

Book Reviews

Rebel with causes

|By Joseph Wilson

THE SCIENTIST AS REBEL by Freeman Dyson (New York Review), 360 pages, \$36.95 cloth.

Rating: NNNNN

This collection of essays by eminent physicist Freeman Dyson touches on everything from the state of contemporary science to war, religion and poetry.

Dyson isn't afraid to take intellectual risks by musing on difficult topics in a public forum. Most of these essays are culled from the New York Review of Books, which may give reviewers 4,000 words or more to explore a topic rather than just provide an opinion of the book at hand.

The best essays here are his most personal. Dyson's reflections on Edward Teller, Richard Feynman and other 20th-century physicists are informed by the fact he and they were colleagues, working together on some of the most pivotal scientific undertakings of the past century.

One of these was the Manhattan Project, which saw the development of the atomic bomb. Like Einstein, Dyson wrestled with his conscience, vacillating between supporting the Allied attempt to rid the world of Fascism and denouncing the militarism of the Western world.

He tackles these complex moral issues with courage, and in each essay reaffirms the goal of science to subvert and challenge authority figures wherever they appear. His aim is to be a scientist and an ethical citizen. Religious figures, governments, the literary canon, even other scientists can be the targets of Dyson's scythe-like critiques.

He pokes holes in conventional opinions on everything from bioethics to climate change, but he uncarries out these intellectual explorations with the greatest respect.

Dyson is now 84 and in many of these essays looks wistfully back at his life, yet none of these recollections is tinged with sentimentality.

Postscripts after every essay, written in 2006 in his office at Princeton, show that Freeman Dyson is still keenly aware of the world around him and ready to call bullshit when he sees it.

