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## **Books of The Times; A Life of Love, Pizza and Theoretical Physics**

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

Particles and Luck By Louis B. Jones 305 pages. Pantheon Books. \$22.

Mark Perdue, in Louis B. Jones's richly comic new novel, "Particles and Luck," is a 27-year-old physicist so absent-minded that Audrey, his wife, who is a lawyer, must put "signs on everything" to help him navigate an evening when she has to be away from the house on business.

But this time her strategy fails. During the morning at work -- Mark holds a prestigious chair in the physics department at Berkeley -- he gets a phone call from Roger Hoberman, his next-door neighbor in the new-built Phase III section of Cobblestone Hearth Village Estates, with its guaranteed view of Mount Tamalpais. It seems that some multi-national corporation is trying to take "adverse possession" of a corner of their property, based on the 19th-century claim of some crazy man who died more than 40 years ago. The law may require some ritual counteraction, and tonight, Halloween, is the deadline. They should "go for it," as Roger suggests.

At the same time, the voluptuous departmental work-study assistant, Shubie Behejdi, who has told Mark, "Now you are a married man, you are safer for flirting," drops hints that she will be available that evening.

So Mark takes off from work and joins up with his neighbor at Olde Fashion Pizza, Roger's latest moribund franchise. How the two of them get through the rest of the day and night is amusing enough, what with a lawyer they consult who won't advise them if they even need him until they've retained his services, and then won't let them leave until they've signed a nonagreement paper, and what with Roger's two small children, whom his estranged wife, Dot, demands he baby-sit, although she has applied for a restraining order against him.

But there is so much more to "Particles and Luck." Mark is not so much absent-minded as overly present-

mind. The least detail of the physical world distracts him: "He rests his weight on his elbows on the sink's threshold, and he falls into a lucid stupor over the tube of falling water, which imprisons a filament of cold daylight. Its base is like a wineglass foot that pushes outward an encircling lip of trembling water, which always threatens to close over. It's beautiful."

When he is shown the kidney stones Roger has proudly passed, bottled and displayed on his mantle piece, Mark picks up one container and turns it "to reveal a facet in the gem, quartzlike, but clouded with rust: there may be actual iron oxide ingredients." He continues to meditate: "It's possible that the lattice inside is densely crowded with creases and faults. He dimly recalls a textbook illustration, in a chapter he never reached, where a trellis of molecules is climbed by damaging cracks."

When Mark's mind isn't ruminating, it is driven by compulsive superstitions. "Before he sits down anywhere, he has to lift the chair discreetly and tap each of its legs 4 times -- upper left and right, then lower left and right -- 16 taps altogether."

"It's a way of crystallizing space around him as he moves, which since childhood has felt like establishing order and justice, geometrically."

Yet at the novel's deeper level, order and justice are comically askew. Mark's fame is based on an article on the subatomic constituents of matter that has also won him the Potts Chair in Theoretical Physics at Berkeley. Its gist is "to show the *IMPOSSIBILITY* of Uncertainty" and reassert that "reality exists independently," although the producer of a popular television show on physics wants him to say "the universe is made of nothing," and when Mark protests, the producer trumps Mark's credentials as a scientist with the awards his shows have won.

While only readers with a firm grasp of quantum physics can judge the deepest reverberations of the novel, it is easy enough to smile at the more obvious paradoxes involving space and time. Audrey Perdue's business away from home that evening involves "licensing negotiations for the pope's-visit theme properties." As she later explains her refutation of the Nuncio's official position that the church is simply indifferent to license poaching: "I mean, he has the intelligence to see the church may not be worldly but they have to live in the world."

Shubie, the physics-department assistant, is about to return to the Middle East because of a property dispute. A rich uncle "is losing his wife by divorce, for the strangest of reasons: his right arm, severed from his body by a sheet of glass in an explosion, had been surgically reattached to his shoulder." And now "three years later, though the operation was a success in every other way, he has lost his love for his wife because of his own increasing neurotic delusion that his touch is no longer authentic, his right arm no longer genuine."

Only Roger seems instinctively to see beneath the surface of time and space. When Mark asks him how he lost an earlier pizza franchise, he replies, "Location." Where was it? Mark asks. "Same place as I have the Olde Fashion now." But if the location was bad! Mark protests. "Tell you about pizza," Roger replies. "Pizza isn't fast food."

"Pizza is *SLOW* food. . . . Pizza! Sheesh! Pizza goes way back. Pizza *USED* to stand for -- I'm talking about when I was a kid -- it stood for a whole different way of being in time. There was more time."

Anyway, Mark staggers drunkenly home from his night with Roger and his children, and, while lying awake in the dark, sees the beginning of what he thinks will be his next great article, about how "the whole fabulous idea of a '*POINT*' -- a 'location without dimension,' as defined in high school geometry -- is the fundamental mistake that makes physics possible."

Whether this makes sense scientifically, you can't help reflecting that Roger's forbiddingly beautiful ex-wife, with whom Mark has missed connections several times during the night, is named Dot.

And by successfully pulling off this absurd yet oddly touching portrait of a physicist in the throes of creating, Mr. Jones has fulfilled the promise of his unusual first novel, "Ordinary Money," about the real and the false in contemporary American culture, as experienced by a man who lays his hands on a fortune in counterfeit money so real that it can't be differentiated from the genuine. And he has pointed the way for more good things to come.