



Galileo

J.L. Heilbron

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In 1610, Galileo published the *Siderius nuncius*, or *Starry Messenger*, a "hurried little masterpiece" in John Heilbron's words. Presenting to the world his remarkable observations using the recently invented telescope—the craters of the moon, the satellites of Jupiter—Galileo dramatically challenged our idea of the perfection of the heavens and the centrality of the Earth in the universe. Indeed, the appearance of the little book is regarded as one of the great moments in the history of science.

Planned to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the publication of the *Starry Messenger*, this is a major new biography of Galileo, a fresh and much more rounded view of the great scientist than found in earlier works. Unlike previous biographers, Heilbron shows us that Galileo was far more than a mathematician: he was deeply knowledgeable in the arts, an expert on the epic poet Ariosto, a fine lutenist. More important, Heilbron notes that years of reading the poets and experimenting with literary forms were not mere sidebars—they enabled Galileo to write clearly and plausibly about the most implausible things. Indeed, Galileo changed the world not simply because he revolutionized astronomy, but because he conveyed his discoveries so clearly and crisply that they could not be avoided or denied. If ever a discoverer was perfectly prepared to make and exploit his discovery, it was the dexterous humanist Galileo aiming his first telescope at the sky. In *Galileo*, John Heilbron captures not only the great scientist, but also the creative, artistic younger man who would ultimately become the champion of Copernicus, the bête-noire of the Jesuits, and the best-known of all martyrs to academic freedom.

Galileo Details

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Author : J.L. Heilbron

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From Reader Review Galileo for online ebook

Matthew Trainor says

I got this as an audiobook because I wanted to know more about the historical events. However, approximately 1/3 of the book is essentially a geometry text and contains many detailed diagrams that are read out loud. As you can imagine, this does not really translate well into an audiobook, especially when listening to it during the morning commute.

The historical portions were very well written and the audio performance was also very good. I will most likely obtain a hard copy of the book at some point in the future.

Bill says

Immense in erudition, but the tone is grating throughout. Heilbron, perhaps on the model of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso, aims at irony, but mostly succeeds in sounding jaundiced. One happy exception the comment on how perilous life in Pisa must have been back in the 1590s when philosophers were throwing chunks of wood and lead off the roofs and out of windows to test Aristotle's proposition that heavier objects fall faster than lighter ones (p. 44).

Bob Finch says

This is an in-depth examination of Galileo's life and work. No quick read (it helps to have pencil and paper handy to work through the examples, and a dictionary close at hand!), but it certainly provides great insight into how Galileo thought through the problems he is so famous for attacking. It is also not about hero worship, as the author provides a clear-eyed description of Galileo's increasingly confrontational approach to promoting his views on the Copernican system, an approach that the author suggests was largely responsible for the famous renunciation of Copernicanism that Galileo was forced to make.

Grant says

most of it was way over my head. I did enjoy his honesty as he approached life and desire to learn the truth. This is a very complex book not for the easily discouraged reader

Catherine Woodman says

This is a very detailed book on a mathematical level about what Galileo's contributions were as a mathematician--which was not off putting for me, but might be hard reading for someone with no interest whatsoever in math--this doesn't so much focus on his astrological contributions, except in the matters that they got him into big trouble. Galileo was not one to underestimate his personal value, and was shocked

when the Inquisition caught up with him and labelled him a heretic--he was under arrest, with limited visitors from then on,. This, compounded by the plague sweeping through italy and killing off many of his family members made the end of the story sad--he therefore made his most important contributions as a young man, but who knows what another time might have held for him. A great read.

Tlaura says

Really funny, fair, subtle and compelling book on Galileo's life and times, especially his humanistic training in Pisa and early university life in Venice. Heilbron's interpretation of Galileo's final contest with the pope (that the Dialogue was more or less commissioned by Rome to prove that the Church's rejection of Copernican theory wasn't based on ignorance of the science and that the book easily passed the censor except for Simplicio's speech at the end) puts a slightly new spin on things, and Galileo's progression toward eventual sainthood is wonderful irony and would have made him very happy. It's not a great book for total beginners with the subject matter and assumes a fair amount of prior knowledge of the basic history and familiarity with Newtonian physics and plane geometry. I enjoyed it more on a second visit after returning to it following a couple of easier and less academic books on the era (and several visits to wikipedia to refresh myself on the theory of motion).

