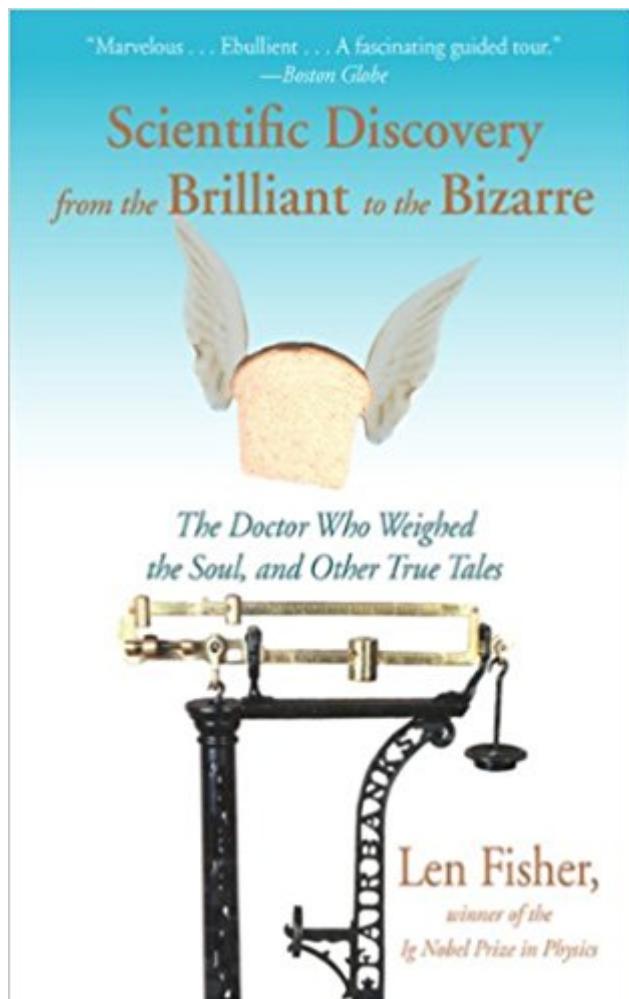


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# Scientific Discovery From The Brilliant To The Bizarre: The Doctor Who Weighed The Soul, And Other True Tales



## **Synopsis**

Winner of the IgNobel Prize in physics and the 2004 American Institute of Physics Science Writing Award, Len Fisher showed just how much fun science can be in his enthusiastically praised debut, *How to Dunk a Doughnut*. In this new work, he reveals that science sometimes takes a path through the ridiculous and the bizarre to discover that Nature often simply does not follow common sense. One experiment, involving a bed, platform scales, and a dying man, seemed to prove that the soul weighed the same as a slice of bread. But other, no less fanciful experiments and ideas led to the fundamentals of our understanding of movement, heat, light, and energy, and such things as the discovery of electricity, and the structure of DNA; improved engines; and the invention of computers. As in his previous book, Fisher uses personal stories and examples from everyday life, as well as humor, to make the science accessible. He touches on topics from lightning to corsets and from alchemy to Frankenstein and water babies, but he may not claim the last word on the weight of the soul!

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## **Customer Reviews**

Weighing the Soul : Scientific Discovery from the Brilliant to the Bizarre by Len Fisher (Arcade

Publishing) F From the man who "puts the fizz in physics" (Entertainment Weekly), here is an entertaining and thought-provoking foray into the science of the bizarre, the peculiar, and the downright nutty! Winner of the IgNobel Prize in physics, Len Fisher showed just how much fun science can be in his enthusiastically praised debut, *How to Dunk a Doughnut*. In this new work, he reveals that science sometimes takes a path through the strange and the ridiculous to discover that Nature often simply does not follow common sense. One experiment, involving a bed, a plat-form scale, and a dying man, seemed to prove that the soul weighed the same as a slice of bread—or roughly 21 grams, as the title of the popular movie put it. But other experiments and ideas that seemed no less fanciful in their time led to the fundamentals of our understanding of movement, heat, light, and energy, and such things as the discovery of electricity and the structure of DNA. As in his previous book, Len Fisher uses humorous personal stories and examples from everyday life to make the science accessible. He includes a catalogue of the necessary mysteries of modern science: the anti-commonsense beliefs that scientists now hold and use as tools in their everyday work. In chapters that feature figures from Galileo and Newton to Benjamin Franklin and Erwin Schrödinger, among many others, he touches on topics from lightning to corsets and from alchemy to Frankenstein and water babies, but he may not claim the last word on the weight of the soul!

Review of *Weighing the soul; scientific discoveries from the brilliant to the bizarre*. Len Fisher. New York: Arcade Publishing (2004). Reviewer: William P. Palmer

This book is very entertaining, written by a British academic physicist, Len Fisher, who believes that one of the duties of scientists is to popularise science through their writing. Len is, in fact the winner of the 1999 'Ig Nobel' prize for his research on 'dunking doughnuts'. The title of the book comes from the first chapter which is entitled 'Weighing the soul' and refers back in time to the Egyptian painting of the God, Anubis, weighing the soul of a person who had died recently using scales counterbalanced by a feather. I was rather taken with this idea and on a recent trip to Egypt purchased a copy of the painting. On further reading about the concept that was being portrayed, it appears that the feather was not actually a feather, but represented Ma'at, the correct conduct in life. If the balance was in equilibrium, then the soul passed the test and the deceased had lived a good life. This is unlike the further Western experiments described by MacDougall which seek determine if there is a physical change in weight when someone dies. A loss of weight on death would indicate that the soul exists. On the other hand, does not Fisher take The MacDougall experiments at face value, but uses MacDougall's own self-doubts and other experimental results to consider the whole question of 'scientific method'. Between times Fisher manages to bring Rumford's historic experiments on the nature of heat and

the yet to be proven existence of the Higg's boson, into the discussion. Yes, Len Fisher certainly writes entertainingly about science.

From an educational point of view the book may be rated at 4 stars, but if you expect much on the "Weighing the Soul" subject, you might be disappointed; about 10% of the whole 248 pages are allocated to weighing the soul. But the author informed us that there has been no published experimental study of "Weighing the Human Soul," since that by Duncan MacDougall, M.D., conducted almost a century ago. Considering another story of old experiment (in 1799) on measuring "the weight of heat," the author suggested a possible cause of the weight loss recorded by MacDougall during life-to-death transition of human due to an effect of probable convection air flow generated "when the bodies that they were studying cooled down upon death," and the author suggested that "In any event, convection currents must be eliminated before any future experiment similar to MacDougall's could possibly be interpreted as weighing the soul." A reasonable suggestion from the 1999 IgNobel Prize scientist, though conduction of any future study on weighing the soul will be very difficult in these days when every patient is equipped with resuscitator during the life-to-death transition. As a retiree from the research field of nuclear engineering, I am not much convinced by the author's reasoning for the interpretation of the MacDougall's results. Believers in "the 21g" as the weight of soul might be disappointed after reading the first chapter of this book. But we know that our scientists are not at all versatile when the subject is concerned with "human consciousness." There are many historical facts that verify the ignorance of science as written, for example, in the books "D.D. Home--His Life and Mission (1888)" by Mrs. D.D. Home, and "Healing Hands (1966)" by J.B. Hutton.

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