

the childhood of Isaac Newton

By Steve Legomsky

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

Ladies, Gentleman,

Ahem.

To begin, I'm here to explain why one such as yourself should read Steve Legomsky's, "The Childhood of Isaac Newton."

Let me be the first to say, "Oh, this clever bastard."

I had all the fun reading this piece.

From the humor within, to the irony, to the literariness, to the combination of history and creative nonfiction that I so dearly love, to the utter complexity hidden beneath a clear, concise, damn-fine piece, this work is one of the more entertaining pieces that I have read all year.

Young Sir Isaac Newton is a child prodigy – already having discovered that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Raised by Canadian snowbirds, imagining becoming a Hall of Fame baseball player for the Arizona Diamondbacks, soon to be studying for his bar-mitzvah, young Isaac falls into his own prophecy as he watches the fabled apple fall from the tree.

What I love about this story is its construction, subtlety, and care. You can tell that this was conceived by a human who has written or read enough about Isaac Newton to be able to play around with his life, you can tell that the writer knows how to show and not to tell the reader those moments of pure brilliance that he slips in (no spoilers, but the chance meeting towards the end of the story is a happy-go-lucky chef's kiss), and you know that the writer cares because of the attention to the craft it would take to write this story – the attention to detail needed for you, the reader, to dig into this work.

I think one of my favorite set ups within this piece is Isaac crowdsourcing his bar-mitzvah crowd:

"And yet those in attendance would remark later that that recitation was only the second-most dazzling element of his performance. The most memorable, they said, was his subsequent bar mitzvah speech. Removing an apple from his pocket, he held it dramatically above his head for several seconds and then released it. The spellbound crowd watched as it splattered against the oak floor of the bimah. In the finest Socratic tradition, he posed a rhetorical question to his bewildered audience: "What was that?""

I don't even know what a bimah is, but I know enough to presume that it is a traditional aspect of the ceremony and didn't feel like looking it up, and that fact makes it all the better that Legomsky included it within the piece.

I chuckled throughout this entire piece. It's a rare quality in a story that can make you both smile and tap into your literary mind – "The Childhood of Isaac Newton" has both. I most assuredly suggest that you read this story, I would be remiss to not insist upon it.

So, this is me insisting.

I insist.

Five Stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE: (for the love of language)...

It was perhaps at his fourth birthday party that Isaac's extraordinary mathematical talents first became obvious and his ultimate career path inevitable. When his aunt playfully asked him "How old are you, young man?" an annoyed Isaac replied "the cube root of 64" and proceeded to laugh contemptuously at her confused reaction. As answers like that started becoming routine, his aunt complained to Isaac's parents that this habit had become "tiresome and, frankly, a bit disconcerting," to which Isaac's father replied, "Just wait. This kid is going to be another Einstein.

The Childhood of Isaac Newton

By Steve Legomsky

Isaac Newton was born in 1642 in Tempe, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix. The son of Canadian snowbirds, he was overjoyed the day his parents, tired of their annual migrations, finally resolved to make the Sunbelt their permanent home. "Enough with the schlepping back and forth, already," his father announced.

Isaac's father, Josh, was a struggling hedge fund manager. His mother, Debbie, was an orthodontist. When confronted by his middle class suburban friends, young Isaac would often retort proudly that his parents, though not wealthy, were clean and humble. Pressed on this, he would inevitably have to concede that, by "clean," he didn't necessarily mean "squeaky clean," like in the TV commercials, but "average clean." "Humble," on the other hand, was a perfectly apt description of his unassuming mother, though he had to acknowledge that his father, if anything, was a bit on the arrogant side. "How many men have fathered the inventor of

gravity?” his dad would frequently ask, taunting his colleagues, neighbors, and fellow K-Mart shoppers.

At the core of Isaac’s childhood was a ceaseless tension between his two fundamental passions. Even at an early age, he recognized his own mathematical and scientific brilliance. But his heart was elsewhere. What he wanted more than anything was to become a Hall of Fame third baseman for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Sometimes Isaac’s star third baseman fantasy took the form of excited radio broadcasts that portrayed Isaac electrifying the crowd with his swashbuckling style of play. In bed one night, in hushed but animated tones that he tried hard to prevent his parents from hearing, he announced, with appropriate urgency, “Peralta swings and lines one into right field! It’s a base hit! Newton is rounding third! They’re waving him in! Here’s the throw to the plate! Newton dives! The throw is” – a dramatic pause, then a loud, piercing shout that escaped from his mouth like air from a punctured balloon – “NOT IN TIME!!!” Another dramatic pause, as he listened to the deafening noise of the delirious crowd. “There is pandemonium in Phoenix! This crowd is going berserk!”

