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In Brief

Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit, *and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes*, I will be brief.

—Act 2, Scene 2, *Hamlet* [1]

Every time I visit the local bookstore, I am intrigued by a revolving clear plastic bookcase displaying a changing selection of colorful paperbacks. Each volume is small enough to fit easily in a jacket pocket and is no more than 150 pages, all told. These books form part of the popular *Very Short Introductions* series [2] published by the Oxford University Press. The series has grown to include over 700 titles, ranging from abolitionism to Zionism, and span fields as diverse as the arts, the humanities, and the sciences. The topic of a volume can be as broad as engineering and as narrow as typography.

Naturally, I wondered which of the books in the series are connected to our own discipline and how they have covered the field. I started my investigation with a volume labeled *Physics: A Very Short Introduction* [3] by Prof. Sidney Perkowitz of Emory University (Georgia USA). The opening words of the preface concede that physics [3] “is a huge topic spanning big stretches of time, space, and ideas. The science itself is as old as the natural philosophy of the ancient Greeks, and as new as the most recent data from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration

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(NASA) or European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) and the latest technology.” The book is not organized like a physics textbook with sections on mechanics, heat, electricity, and so on. Rather, drawing upon his lifelong experience as a physics researcher and educator in industrial, academic, and government laboratories, the author shows what physics covers and (just as importantly) what it does not, how physics works and how it is applied, how it has become a force in our society, and finally what questions remain unanswered.

The series includes separate volumes devoted to sound, light, and waves. I looked through the volume *Waves* by Mike Goldsmith [4]. In the first chapter, Goldsmith introduces the essential wave phenomena, including longitudinal and transverse waves, reflection, refraction, and interference. The subsequent chapters examine different kinds of waves: water waves, sound waves, seismic waves, biological waves, electromagnetic waves, quantum waves, and gravitational waves. The chapter on electromagnetic waves describes the spectrum from radio waves through gamma rays. There are illustrations showing the fields produced by the alternating current in an electric dipole and a propagating trans-

verse electromagnetic wave. However, Maxwell’s equations do not make even a cameo appearance.

One volume [5] by Prof. Frank James of the Royal Institution (London, England) is devoted to the life and work of Michael Faraday. Prof. James is a historian of science and has worked on Faraday for over a quarter of a century, drawing upon archives around the world that hold Faraday’s manuscripts [5]. Interestingly, only two chapters are devoted to his scientific work, including his research on electromagnetic induction, while equal space is given to the evolution of Faraday’s reputation from the Victorian times to the present.

Regrettably, there is yet no volume devoted to electromagnetism or the lives of Maxwell, Hertz, or Marconi. Perhaps, this column will inspire one of the readers to address this glaring gap!

REFERENCES

- [1] “Brevity is the soul of wit’ meaning and context.” No Sweat Shakespeare. Accessed: Sep. 12, 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://nosweatshake.com/quotes/famous/brevity-is-the-soul-of-wit/>
- [2] “Very short introductions,” Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, U.K. Accessed: Sep. 12, 2023. [Online]. Available: <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/v/very-short-introductions-vsi/?cc=us&lang=en&>
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