

★ **Alone Against Gravity: Einstein in Berlin: The Turbulent Birth of the Theory of Relativity, 1914-1918**

Thomas De Padova

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Alone Against Gravity is a fascinating portrait of the most famous scientist of the twentieth century as he faced professional, personal, and political turning points on the eve of World War I.

Einstein came to study in Berlin in 1913, during the city's tech and population boom. As the physicist's colleagues became increasingly nationalistic and their research shifted to weaponry, Einstein had to choose between a cloistered academic life and risking his reputation to promote pacifism.

Forwarding a great sense of the scientific community in a tumultuous era, the book weaves the story of the war into the birth of Einstein's theory of relativity. Einstein is elusive; it may be impossible to reconcile the brilliant theorist with the man who emotionally abused his family. He proves both aloof and supportive, playful but capable of great cruelty, and works toward becoming a man who would denounce war.

There is more recorded of Einstein's scientific work than his interior life; such spaces are filled with side narratives, such as the gutting story of Clara Haber, whose husband was Einstein's mentor and who pioneered the deadly technique of weaponizing chlorine gas. After it was used in Ypres, France, she shot herself.

A science writer himself, De Padova does not skimp on physics, tracing the particulars of Einstein's work and making the basics easy to understand. Following Einstein's example, De Padova brings theoretical physics to life with concrete and imaginative analogies, such as an imagined scene in which the scientist travels in space and waits for a much younger, unconventional romantic interest to catch up to him in age.

This is an important look at the scientific community in Europe during the rise of fascism. Though Einstein's breakthroughs and political choices were made a hundred years ago, they are compelling and pertinent for today's audience.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (September/October 2018)

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