ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Starry Night: Astronomers and Poets Read the Sky
David H. Levy
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This book was a labor of love for the author, a science writer best known for co-discovering the Shoemaker-Levy 9 comet. He establishes in the preface that poetry and stargazing have been early and abiding passions for him in almost equal measure, like the snakes entwined on Hermes' caduceus. This intersection, a kind of magic to Levy, is the message of the book.

Part personal narrative, part scientific text, part compendium of metaphysical poetry and art, with annotation to those texts, Starry Night takes many different routes in its thematic journey. Levy spends much of the first two chapters thinking about poetry as science, exploring and explaining the astronomical events and phenomena referenced in Donne, Shakespeare, and Milton, among others. Then he reverses course, framing the discussion with a general history of science from Copernicus to Darwin, and interspersing poetic texts that gauge the culture's reaction to "the new science." The next three chapters return to poetic ground, each engaging the work of one poet or writer: Alfred Lord Tennyson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Henry David Thoreau. The ends book as a mirror of the beginning, viewing science as a kind of poetry.

Levy's diction and depth of exploration indicate that the book is intended for a general audience. At times, its exuberance rushes ahead of itself and the reader, as when it refers frequently to Ptolemy and Copernicus before backtracking pages later to explain who those scientists were and what they contributed. Pedantry isn't the top priority to Levy; what is important is that art and science have more in common than is commonly thought. That fact is not a secret, and hasn't been since the ancient Greeks conceived of numbers as harmonics. The awe with which Levy approaches the subject, however, can make it seem joyfully new even in this science-savvy age.

Aimee Houser