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Foreword Review

Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science Faith and Love

Dava Sobel
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Galileo Galilei had three children with Marina Gamba, his mistress of twelve years. Because he never married Marina, his children were illegitimate. Galileo's son Vincenzo was eventually legitimized by the Grand Duke Cosimo II; but his daughters, because they would never be able to marry, entered a convent at the ages of thirteen and fourteen, and lived there in poverty for the remainder of their lives.

With his eldest daughter Virginia, who took the name of Maria Celeste when she took her vows, Galileo had an exceptionally close relationship. They exchanged correspondence so frequently that by the time Maria Celeste died, her possessions consisted chiefly of her father's letters. Her writing shows that she was uncommonly selfless, kind and industrious. In addition to working late into the night at the convent, she was always sending Galileo homemade food items, as well herbal medicines as a guard against the bubonic plague. Her letters are beautifully written, articulate, filled with details of her every-day life. Galileo, in return, doted on her and fulfilled her every modest request. He told his colleagues that she has "an exquisite mind."

Despite the title, the book is mostly Galileo's story, interspersed with excerpts from his daughter's letters. Galileo first taught at the University at Pisa, where he demonstrated his theories of falling bodies by throwing cannonballs off the Leaning Tower. He refined the Dutch invention of the spyglass into the telescope, through which he saw celestial bodies never seen before. Based on his observations, he published "Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems: Ptolemaic and Copernican," which thinly disguises his embracing of the prohibited Copernican theories. Faced with the power-hungry Pope Urban II and jealous colleagues, Galileo was convicted of heresy, and sentenced to house arrest. Throughout his trials, Galileo had the support of the generous archbishop of Siena, many of his peers and especially the devoted Maria Celeste.

Sobel's writing is occasionally overwrought, as when she begins to explain the repetition within Galileo's name by stating "A repetition of recollected identities echoed through the Galilei family like the sound of chanting, with its most melodic expression in the … rhythm of the … scientist's full name." Such excesses are infrequent, however, and they barely detract from this extraordinary tale. Sobel shows that Galileo was a devoted family man, as well as a brilliant scientist who persevered in his search for the secrets of the natural world.

JILL BLUE LIN (November / December 1999)

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