Einstein vs Predator

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Einstein vs Predator is a light-hearted exploration of the science behind the science fiction featured in a range of popular and successful science fiction books, series and films, ranging from Mary Shelley's Frankenstein to James Cameron's Avatar and other more recent releases. Using these as a springboard to introduce concepts such as time travel, the colonisation of other planets and spontaneous human combustion, Palacios sets out clearly the relevant physical theories and discusses whether the feats featured in the science fiction would be possible to any degree if subject to the laws of physics as we understand it, if so, how the conditions in the example might have to be adjusted to achieve this, and if not, why not.

In terms of science and science fiction, the reader is expected to have an interest in rather than a good knowledge of these areas. Despite his own advanced knowledge of both fields, Palacios is conscious that his readers may be amateur enthusiasts and the level of scientific understanding required is certainly not above secondary school level. With regard to science fiction and cinema, Palacios gives sufficient back-story for the reader to engage with the examples on which he focuses. In addition, while some of the cinematic examples date back as far as 1915 and the literary ones even further, they are, for the most part, mainstream films and books that the reader is likely to know of, even if they have not seen or read them. Furthermore, Palacios provides a useful index of films cited at the end of the book, giving details of their titles in both Spanish and their original language, year of release, director, country of origin and a brief synopsis.

Palacios' writing is engaging, informal and verging on conversational, making frequent use of rhetorical questions and tongue-in-cheek asides. Some jokes were somewhat sexual in nature, which might require editing depending on the target audience. Readers with a more advanced knowledge of the subject matter might consider Palacios' tone to be patronising and the presentation of the various topics to be overly simplistic. However, combined with well chosen, engaging and easily visualised examples, Palacios' style allows him to make complex and potentially intimidating theories accessible and comprehensible to the lay reader. There were also moments when some of the scenarios Palacios suggested made me laugh out loud.

The chapters are, for the most part, independent of each other in terms of content, and where there is overlap or a previous chapter that might aid understanding of the current one, Palacios refers the reader appropriately.

In terms of subject matter, the book would travel well to the UK. Science is international, so the scientific concepts and theories explored by Palacios would not seem foreign to a UK reader, and, as mentioned above, the science fiction material would be familiar to most UK readers. Popular science is an established genre in the UK market, with books such as The New Scientist spin off Why Don't Penguin's Feet Freeze remaining popular and Olivia Judson's Dr Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation receiving favourable reviews in both specialist publications such as Nature and Science and more mainstream publications like The Times and The Economist.

With regard to suitability for translation, there are points to consider rather than obstacles to translating the text into English. All the scientific terms have established English equivalents so this should not be a stumbling block, and there would be no difficulty in translating the names of films or characters back into English. However, there are one or two elements that may require a degree of substitution or adaptation were the book to be translated. Principal of these are the quotations Palacios includes at the start of each chapter. Amongst those quoted are Einstein, George Elliot, Aristotle, Antoine de Saint Exupéry and Mario Vargas Llosa. As a group these might raise an issue of seeking permission to use either the text, in the case of quotations that were originally in English, or an established translation of quotations from other languages. It may also be worth considering substituting some of the quotations of Spanish or Latin-American origin with English language quotations that would be more familiar to a UK reader. There are also some references to Spanish averages and survey sample groups where, if available, a British or American equivalent might be more relevant for a UK reader.

Palacios is a professor at the Universidad de Oviedo where he specialises in applied physics. In 2004 he began offering a new course on Physics in Science Fiction and in mid-2006 he began publishing short articles and writing a blog under the same title. Palacios published his first book, La Guerra de dos mundos (literally The War of Two Worlds) in 2008, also with Robinbook. The approach and the general subject area covered in La Guerra de dos mundos are similar to those of Einstein versus predator, which is, essentially, a sequel. La Guerra de dos mundos

is not currently available in English, but this would not necessarily be a barrier to translating Einstein versus predator as a stand-alone book. While there are a few references to La Guerra de dos mundos in Einstein versus predator, these could easily be removed without compromising the style, content or coherence of the text. Palacios does, on occasion, refer the reader to other chapters within Einstein verusus Predator, but the references to his previous work are made in passing and there is absolutely no need for the reader to have read it to follow the science or the science fiction contained in Einstein versus Predator.

Over all this is an enjoyable read that introduces some quite complex physics in an entertaining and accessible manner and changes the way you read or watch science fiction without ruining your reading or viewing enjoyment. If it were available in English, I would recommend it to friends and family.

This is a summary of the report by Isabele Kaufeller.