As he lay in bed, basking in the bedlam that was washing over him like a warm shower, Isaac’s fantasy was suddenly shattered by the sight and sound of his frightened mother bursting through the door. “Are you all right?” she asked him.

“What?”

“I heard you shriek.”

“No, that wasn’t me.”

“Sorry, it must have been your father again. He’s watching another scary movie. Nighty night, little twinkie.”

Isaac grimaced. Ballplayers hate to be called “little twinkie.” And just for the record, he thought to himself, it wasn’t a “shriek,” but a manly exclamation fully commensurate with the thrill and drama of the moment.

There was just one problem with Isaac’s dream of baseball stardom: He sucked at sports. All sports. When it came time to choose up sides for a pickup baseball game, Isaac was always the last kid chosen and the one instantly banished to the graveyard known as right field.

Meanwhile, his intellectual horizons were expanding at the speed of light at the same time that his athletic mediocrity was careening toward humiliating new lows. Isaac’s destiny was coming into clear focus, for all to see. All except Isaac himself, that is. Everyone else knew early on that he was never going to play third base, or any position for that matter, with the Diamondbacks or any other professional team. They all knew he would be a mathematician and a scientist.

But for most of his childhood, Isaac was in fierce denial. Others could scoff all they liked, he felt. He was adamant that he would never give up on his dream. At times he could even be overheard rehearsing his future Hall of Fame speech. “They all told me I’d never make it as a ballplayer. They said I was no good, I had no talent, I would never grow facial hair. But I never gave up. I plugged away, practicing hitting, fielding, throwing, base-running, autograph-signing, doing shaving commercials. I honed these skills from morning till night, 7 days a week, 365.25 days a year, till my hands were raw, my legs weary, and my face cut up from shaving miscues. And now, here I am, in Cooperstown. Dreams can come true, my friends! [Pausing for frenzied, thundering applause] DREAMS CAN COME TRUE!”

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“How old are you, young man?” an annoyed Isaac replied “the cube root of 64” and proceeded to laugh contemptuously at her confused reaction. As answers like that started becoming routine, his aunt complained to Isaac’s parents that this habit had become “tiresome and, frankly, a bit disconcerting,” to which Isaac’s father replied, “Just wait. This kid is going to be another Einstein.”

Isaac’s aunt was puzzled. “The bagels guy?”

“No, the other one.”

At age 6 came Isaac’s visionary announcement to his friends: “Mark my words. One day, Arizona will be a state.”

“What’s a state?” asked one of his friends. “You mean like Spain, or Myanmar?”

“No, one of the 50 states of the United States. You know, like Michigan, or Ontario.”

Isaac was 9 years old on that now famous, fateful day when, sitting beneath an apple tree while munching on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich during recess, Isaac watched an apple tumble to the ground. His revelation came suddenly. “Why,” he wondered, “do the apples always fall perpendicular to the ground? Why don’t they travel sideways, or even upwards?”

This question consumed Isaac for several days. His initial hypothesis was rooted in what he called his “theory of botanical instinct.” The tree, he speculated, did not want the Santa Ana winds that swept through the desert in the autumn to carry her apples to distant places. Thrusting her apples straight down to the ground would minimize their wind exposure and therefore the distance they would travel from home. Implicit in that theory was Isaac’s assumption that the tree understood intuitively what Isaac had long since proved mathematically -- that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

But he was never really at peace with his “botanical instinct” theory. If the tree’s goal were to keep the apples close to home, he figured, why wouldn’t the tree just wait a little longer and release them during the winter months, once the Santa Ana winds had passed?

It didn’t take long for Isaac to lay his initial theory to rest and consider whether the answer might be found not in the world of botany, but in physics. So he set out to identify the physical forces that impelled apples to plunge headlong toward the earth. With the traumatic memory of having violently pushed away the bowl of borscht that his parents had once commanded him to eat, Isaac wondered: “Might it be that all objects have a natural inclination to push things away from them?” He hypothesized that the force with which they push objects away (F) is directly proportional to how revolting the object is (R) and inversely proportional to the square of the monetary value of the thrust object (M). The formula $F=RM^2$ quickly found its way into Isaac’s notebooks.

But that theory too had a short life. A tree, Isaac realized, doesn’t have arms, unless you count its branches, which at any rate don’t have wrists. “A tree could no sooner thrust an apple to the ground than an NFL wide receiver could spike a football,” he scribbled furiously in his journal. “No, the apple must drop on its own when it’s ripe. And since it always heads straight to the ground, it must be the earth attracting it, not the tree pushing it away like a bowl of borscht.” It didn’t occur to Isaac, brilliant as he was, that the earth didn’t have arms either, so that his theory of gravitational pull was no more logical than his rejected theory of gravitational push, a flaw that physicists at Princeton University would point out only centuries later.

