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5 Great Science Book Gift Ideas

By **Andrew Zimmerman Jones**, About.com Guide December 18, 2011[My Bio](#) | [Headlines](#) | [Forum](#) | [RSS](#)

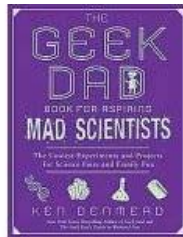
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A couple of weeks ago I mentioned one of my favorite science-related Christmas gifts, the copy of *The Physics of Christmas* which I received as a teenager from my grandmother. If you're still in the process of searching for a great gift for your positively neuro-atypical friends and family members, here are a few other suggestions.

1. *The Geek Dad Book for Aspiring Mad Scientists: The Coolest Experiments for Science Fairs and Family Fun* by Ken Denmead



For the family-oriented science book, there's really nothing that can

top this volume, put together by the editor of *Wired* magazine's [Geek Dad blog](#). With a stronger science emphasis than the previous two books in the series (*Geek Dad* and *The Geek Dad's Guide to Weekend Fun*), this book works for pretty much any member of the family who has an interest in science. Kids can get it for parents, parents can get it for kids, or Santa can get it for the whole family.

What's nice about this gift is that, much like board games and card games, the gift is not merely a gift, but rather a promise--a sacred covenant, if you will--between giver and recipient. It is a promise of future joint activities, of experiments to be planned and executed, of time to be spent together making it, really, one of the best possible holiday gifts.

2. *The Nerdist Way: How to Reach the Next Level*

(in Real Life) by Chris Hardwick

This book is less directly scientific than the rest of those on this list, but I'm including it because I think it will appeal to the scientifically minded. This humorous self-help book explains how to take the passion that makes one a nerd and turning it into a true art form. Once you have become a nerd artist - or nerdist, if you will - then you will learn how to take all of the energy that had previously been devoted to myriad tasks and use them, with laser-precise focus, to improve your life. It worked for Chris Hardwick, the nerd-turned-nerdist who transformed his own life in this way.

Why would a scientist like this book? That question is answered in a chapter near the end conveniently titled "Recurring Themes of this Book." The first theme listed is Measurement, and the section begins:

Data. The key to mastering anything is data.... It should then be your pursuit to be an information gatherer.... we must listen to numbers and data so we can form a relationship with them. Through this empirical understanding, we are able to take this tangible information and manipulate it to suit our wants, needs, and goals.

Assuming that "manipulate" is meant in the non-nefarious sense, this sounds very much like the way scientists talk about data and their relationship to it. So any book which would attempt to transform life through scientific means is pretty cool in my book.

3. *Unraveling the Mysteries of the Big Bang Theory* by George Beahm

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Anyone who's read this blog for any period of time has likely figured out that I'm a big fan of CBS's hit sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, which explores the adventures of a group of geeky scientists (and an engineer) and the trials in their lives and romances. This new book from the wonderful Smart Pop Books imprint goes behind the scenes to explore why this series works so well. The book begins with the series' inception, including in-depth looks at both the failed 2006 pilot and the retooled, successful 2007 pilot. He then goes on to explore the characters and setting of the series.

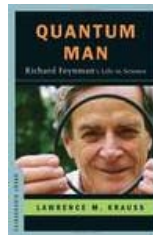


Of course, science itself plays a big part in the show. I've done my part on this website to begin explaining some of the science behind individual episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* (and my DVR currently contains another 60+ episodes from syndication that need added). Author George Beahm doesn't shy away from this either, with chapters such as:

- A Condensed History of the Universe, from the Big Bang to the Twenty-first Century
- Science Matters
- Stellar Scientists Star on *The Big Bang Theory*
- The Science of *The Big Bang Theory*: A Primer for the Science-Impaired, Perpetually Perplexed, but Sufficiently Intelligent Person

4. *Quantum Man: Richard Feynman's Life in Science* by Lawrence Krauss

[Richard Feynman](#) is one of the biggest names in twentieth century physics, a man who developed fundamental insights into the quantum world while also making great efforts to reach out and explain science to the masses, at a time where such things were rarely done.



One of the best science biographies of the year (and the [Physics World](#) podcast seems to agree, placing it on their top 10 list), The thing that makes this book is great is that it's written by an actual physicist, which means the emphasis is entirely placed on Feynman's approach to science. There are references to the various distractions from his life - the "curious character mythology" which he himself helped to cultivate in his own biographies - but by and large this study is of Feynman's scientific character, which is curious in the sense that he himself continually sought to understand the world around him in very fundamental ways.

For the science enthusiast, especially those who are in the process of studying physics, this is an invaluable resource to understanding the way a scientists should approach questions of a theoretical nature.

5. *Knocking on Heaven's Door: How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe and the Modern World* by Lisa Randall

The list really wouldn't be complete without at least one book that contains a fairly comprehensive history of modern physics and attempts to explain cutting edge physics theories in a way that is completely accessible to the non-scientist. There's no shortage of these books, but one which has been getting a lot of positive press lately is Lisa Randall's new tome, *Knocking on Heaven's Door*.



I'm going out on a limb suggesting this book, though, because the fact is that I have yet to read it. I've seen her discuss it numerous places, including this [interview on The Daily Show](#). I've had the book sitting on my shelf for a few weeks, but just haven't had time to pick it up for more than a casual reading. Still, the nice thing about it is that in addition to explaining science it does one of my other favorite things:

It tries to make the case that scientific thinking is relevant to the world at large, such as in cases of evaluating risk in non-scientific situations like politics and economics.

Some critiques of the book complain about it being overly-redundant and that many of the anecdotes are over-used, but the reader who has read these books can easily enough skim those parts and get to the meatier subjects quickly enough, I imagine. And, of course, for the reader who likes science but doesn't have a strong background, that level of redundancy may be necessary to get the point across.

So there you have it, a set of 5 books that should give you some ideas for filling out your science-based Christmas gift list. And, of course, if none of those seem to fit the bill, there are always more options ...

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