

REPORTING ON TV

By Alan Rance

TUESDAY

(PBS, 8-9 p.m.): If long-success in life is measured by thriving and proliferating, then ants take the prize. They've been around for some billion years, long enough to pick many other life forms and fall.

"Little Creatures Who Rule the World," the life of ants explored by those nosy John-Johns, human guests. The host is Harvard University's Edward O. Wilson, who won a Pulitzer Prize for authoring the monumental tome "Ants."

Close-up photography and stunning starling film reveal a not-always-glamorous world of wars and territory raids, but also what is a lot like family life.

WEDNESDAY

Biography "Sammy Davis Jr. Entertainment"

(8-9 p.m.): You may have seen that old clip on TV: a little, smiling child sings and dances with astonishing poise and grace. The kid may have been in danger of peaking early — at age three, when he was already a hit. But Sammy Davis Jr. went on to become the most polished and charismatic singer-dancer of his era, some say.

The show also covers the other side of the late Davis's life. He lost an eye in an auto accident; he was embroiled in many controversies over his marriages and his politics. But his soaring talent overcame all.

Boys and Girls Are Different: Men, Women, and the Difference (ABC, 10-11)

(10-11 p.m.): The title makes a point that was once a truism: The different ways that boys and girls approach life go deep and societal conditioning. Today that's an explosively controversial claim in some quarters.

John Stossel traces the boys' movement and finds that their justified goals haven't been realized yet. In exploring the program consults scientists, talks with families, and looks at test results, and concludes that perhaps gender differences — but not inequality — should be acknowledged, and that naturally different talents should be allowed to flourish.

Use check local listings for these programs.

# Insiders' Science Novel Slips Into Stereotypes

By Simson Garfinkel

TWO years ago, Alan Lightman's first novel, "Einstein's Dreams," became an unexpected bestseller. A loosely knit collection of short stories and vignettes exploring distortions in space and time, "Einstein's Dreams" was a hit with scientists and the lay public alike.

Now Lightman, a professor of physics and writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is back with "Good Benito," a novel that's more conventional and

And yet, no matter how much Bennett tries, he cannot escape the fact that he, too, is human. Time after time, Bennett finds himself acting without reason — moved by love, propelled in his studies by the illogical flash of inspiration, or even willing to betray science and commit scientific fraud out of a misguided compassion for his students. Nevertheless, Bennett remains a callous caricature — unreal and unlikeable.

Lightman's story is built upon well-worn clichés that will be familiar to anyone who has spent time around a big university physics department: Bennett's failed attempt at building a model rocket, which taught him that he was a theorist, not an experimentalist; his lab partner, who gets hooked on drugs and eventually stops attending classes; and his pathetic family, in which the only person who ever really gives Bennett love is the family's black maid.

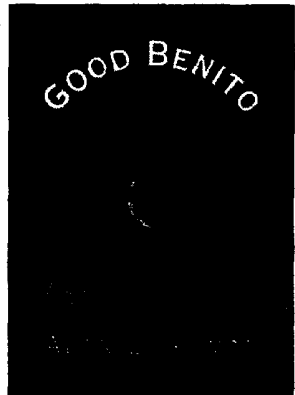
Surrounding Bennett are people who could touch greatness, if only they wanted to. One is Arnold Scalapino, a great physicist who twice changed the course of modern physics with papers that he published several years apart, but who hasn't published anything in more than a decade.

And then there is Penny, the gifted artist. Two years after they are married, Bennett secretly shows her work to a curator at a prestigious Washington gallery who agrees to exhibit the work. But Penny refuses: She says she is still learning how to paint. Disgusted, Bennett becomes dissatisfied with her and soon leaves.

It all makes for a story that is interesting, but not compelling. Lightman has said that Bennett is a composite character: Some of the events in Bennett's life are autobiographical while others are based on students that Lightman has observed in his years of teaching. Unfortunately, Lightman sacrifices any hope of plausibility by making all of these tragedies happen to Bennett.

In today's world, where high school kids mercilessly tease and ridicule their scientifically inclined classmates as "nerds," it's sad to see a writer as well-regarded as Lightman working so hard to perpetuate the stereotype. There are many physicists who are warm, complex, and interesting people. Lightman should try writing about them.

■ Simson Garfinkel is a freelance writer who specializes in science and technology.



GOOD BENITO  
By Alan Lightman  
Pantheon, 215 pp., \$21

aimed squarely at a nonscientific readership. Where "Einstein's Dreams" was a whimsical exploration into scientific fantasy, "Good Benito" is a straightforward attempt at portraying a physicist as a young man. It may also be an underground plea for increased liberal-arts requirements for science majors at universities like MIT.

"Good Benito" follows the childhood and schooling of Bennett Lang, a scientifically inclined youngster who grows up in Memphis and attends a small college in the Northeast. Dismayed by the uncertainty and the capriciousness of the world, Bennett turns increasingly to the security of science. As a steady cast of characters systematically befriend and then betray Bennett, he learns to trust no one. Instead, he places his faith in the mathematical precision of physics, choosing it as his avocation. As an undergraduate, graduate student, and ultimately as a professor, Bennett sacrifices his humanity on the altar of his discipline.

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