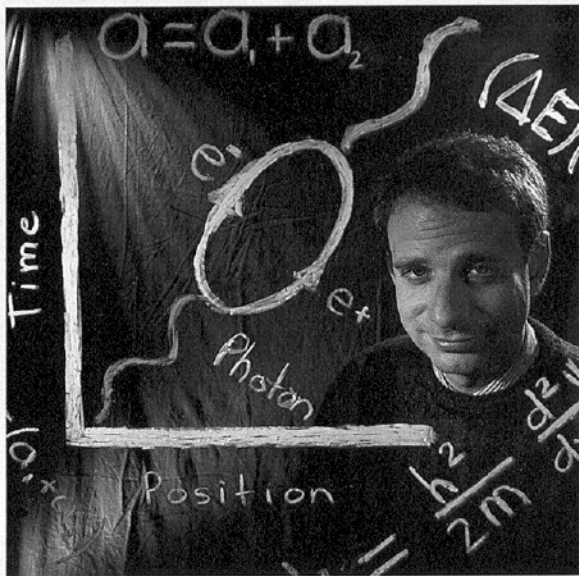
While Feynman was dying of cancer in 1987, Gleick was

working on the science desk at the *New York Times*. The first item he wrote about the physicist was his obituary, which appeared in 1988. The

Both men were born into New York Jewish families; both were unathletic kids who were good at math. At Harvard, Gleick avoided science

subjects; he joined the *Times* as a Metro Section editor a few years after graduation. Feynman became group leader of the theoretical division of the atomic-bomb project at Los Alamos in his mid-twenties.

"Writing this book got to be a very obsessive, draining experience," Gleick says. "I didn't want to fall in love with the guy—though I didn't set out to debunk him, either." What



Physicist graffiti: James Gleick.

two men never met.

But there are certain obvious parallels, starting with a physical resemblance, which Gleick denies seeing.

emerges in *Genius* (Pantheon; \$27.50) is a complicated picture at odds with the folksy image Feynman tried to project; the biography is a finalist for a National Book Award.

So why is Feynman the undisputed giant of modern physics, after Einstein? He worked with partons and superfluidity, and he constructed a new theory of quantum electrodynamics, which won him the Nobel Prize in 1965. (You asked.) Relentlessly curious, he also experimented with sensory-deprivation tanks, out-of-body experiences, and est, meanwhile teaching himself conversational Portuguese and intricate African polyrhythms.

After Feynman's death, to quote *Genius*, "an imprint remained: what he knew; how he knew." And how Gleick writes. MARTIN KIHN

TIME LINE

THIS FRIDAY, BOB DYLAN CELEBRATES HIS thirtieth anniversary on Columbia Records with a show at Madison Square Garden. A very brief Dylan time line, for the uninitiated:

- Born Robert Allen Zimmerman on May 24, 1941, in Duluth, Minnesota.
- Performs for the first time four years later, singing "Accentuate the Positive" in front of his grandmother.
- Legally adopts the name Bob Dylan five months after releasing his first album, *Bob Dylan*, in 1962. The name comes from either an obscure character in the medieval Welsh prose romance *The Mabinogion* or a not-so-obscure Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas.



• "Goes electric" at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. Is booted.

- Releases rock's first double album, *Blonde on Blonde*, in February 1966, only one month before confessing his long-standing desire to "be Brigitte Bardot."
- Crashes motorcycle in July 1966. Survives to hear William Shatner cover "Mr. Tambourine Man."
- "Goes Christian" in 1979.
- Adapts to advancing age not by dying, like so many of his sixties-icon counterparts, but by appearing with the Grateful Dead in 1987.
- Becomes oldest Traveling Wilbury in 1988 upon death of Roy Orbison. ALEX WILLIAMS