

Too easy to simulate science

Nonscience
By Brian J. Ford
(Wolfe £2.00)

From time to time the television authorities cast a wistful glance back to their early days and broadcast a science spoof. These are frequently appended to an otherwise impeccably correct programme so that after eloquent explanations of the nature of quarks or the hunt for the intermediate vector boson, the unsuspecting viewer is invited to believe in an attempt to transmit odour by electromagnetic radiation, or a psychoanalysis of plants tortured by telepathy.

All good harmless fun; but such skits are certain to arouse protests from scientists. It is hard enough, they complain, for us to convince the public of the significance and purpose of science without clouding the issue with humour. In short, it is just too damn easy to parody science; the uninitiated have no reasonable way of telling the genuine from the facetious.

This attitude sums up my feelings towards Mr Ford's book, although polarized in the opposite sense. It is just too damn easy to set down the undesirable facts about the practice of

science and expect people to find it funny.

Mr Ford seeks to convince us that the day of the true scientists, honest, upright, devoted to integrity and the pursuit of truth is past. In his place now stands the nonscientist, the Expert with a capital E, the fact-filled ignoramus grubbing after money and status conning his way up the ladder of scientific prestige in an effort to rule the world. The author provides a flow chart so that the aspiring Expert can best direct his energies towards achieving his end. It shows how to reject intellect in favour of memory, conformity for originality and integrity for considered circumspection. The tyro is exhorted to work hard to fulfil the goals of university entrance, degrees, learned papers and research publicized in the national dailies all leading to fame and recognition. But none of this is indisposible; the expert who finds himself lamentably light on qualifications should invent them, says Mr Ford, for few will inquire into their legitimacy.

And of course Mr Ford is right. By all accounts he is doing very well out of his own brand of expertism (sic). The book jacket describes his private

science consultants' laboratory in Cardiff as "well equipped", and he claims to have published over 1,000 articles before the age of 28. (Not a difficult task to judge by his rate of production—*Nonscience* was published on September 30, 1971, and contains references to newspaper articles published on the seventh of the same month.)

Mr Ford's idea is not novel—William Davis in *Punch* is only one of a number of commentators who have drawn gloomy pictures of the Expert as a warped academic, and there is little in *Nonscience* to rejuvenate the old joke. In particular, the practice of coining long and abstruse phrases throughout the book to illustrate the Expert—and expertist—obscurantism is a good example—grows wearisome after the first three pages, especially to those whose task in life is to explain things scientific in terms layman (and Times roman).

The key to the book may lie in its humour, which is unsibble and lugubrious.

Perhaps this is the caveat which Mr Ford has thoughtfully provided to prevent the reader from taking his thesis too seriously.

Alan Cane

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