

# Example of beginnings: unwanted child to great scientist essay

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## **Isaac Newton by James Gleick**

Introduction:

Isaac Newton is probably one of the most famous scientists of the Renaissance age, and with his discovery of gravity, he definitely entered into the annals of history. Gleick's book is instructive and quite useful, since it throws new light on this rather mysterious scientific figure. Newton's early past is also given considerable exposure, and since this has often been overlooked, Gleick's book is definitely quite useful in this area.

Isaac Newton was born in 1642, his first forays into the world were quite harrowing since he came from an unknown father and his mother did not want him either. This inauspicious beginning is in stark contrast to his death in 1727, he had become a worldwide figure and was given a state funeral, something that was unheard of in that day and age, especially from those who came from the intellectual side of things. Newton was an almost irascible force during his time at Trinity College, Cambridge and the way he managed to coin names for properties of nature is nothing short of remarkable. Gleick does not dwell much on Newton's childhood since it is unimportant in the grand scheme of things, we are only afforded a foretaste of what was to come later when the perseverance of the child was to come into the equation especially when he had to face the traditionalist element at Cambridge University.

James Gleick is well known as one of the finest science writers at the moment and his effort on Newton enables us to delve deeper into Newton's quite private life with very clear explanations of concepts that have changed

us forever – these are words and terms that we take completely for granted. Newton was inspired by philosophers and scientists such as Aristotle and Galileo – these figures were perhaps the training ground for his experiments that coined the names of mass, gravity and velocity. Gleick goes into considerable detail on the processes that Newton went through to come up with these theories and the result is quite fascinating.

## **Newton the scientist**

We have the image of Newton as a figure from the school books, sitting under an apple tree as he discovers the secrets of gravity. What is definitely important about this book is that Newton was much more than just the scientist who invented gravity and Gleick does delve deeply into this aspect of Newton's life. The author uses an accessible style but this is occasionally hampered by the esoteric processes that Newton was so fond of. Some passages in the book are particularly important; we tend to forget that Newton was the scientist who invented the process of calculus. At first the text may seem to be pedantic but if one sticks with the book then the rewards are great. We are made to understand the thought process of Newton who was often alone; in fact he did most of his thinking and experimenting in a solitary state. One of the most entertaining parts of the book is the way Gleick describes the experiment with the eye where Newton almost lost his sight in order to find out how the eye processed particular images. This matter of fact style makes the book all the more engaging, even to those who have not heard anything about Newton.

Newton rose from relatively poor beginnings to become one of the most

influential scientists of his generation. Gleick's painstaking efforts to find out more about the man are reflected in the way he uses his notebooks and other accounts to arrive at the truth that is not always very palatable. Gleick is an excellent writer, so we are never left out of sorts as we observe and learn more about Newton. We come to the conclusion that Newton was a very complicated man and that the myth of falling apples was really that, just a myth.

Gleick's writing usually falls into two sections, the character study or a very broad analysis of scientific trends. In this book on Newton, he manages to link both together in a very successful way and the end result is a biography that goes to the heart of the matter on several issues but remains a bit short, both on the personal as well as the scientific. We are taken back into Newton's time with the extensive reproduction of papers as well as historic accounts that really re-live the occasion. The book has no less than sixty pages of notes that are fastidiously indexed – this reveals the painstaking work carried out by Gleick as he compiled the book.

If I were to criticise the book it would be on its lack of depth in certain scientific matters, something not usual with Gleick. There is a lot of historical detail in the narrative but the analysis of Newton the scientist seems to be that little bit distant. Compared to the Feynman biography, Gleick may seem slightly shallow especially when he is analysing the scientific disputes between Newton and Leibniz for example. On the positive side, Gleick brings a lot of colour and panache to Newton's scientific discoveries that are re-enacted in a very direct and attractive manner. Newton's earnestness on the mathematical side of things is also very well analysed by Gleick and the book

is definitely serviceable as a study on Newton. One would have perhaps expected better from such a talented writer as Gleick, although that criticism may seem harsh to those who are not initiated in science.

However, Gleick's book shows us the human side of Newton's character and his multi-faceted talents. First and foremost, he was a scientist but he was also a student of the bible as well as Master of the Mint for almost three decades. Although Gleick does seem to gloss over the other achievements in great detail, we are led to believe that Newton really did change his world with his mathematical thoughts and beliefs. Leibniz was very generous in his praise of Newton who was described as having begun an era of science that could never go back to what it was. Gleick's book brings out the eccentricity and sheer intelligence of Newton in several ways. His writing is at once understandable and interesting, and we do get to know the essence of the man's character through its pages. Gleick's book is an excellent read; it has several positive aspects and will definitely prove to be an eye opener to those who are not that mathematically minded. The genius of Newton is never in doubt throughout its pages.

### **Works Cited:**

Gleick J; Isaac Newton, Vintage 2004, London, Print