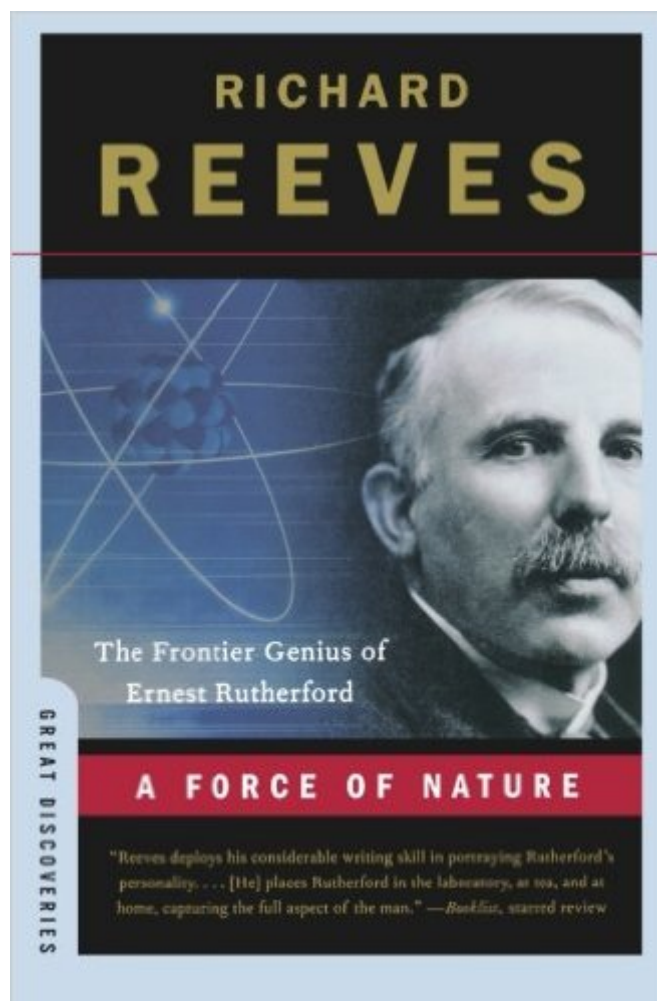


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A Force Of Nature: The Frontier Genius Of Ernest Rutherford (Great Discoveries)



Synopsis

"Starred Review. Reeves deploys his considerable writing skill in portraying Rutherford's personality ... capturing the full aspect of the man." "Booklist Born in colonial New Zealand, Ernest Rutherford grew up on the frontier "a different world from Cambridge, to which he won a scholarship at the age of twenty-four. His work revolutionized modern physics. Among his discoveries were the orbital structure of the atom and the concept of the "half-life" of radioactive materials. Rutherford and the young men working under him were the first to split the atom, unlocking tremendous forces "forces, as Rutherford himself predicted, that would bring us the atomic bomb. In Richard Reeves's hands, Rutherford comes alive, a ruddy, genial man and a pivotal figure in scientific history.

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Customer Reviews

There have been many biographies of Ernest Rutherford; what does Richard Reeves 'A Force of Nature' contribute to what has already been done? In a few words: popular accessibility. This is a book of scientific biography for a popular audience, and it works. Like other entrants in the Norton 'Great Discoveries' series, the point is the explication of a great scientific discovery and the life of the person most responsible for bringing it about. Reeves has already proven himself an accomplished biographer, especially of Presidents Reagan, Nixon, and Kennedy. This is apparently his first biography of a scientist. Reeves traces Rutherford's trajectory from New Zealand to the Cavendish in Cambridge to McGill (in Montreal) to Manchester and beyond. But the real story is

Rutherford's discovery of the structure of the atom. Although the topic may sound boring to those not interested in such things, Reeves effectively relays the excitement and drama of this particular scientific discovery (the ability to do so of which is the real strength of many of the books in the 'Great Discoveries' series). Here's but one example: Reeves describing Rutherford's reaction after his team first split the atom: "Rutherford's first reaction was to swear Cockcroft, Walton, and Chadwick to secrecy...until the results could be published in 'Nature'. Only God could know what the Americans would come up with if they knew in advance of publication. ... Of course the secret did not really hold...Rutherford [soon] told members [of the Royal Society] what happened...then he swept his arm toward Cockcroft and Walton and boomed out, 'Stand up, boys! Let everyone have a look at you!' " (p.

There are probably only a handful of scientists the average educated person could name, among them Galileo, Newton, Einstein. And, of course, even a typical educated person might have trouble saying something about why these scientists are so important. This is too bad. Not just because of what it says about science education in the world today but because there are so many scientists whose work deserves better recognition. Ernest Rutherford is one of those who deserves better. Many students comes across Rutherford in middle or high school during the study of the atom. Rutherford's "gold foil experiment" through which he identified the atomic nucleus and developed the "solar system" model of the atom is a standard part of the curriculum. However, this only touches on Rutherford's body of work and says nothing about the type of man, and scientist, he was. In *A Force of Nature*, Richard Reeves does an excellent job of bringing both to the fore. Mr. Reeve's describes many of Rutherford's achievements in a very accessible way. Rutherford's work ranged from investigations of radio and radioactivity to basic sonar concepts during the war. His work on the atom included more than just his well-know discovery of the nucleus. He also was the first to split the atom, though he never realized (or admitted he realized) the awesome power potential of this process. His work earned him a Nobel Prize (in chemistry, Rutherford would sneer) as well as a number of other awards and honors, including the prestigious directorship of the Cavendish Laboratories. But Mr. Reeve is also able to give a real sense of Rutherford as a human being. As a "colonial" (a New Zealander), Rutherford found it difficult to fit in with the Cambridge set when he earned a scholarship to attend.

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