

## THE THINGS THAT MADE ME

# PROFESSOR JIM AL-KHALILI

Celebrating his 60th birthday this year, the theoretical physicist, author and broadcaster Professor **Jim Al-Khalili** came to England with his family to escape from Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1979. Passionate about communicating science, his new book, *The Joy of Science*, explains how we can all benefit from taking a more scientific approach to our decision-making. Jim and his wife Julie have two adult children and live in Southsea, Portsmouth

**BOOK:** THE BOY'S COMPANION

First published in 1949, this nicely hefty hardback – a 10th birthday gift to me from my English grandmother – was my go-to hobby book for the school holidays. With its help, I mastered the arts of collecting stamps, doing magic tricks and – best of all – playing football. As my mother was British, we spoke English at home, so I would translate the rules of the game into Arabic for the team of friends I played with. They considered me quite exotic, and the book became our football training manual.

**FOOTBALL TEAM:**  
LEEDS UNITED

English football teams were loved worldwide when I was a child and, for me and many of my friends, Leeds United was the team to support in the early 70s. My British grandparents would send me and my younger brother Nazar copies of the football magazine *Shoot*, so our bedroom walls were plastered with posters of both the team and our hero, midfielder Tony Currie. I still support Leeds, and at least once a season, my son David, 30, and I travel to Yorkshire to watch them play at home.

**TV SHOW:** STAR TREK

When *Star Trek* reached our screens in the 1970s, it was like nothing I'd seen before – and I loved it. This was the original version, of course, with Captain Kirk played by William Shatner. It was so other-worldly, and I have such fond memories of it that I've brought it into my undergraduate lectures on relativity, explaining that nothing travels faster than the speed of light – despite claims made for *Star Trek's* Starship Enterprise!



**MUSICAL INSTRUMENT:** GUITAR  
 Aged 14, maybe from one of the chapters in my *Boy's Companion*, I decided to make my own guitar. I bought the wood (spruce is best, I'd read) and cut thin sheets to soak and mould into shape. I fitted it with the correct strings and tuning keys and was thrilled at how well it worked. I couldn't read music, but I could play by ear and learnt the guitar chords for songs by Simon and Garfunkel, Cat Stevens and James Taylor. Unfortunately, the guitar was one of many things we had to leave behind when we moved to the UK, pretending we were just going on holiday. Now all I have of it is a scar where the saw slipped and cut my finger.

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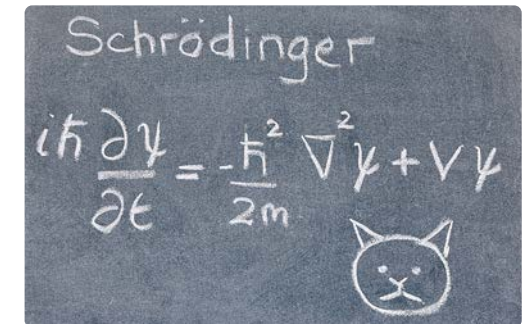
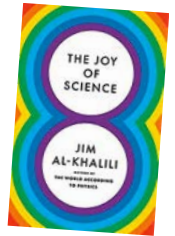
**ALBUM:** SANTANA'S MOONFLOWER  
 Before a visit to us when I was 15, my grandmother asked what I'd like her to bring me as a gift. Newly into music, I asked for an LP. It was the assistant in the record shop in Portsmouth who suggested Santana's *Moonflower*: an instant hit with me. I played it super-loud in my bedroom, and even louder through my cool older cousin's headphones. *She's Not There* still takes me back to his room in Baghdad, furnished with beanbags and the classic Che Guevara and Tennis Girl posters that so many boys had.



**FILM:** THE PRINCESS BRIDE  
 The year after we moved to the UK, I was one of just three boys joining over 100 girls in the lower sixth form of a school that was transitioning from a girls' grammar (in fact, the one my mother had attended) to a mixed comprehensive. It was here that I met my wife Julie, who'd been at the school since she was 11. Our son David was born when we were 29 and our daughter Kate two years later. When I think of fun family times together, I'm reminded of *The Princess Bride* – a film we've watched over and over. Starring Peter Cook, Mel Smith and Mandy Patinkin (Saul in *Homeland*), it's full of quotable lines like 'Prepare to die!' and 'Inconceivable!' that I will never tire of.



**EQUATION:**  
 SCHRÖDINGER'S EQUATION  
 It's no secret that I love science, and, studying physics at Surrey University (where I still work), I was quickly won over by Schrödinger's Equation – which showed how a single atom can be in two places at the same time. Known as one of the founding fathers of quantum mechanics, it's entirely down to Erwin Schrödinger and the other great physicists of the 1920s that we now have everything from mobile phones to digital TVs. His famous thought experiment, known as Schrödinger's Cat, showed how a cat could be dead and alive at the same time. It's a concept that has led to endless debates and arguments in physics, but it shows that scientists know how to disagree without being disagreeable! It's a way of thinking that I explore in my new book, written for the lay reader: *The Joy of Science* (£12.99, Princeton University Press). Many politicians could benefit from thinking like scientists.





**ITEM OF CLOTHING: SHOES**

In 2006, BBC Four invited me to present the three-part documentary *Atom*, which aired in 2007 and explored our understanding of atomic physics and quantum mechanics. It was my big break as a presenter, and the director took me to Selfridges to get kitted out for the show. I came home with a lovely pair of reddish-brown Ozwald Boateng brogues, hands down the best shoes I've ever owned. My family called them my Atom Shoes and I wore them to special-occasion events for years before they finally gave up the ghost.

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**ROOM: THE ROYAL SOCIETY MEMBERS' ROOM**

Set up in the 17th century, with founding fellows including Christopher Wren and Isaac Newton, The Royal Society is one of the most hallowed clubs to which any scientist can belong. In 2018, I was elected as a fellow – a huge honour – and now enjoy the privilege of drinking coffee and checking my emails in the inner sanctum of the Members' Room. Soaking up that atmosphere and that sense of history – surrounded by portraits of scientists past and present – feels very special indeed.

PHOTOS COURTESY PROF AL KHALILI, GETTY IMAGES, ALAMY, SHUTTERSTOCK

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