

Fission

Tom Weston

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Historical Fiction is at its best when the reader races to the bookstore (virtual or bricks and mortar) burning to know more about the subject—one that may have escaped notice before the author nurtured facts into fascinating fiction. *Fission*, by Tom Weston, morphs the Holocaust, physics, and the divide between the sexes into a humane, funny, and informative profile of mid-twentieth-century Austrian scientist Lise Meitner.

“How could a person who was arguably the most famous woman in the world in 1946 become an obscure footnote in dusty science journals only a generation later?” questions Weston. The author’s curiosity turned to outrage at the injustice done to Dr. Meitner and the suppression of her story and grounding-breaking discovery: no less than the splitting of the atom. And he communicates this so well that the reader quickly takes up her part.

Recalling the years between 1906 and the end of WWII, the book calls into service the well-known scientific minds of the time: Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Otto Hahn, and Max Planck. An Internet search for any of these men reveals thousands of entries; look for Dr. Meitner and the information drops off considerably.

The Holocaust continues to be the subject of books, movies, and documentaries. In a departure from recounting the atrocities of millions, *Fission* instead enters the sacred world of writings by Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, and Primo Levi, wherein personal experience is set within the larger context of devastation.

Meitner’s lack of knowledge about the extreme state of Hitler’s hold on Europe and the extermination of Jews is unfortunately typical of a scientific, head-in-the-sand mindset and would surely have landed her in a death camp had her fellow scientists not taken command of the situation and planned for her safe escape to Sweden.

The portion of the scientific community not threatened by a brilliant woman was there for Meitner out of respect for her knowledge and discoveries. Max Planck, friend and father figure, found a way into the prestigious Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Meitner and pushed unsuccessfully for her to receive the Nobel Prize.

Tom Weston hails from England and is the author of *First Night* and the Elf of Luxembourg. *Fission*, he explains aptly, “becomes a metaphor for a world tearing itself apart.”

DINDY YOKEL (November 18, 2011)

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