At age 12, on most of the days that his young friends were outdoors playing baseball or basketball after school, Isaac’s parents forced him to toil away in Hebrew school three afternoons a week. On those few afternoons when he was free to play baseball with his friends,

he would regale them in between innings with fascinating tales, learned in Hebrew school, about the history of the Jewish people.

Mesmerized, they would listen with awe and rapt attention, even while skeptical about the part where Moses led the Jews across the Red Sea. “Oceans don’t just suddenly dry up in minutes,” they would point out, only for Isaac to remind them that the Red Sea is, as its name implies, a sea, not an ocean. This seemed to satisfy them.

As excited as they were to hear the many installments of Isaac’s historical lecture series, they frequently taunted him. They quickly nicknamed him “Fig.” Of course. “Hey, fig, having fun at Hebrew School? Ha, ha.”

Truth be told, however, Isaac’s elementary school friends were envious. Like most children today, they dreamed of one day becoming philosophers or historians, while young Isaac could think only about baseball fame.

Although tales of his uncommon brilliance had already begun to circulate, it was not until his bar-mitzvah that “young Isaac” became a household name and his destiny so obvious that even Isaac himself had no choice but to finally accept his future career path. For it was on that occasion that he recited his entire haftorah with his eyes closed. And yet those in attendance would remark later that that recitation was only the second-most dazzling element of his performance. The most memorable, they said, was his subsequent bar mitzvah speech. Removing an apple from his pocket, he held it dramatically above his head for several seconds and then released it. The spellbound crowd watched as it splattered against the oak floor of the bimah. In the finest Socratic tradition, he posed a rhetorical question to his bewildered audience: “What was that?”

One person shouted “an apple.”

Smiling patiently, Isaac followed up: “Ah, but why did the apple fall to the floor?”

“Because you dropped it. Duuuuuh!”

Isaac was disappointed. Frustrated. Even a tad angry.

To Isaac’s delight, however, one member of the congregation understood perfectly.

“Gravity,” bellowed a gentleman with wild white hair and a thick German accent. “Bingo,”

Isaac responded, pointing his right index finger at the gentleman while winking and making a clicking sound. Always the punster, he couldn’t resist adding “I’m glad you grasped the gravity of the moment. Get it?” The crowd roared appreciatively. “Ja, aber der moment ist relativ,” quipped the strange gentleman.

You know the rest. Isaac never became a professional ballplayer, but he did transform the fields of mathematics, physics, and even philosophy.

Isaac “Fig” Newton died in 1726, a bevy of tearful friends and disciples at his bedside. At his insistence, he was buried in his white lab coat with a Diamondbacks cap on his head, a wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth, and a baseball glove lovingly cradling his left hand. The last line of the rabbi’s eulogy succinctly captured Isaac’s life: “The world has lost the worst third baseman who has ever lived.”

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve struggled to identify the inspiration for this story. I wish I could root it in some profound philosophical theory, preferably one that links to existentialism and has taken me years to perfect, but the truth is that I have no idea where in my subconscious mind this story came from. My best guess is that its origins spring from my occasional daydreams in which I’ve wondered what life paths particular historical characters would have taken had they been born in modern times. So imagining Isaac Newton in 21st century North America seemed like a fun project. Truth be told, there is also a shred of autobiographical content here. Like my imaginary Isaac, I grew up loving both math and sports, spending much of my childhood fantasizing about playing third base for the Red Sox. And although I can’t match Isaac’s intellectual talent, I too spent a lot of time in right field, so I might have been able to match his athletic prowess. As for*

literary inspiration, the closest I can think of for this story would be Woody Allen's wonderful book, "Getting Even." Or maybe Ranger Rick.

AUTHOR BIO: Steve Legomsky is a former mathematician, Washington University law professor specializing in immigration, and Chief Counsel of the federal immigration services agency and Senior Counsel to the Secretary of Homeland Security in the Obama Administration. He has held visiting positions at universities in twelve countries. As an academic, Steve wrote mainly nonfiction books and law review articles. Since then, he has been a part-time fiction writer. His first novel, "The Picobe Dilemma," explores what it means to be "living" and the personal and ethical hazards in pursuing eternal life in a laboratory (<http://www.booklocker.com/books/9469.html>). His short stories usually strive for meaning and poignancy but often degenerate into satire. They appear in the Broadkill Review, Ravens Perch, Fewer than 500, Idle Ink, 50-Word Stories, MORIA, Scribble, DASH, Bindweed, the MacGuffin (forthcoming fall 2021), and Offcourse. His odd jobs have included shoveling horse manure (literally, not just in academia), caddying, and selling shoes. Steve lives in St. Louis and loves his family, children, the Red Sox, and other animals. He hates the Yankees. His website is <https://law.wustl.edu/faculty-staff-directory/profile/stephen-h-legomsky/>.