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My friend, Stephen Hawking

Stubborn, funny and a man of iron behind a frail facade. This is the Stephen Hawking remembered by fellow physicist Leonard Mlodinow, finds **Gege Li**



Book

Stephen Hawking: A memoir of friendship and physics

Leonard Mlodinow

Allen Lane

WHEN physicist Stephen Hawking died in 2018 at the age of 76, the world mourned. But after the loss, there remains the enormous legacy of the scientist and the man to consider.

And what a legacy. Renowned for decades of work on cosmology and black holes, with *A Brief History of Time* selling more than 25 million copies since its release in 1988, Hawking reshaped our understanding of some of the trickiest areas in modern physics.

Among his achievements was the discovery of something now named in his honour, Hawking radiation. The once-derided idea that black holes emit radiation made him famous. He ended up widely considered the greatest mind of his time and was even dubbed “master of the universe”.

Despite the acclaim, there is still much to discover about Hawking. In *Stephen Hawking: A memoir of friendship and physics*, theoretical physicist Leonard Mlodinow offers an intimate glimpse inside the famous scientist’s life, ranging from early days at university and diagnosis aged 21 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, the motor neurone disease that gradually paralysed him) to his later status as an international celebrity.

After co-authoring two books with Hawking, Mlodinow isn’t short of stories, particularly from time spent working together on their book *The Grand Design*. Hawking lived a colourful life often fraught with hardship, and



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the possibility of death was never far away. Far from letting this be a setback, it is what Hawking credits for his achievements.

“It helped me focus,” he tells Mlodinow after dinner one night.

Even so, Mlodinow admits that initially he couldn’t help but feel sorry for Hawking, living with a condition that required round-

“Over time, the initial pity Mlodinow felt for Hawking would evaporate like one of Stephen’s black holes”

the-clock care and eventually left him unable to speak or voluntarily move anything but his eyes, brows and mouth. However, writes Mlodinow, “over time all that pity would evaporate like one of Stephen’s black holes”, adding that it “occurred to me that Stephen

Hawking said his medical condition helped his focus

had proved himself to be an iron man in a frail man’s facade”.

That view becomes one that readers will also be inclined to adopt as Mlodinow looks back. On one visit to Cambridge, where Hawking studied, worked and lived for over 50 years, Mlodinow tells how Hawking keenly advocated for a punting trip.

Despite Mlodinow’s concerns about dangerous consequences, Hawking was all smiles as he directed himself onboard, signalling with his eyes and mouth, and was fed strawberries and champagne. “Danger seemed to make him feel alive,” writes Mlodinow. “In life as in physics, he liked to take chances.”

This rebellious streak permeated all Hawking’s activities.

“He ignored conventional wisdom... He drove his car wildly and recklessly, and his physics was also wild and unrestrained,” writes Mlodinow. Then there was Hawking’s stubbornness.

Mlodinow recounts a visit to a restaurant without a disabled toilet. In response, Hawking relieves himself outside in a bottle and instructs his carer (despite her embarrassment) to empty the bottle into the bushes near the kitchen. The chef was angry, but Hawking was angrier.

According to Mlodinow, Hawking knew his fame granted him better care than most people with ALS, so he pushed hard for accessibility in public spaces and was less than pleased when they failed people with disabilities.

These small stories all add up to a picture of a man who, despite his physical vulnerability, had an immense passion for life. And although physics played a large part in his life, it wasn’t his entire life. “Love is life,” he once told Mlodinow in response to his friend’s suggestion that physics was everything to Hawking.

There was no clearer demonstration of this than in the connections he forged, with colleagues, carers, partners and children – the latter, he tells Mlodinow, are his favourite accomplishment. That was the last time Mlodinow saw Hawking.

Achievement came in many forms for Hawking, who refused to be constrained in thought or deed. As Mlodinow writes: “Often we limit our chances at success by limiting the goals toward which we strive. Stephen never did that... We can get used to anything, and we can accomplish, if not anything, then at least much more than we give ourselves credit for. To grow close to Stephen was to understand this.” ■