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Strung out across the universe

10 April 2004 by Michael Duff
Magazine issue 2442. [Subscribe and save](#)

The Fabric of the Cosmos by Brian Greene, Allen Lane, £25, ISBN 0713996773

LET'S face it: theoretical physics is usually a conversation-stopper at cocktail parties. True, Stephen Hawking has an enormous popular following, but that interest has as much to do with his extraordinary personality as it has with public fascination with quantum black holes or space-time singularities. Enter superstring theorist Brian Greene with his physics-for-the-layman blockbuster The Elegant Universe. Suddenly, talk-show hosts and producers of TV mini-series are scrambling for his attention, while "dark matter" and "extra space-time dimensions" are now essential vocabulary among the chattering classes.

So Greene has raised great expectations for his sequel The Fabric of the Cosmos, devoted to space, time and the nature of reality. He does not disappoint. With a palpable passion for his subject, the author displays a remarkable talent for explaining abstract concepts in simple terms. Topics that have been treated ad nauseam by other popularisers, such as special relativity, quantum mechanics, general relativity, black holes and the big bang, are given a new lease of life with Greene's user-friendly analogies and skilful turn of phrase. But he doesn't stop there. The arrow of time, the Higgs boson, the inflationary theory of cosmology, dark energy, 10-dimensional superstrings, teleportation and time travel are all treated with the same originality, clarity and wit.

The ambitious hope of theoretical physicists is that the answers to all these big questions will ultimately be found in a final all-embracing theory. Greene presents a convincing case that the best candidate is M-theory, which involves microscopic p-dimensional membranes, known as p-branes, inhabiting an 11-dimensional universe. M-theory unifies what were previously thought to be five rival superstring theories and does much more to boot.

A spin-off from M-theory is the braneworld, according to which our universe is a giant three-brane floating in an 11-dimensional bulk space-time. This in turn suggests the existence of other universes parallel to ours, stacked up like a pack of playing cards. Greene devotes a section to the proposition that the big bang was nothing but the collision of two such three-branes (more like the big splat).

So make sure you have read The Fabric of the Cosmos before your next cocktail party. It will both cause a stir and shake the Martinis.

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