

❧ 1 AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Q What's your life story?

I grew up in upstate New York and Texas before going to Caltech to study physics. I moved to Cambridge, England for graduate school and stayed there as a Junior Fellow, which is also when I started writing books. Now I live in London and work at the Curie and London Institutes. Apart from physics and writing, I like hunting, cabinetmaking, skiing, graphic design, history of men's dress, entertaining, and philosophy of mathematics.

Q Why did you write *The Man's Book*?

In its earliest form, *The Man's Book* was just a collection of notes for me: poker strategy, buckshot size, single malt whiskies, my favorite chili recipe. After friends kept requesting copies, I decided to expand it and publish it. But the book in its current form still includes many of my own interests.

Q How did you research the book?

Most of the material in the book is based on first-hand experience, even if I had to go out of my way to acquire it. I grew a "full-set" for the section on beards, shot subsonic potatoes for the section on spud guns, and kept a packet of snus in my cheek for the section on chewing tobacco. Of course, I had to learn a lot from experts and books too, and have since acquired an extensive library on everything from hunting rifles to handmade suits.

Q "Manliness" seems to be fashionable again after a long hiatus. What is it?

Two qualities stand out in any definition of manliness – assertiveness and single-mindedness. To be assertive is to know what you believe and to act on it, even in difficult or risky situations. Single-mindedness is controlled obsessiveness: a desire to understand the details of a thing, to follow through on a plan of action, to get back up after you've been knocked down.

Q What are your top ten books?

Anna Karenina, Leo Tolstoy
Arnold, Arnold Schwarzenegger
Brideshead Revisited, Evelyn Waugh
De imitatione Christi, Thomas à Kempis
Emile, Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The Englishman's Suit, Hardy Amies
The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald
The Leopard, G. T. di Lampedusa
Men of Mathematics, E. T. Bell
Tolstoy, Henri Troyat

Q Why do men need *The Man's Book*?

A The essential feature of any man's book is a systematic approach to things, because system is a masculine strength. Men like to abstract their day-to-day activities to a set of rules, or a code – whether it be getting dressed, building a fire or mixing a drink. *The Man's Book* codifies men's interests.

Q Should women read *The Man's Book*?

I'm hesitant about women reading the book, because certain parts give too much away. Lord Chesterfield was similarly concerned about his advice on pleasing women in a letter to his son: "I will therefore, upon this subject, let you into certain Arcana that will be very useful for you to know, but which you must, with the utmost care, conceal and never seem to know."

Q *The Man's Book* is organized into 11 chapters, 87 sections and 316 subsections. Where should I begin?

The book is a *vade mecum* meant for frequent reference, so jump to whatever section you need to know about. For a quick sense of what it's about, read the quotes at the beginning of each chapter; if you like these, you'll like the book.

Q Why should a theoretical physicist write "the authoritative handbook for men's customs, habits, and pursuits"?

In many ways, *The Man's Book* is a collection of theories. The goal of each section is to give as detailed and objective a summary of the material as is possible in a limited space, usually just a few pages. Reducing something to its essentials is not very different from developing a theory in physics. In both cases, you need to discover the structure behind what from the outset can appear complex. How do you explain everything one needs to know about beer in five pages? You have to understand the subject thoroughly and think about what is essential, always trying to find structure: the division into lager, ale, and lambic, popular versus notable beers; beer with food versus on its own.

Q Who are the 10 men you turn to for manly inspiration?

Hercules Bellville	1939–2009	Ernest Hemingway	1899–1961
James Bond	1924–	Saint Thomas More	1478–1535
George Bryan Brummell	1778–1840	Louis Mountbatten	1900–1979
Winston Churchill	1874–1965	Arnold Schwarzenegger	1947–
Richard Feynman	1918–1988	Leo Tolstoy	1828–1910

Q You designed and typeset *The Man's Book* yourself. Why?

I believe that how we take in information depends to a large extent on how it is organized on the page. Because I set myself a limit of just a few pages for each section of *The Man's Book*, the writing and typesetting were intimately connected. Clarity of content, simplicity of design, and mathematical proportion were constant themes. My biggest influences were Jan Tschichold's *The Form of the Book*, Robert Bringhurst's *The Elements of Typographic Style*, and Edward Tufte's *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.

Q How did you decide what material to include and what to keep out?

I wanted to keep *The Man's Book* a compact book, with each section focusing on a different subject. Space for the many possible sections was tight: I considered about 200 but only 87 ultimately made it in. So I put together the following "constitution" for which sections to include and how to write them:

- For men* Leave out gender-neutral material.
- Essential* Start with the basics, not the arcane. Leave out trivia.
- Useful* While a section may entertain, it is principally meant to be useful. For pocket reference, not the coffee table.
- Systematic* Systematize, because men like system and making theories is my job. Keep the information objective, not personal.
- Dense* Distill each section down to its most concise form. Write and organize the material to fit the page, making use of every line.

Q You also wrote a book on ties and tie knots. What was that about?

During the last two centuries, a new tie knot has been discovered every 50 years or so. In response to this, a colleague and I published a couple of mathematics papers in which we proved there are exactly 85 tie knots possible, about 14 of which are worth using to tie your tie. The technical papers were the starting point for the popular book, *The 85 Ways to Tie a Tie*. It is about the history, fashion and mathematics of ties and tie knots.

Q What is your favorite...

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| beer Chimay Blue | film. <i>Casino</i> |
| Bond actor. George Lazenby | football team. New York Jets |
| cigarette. Lucky Strike | rifle270 Winchester |
| drinking game. beer pong | tailor. Gieves and Hawkes |
| exercise pull-ups | tie knot. Nicky |