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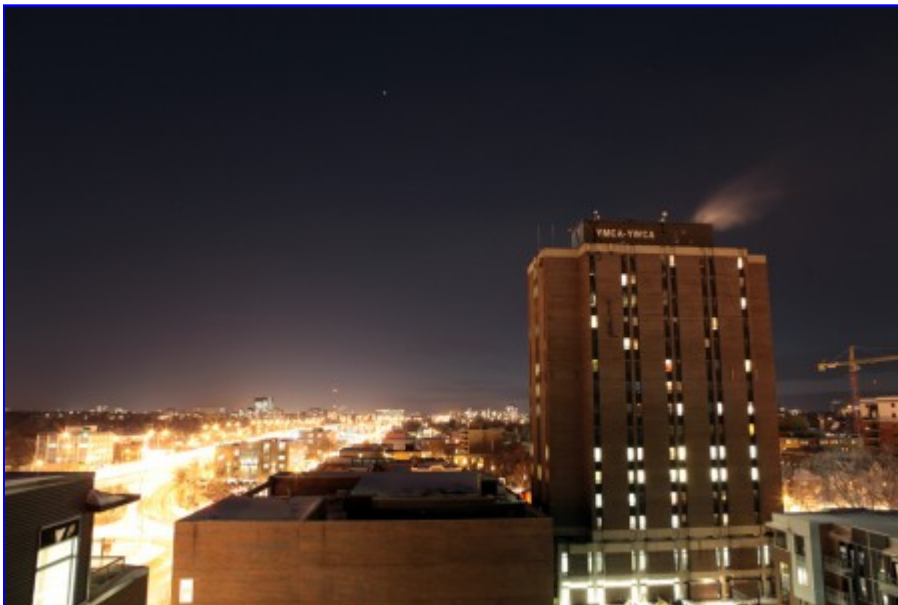
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## Feynman and the Trinity test

February 22, 2011[[edit](#)]

in [Bombs and rockets](#), [Books and literature](#), [Geek stuff](#), [Science](#), [Writing](#)



In several of his writings, American physicist Richard Feynman claims that he was the only person

Everyone else, he claims, was looking through something akin to welding goggles.

This claim is contradicted in chapter 18 of Richard Rhodes' *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, in which Rhodes claims that [Ernest Lawrence](#) considered watching the test through a windshield, but decided to step out of the car and watch it directly, and that [Robert Serber](#) also watched with unprotected eyes.

Feynman does come up a few times in Rhodes' Pulitzer Prize-winning book. He is quoted on the limitations of human understanding (p.32-33 paperback), the boundaries of science (35), and the status of [Seth Neddermeyer](#)'s plutonium implosion setup in 1943 (479). The book also describes Feynman coining of the term 'tickling the dragon's tail' to describe [Otto Robert Frisch](#)'s dangerous criticality experiment (611), and fixing a shortwave radio being used during the Trinity test itself (668). In one of his books, Feynman describes how he began fixing neighbourhood radios as a small boy.

I am not sure whose account of who watched the Trinity test how is correct. That said, while Feynman is a wonderful character, there is sometimes something a bit over-polished in the stories in his numerous autobiographies, and the details don't always seem to fully accord between them. Perhaps that can be put down to the subjectivity of memory, but it also suggests that this famous prankster may not always have been a completely reliable narrator.

{ 6 comments... read them below or [add one](#) }



EK [February 22, 2011 at 12:11 pm](#) [\[edit\]](#)

This book sounds great – you keep mentioning it and each time I bump it higher on my to-read list. I will grab it ASAP, especially since I'm studying the Manhattan Project soon in my history of science core class.



R.K. [February 22, 2011 at 12:33 pm](#) [\[edit\]](#)

I think you mean 'whose' account. Also, there is faulty parallelism in the list of page references.



Matt [February 22, 2011 at 2:28 pm](#) [\[edit\]](#)

*Also, there is faulty parallelism in the list of page references.*

And I thought I could be pedantic!



Grammar corrected! I really do appreciate any and all free editing services. After all, I don't want people scoffing at my errors when they find these posts via Google.



[Michael A. Gottlieb February 23, 2011 at 8:32 am](#) [\[edit\]](#)

Dear Mr. Ilnyckyj,

You write, "In several of his writings, American physicist Richard Feynman claims that he was the only person who watched the Trinity Test relatively directly, using a windshield to exclude ultraviolet light." I do not think that is true. In "Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman" (which is, surely, Mr. Feynman's most popular work) he says, "I am about the only guy who actually looked at the damn thing—the first Trinity test. Everybody else had dark glasses, and the people at six miles couldn't see it because they were all told to lie on the floor. I'm probably the only guy who saw it with the human eye." (You can also find this quoted verbatim in Mehra's biography.) Feynman does not positively state that he was the only person who saw the event with naked eyes, as you claim that he does "in several of his writings." It seems clear that he did not know if he was the only one or not, and only supposed that he probably was. "Probably" does not mean "definitely," particularly to a physicist, and particularly in an informal conversation (which this statement came from – Feynman never wrote it at all – he was tape recorded, telling his stories in an informal setting, and the recordings were later transcribed and edited by Ralph Leighton). In the letter that Feynman wrote to his mother the day after the A-bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, in which he describes the Trinity test (published in Michelle Feynman's collection of her father's correspondence), Feynman mentions the welder's glasses and the fact that he viewed (or tried to view) the blast through a windshield instead, but he says nothing at all about what other people were doing (I suppose, at the time, he was not paying careful attention to other people, but rather, to the events of the day!). The same story is told in Gleick's biography, without Feynman making any claims to exclusivity in viewing the Trinity test without dark glasses. In fact, I can not find nor remember anywhere that Feynman ever made such a claim (despite the fact that I have read most of the works written by or about him, and much of his unpublished writings as well). So, in my opinion, your claim about Feynman is unjustified, which, ironically, makes your conclusion about Feynman and his stories seems more applicable to you and your story about Feynman, that "there is sometimes something a bit over-polished ... and the details don't always seem to fully accord ... Perhaps that can be put down to the subjectivity of memory, but it also suggests that this famous prankster may not always have been a completely reliable narrator."

Best regards,  
Mike Gottlieb  
Editor, The Feynman Lectures on Physics



[Milan February 23, 2011 at 8:59 am](#) [\[edit\]](#)

Thank you for your detailed and informative comment.

I may well be wrong about exactly what Feynman claimed. I will check my collection of Feynman books and see if I can find a stronger claim in any of them.

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