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Maria Goeppert Mayer and the Nobel Prize

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When Maria Goeppert Mayer was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1963, she was only the second woman to receive that award and there have been no additional female physics laureates since. Mayer was uniquely prepared to carry out her prize-winning work on the nuclear shell model. Furthermore, she worked with some of the most well-known figures in mid-twentieth century physics, and her award came at a time when American science was in ascendance. Why, then, is her name so little known beyond the physics community? There are several possible answers to this question, ranging from the personal (her modest reaction to public acclaim) and the scientific (the mathematically abstract nature of her prize-winning work), to the national (the nature of the issues commanding public attention in the 1960s). In this talk I will present an overview of the circumstances that enabled Mayer to make exceptional contributions to nuclear physics, and then examine some of the possible reasons why her exceptional status is not more widely known.