



Strange Beauty: Murray Gell-Mann and the Revolution in Twentieth-Century Physics

George Johnson

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No contemporary scientist has done more to shape our understanding of the universe than Murray Gell-Mann, the Nobel Prize-winner many consider the most brilliant physicist of his generation. His discoveries of the quark and the Eightfold Way were cornerstones for all that has followed in particle physics, the effort to explain the very stuff of creation. In this first biography of Gell-Mann, George Johnson tells the story of a remarkable life.

Born on New York's Lower East Side, Gell-Mann was quickly recognized as a child prodigy. Propelled by an intense boyhood curiosity and a love for nature, he entered Yale at fifteen. By age twenty-three he had ignited a revolution, laying bare in his groundbreaking work the strange beauty of the minute particles that constitute the ultimate components of physical reality.

Particle physics is the most competitive of sports, and Johnson shows us the precocious polymath holding his own with giants like Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, and Richard Feynman -- Gell-Mann's favorite intellectual sparring partner and sometimes antagonistic rival. We see Gell-Mann the self-taught linguist (who couldn't resist correcting visitors on the pronunciation of their own names); Gell-Mann the birdwatcher and amateur archaeologist; Gell-Mann the Aspen socialite, world traveler, and environmental crusader.

We watch him making his scientific breakthroughs, his abrasive, competitive drive leaving behind a growing trail of enemies. The early death of his first wife and a family crisis sent him veering in new directions. Turning from the physics of simple particles, like quarks, he began exploring how complex phenomena like life can be understood scientifically.

George Johnson's informed and insightful biography goes far in helping us understand the complexities of both the man and the science in which he has loomed so large.

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