Tomkeese says

This is an academic biography. In addition to covering the life of Galileo, the book provides insight into the scientific, political, and religious atmosphere of the era. There is lots of detail (perhaps more than necessary) about the people involved in his life, about the scientific challenges of the times, and about the mathematics involved in Galileo's astronomical studies.

David says

Good description of the history going on around Galileo and the politics of Church vs Science. Really immerses you in the complex nature of the arguments including equipping you with literary insight into the allusions that were used at the time. Frankly, the Audiobook was difficult because so much is done diagrammatically in the real book.

Stacey Franklin says

Tedious, pompous, misogynistic, heavy handed, choppy - I found this virtually unreadable. Worst of all - CHOCK FULL OF ALGEBRA!!! O.K., I can't really hold THAT against it, but if you have bad Algebra class flashbacks consider yourself warned.

Sara says

This took me forever to read, and having finally finished it, doesn't seem worth it. I haven't really come away with a better sense of Galileo as a person. The science was written for scientists or mathematicians by the end I wasn't even skimming it so much as skipping it (totally out of character for me). And it just made an interesting story boring. Alas.

Riku Sayuj says

More of a historical tome on the politics and religion of 16th century Europe than a biography, the book meanders through every available detail, boring for the most part and bordering on the interesting and the sensational at times. Not recommended for light reading.

Leanne says

Beautifully written. Great review by Own Gingrich here <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/26/book/reviews/galileo.html>...

Cynthia Frazer says

I genuinely enjoyed the author's voice...to quote Shaw "all genuinely intellectual work is humorous". This biography humanized Galileo for me, laid out the mathematics clearly, and debunked many popular misconceptions I entertained about him and his relations with the papacy.

If the sheer volume of the volume puts you off, don't let it. Half is research notes on the text itself, and I must confess, I didn't miss them. DO read the foreword, though.

Merilee says

Maybe a 3.5...Somebody wrote "choppy" in her review, and I think that nails the problem with this book. I found it very difficult to read, and I am good at, and love math! (and science, and biographies, and Italy). I think that Heilbron decided to write this completely chronologically, and has way too much detail on every aspect of Galileo's life (all well-documented: there are 100+ pages of notes). There will be great detail on all the people in his life at any given time (family, royalty, academics, etc.) and then suddenly 5 pages of very intricate math with beautifully rendered diagrams and then just as suddenly back to his move to wherever, and all the people there. Five chapters later some name will be mentioned with no reminder of who this person is (although there is a list of people in the back). Heilbron can be gloriously witty at times, but the wit is buried in the midst of somewhat clunky sentences. I really wanted to like this book, but I was very glad to finish it.

Perry Clark says

Heilbron's biography of the great reforming scientist, mathematician, and sometime philosopher is thorough and deep, and provides a good look into the mind of the man. It suffers only from the expected emphasis on

the astronomer and proponent of heliocentrism and advocate of his own ego.; we learn less of his personal, private life, and so the image created remains less than fully formed.

What is done is done well, however, and often impressively so. The presentations of Galileo's major works and their development are thoroughly researched and strongly presented. One also gets looks, less thorough but instructive nonetheless, of some of his less major and/or flawed work, such as his unfortunate expositions on the tides. The author's efforts, however, do slide downward in scope, effort, and final value to the reader as he takes the story along. By the conclusion, a reader feels as if the author has tired of the controversy, tumult, and slow-moving drama of the story of Galileo's confrontation with the Church and its rear-guard action against an assault on the untenable science to which it unwisely wed. Heilbron does still a better job than most at presenting the sequence and subtext of events, well noting the seriousness of the matter from all perspectives, though with the expected bias toward the modern position.

This is a very good biography of a massively important and obviously flawed figure in the history of the west. While long, it is not a slog of a read. The book is well-documented with notes and references, and thus serves well the academic as well as the intelligent lay reader.
