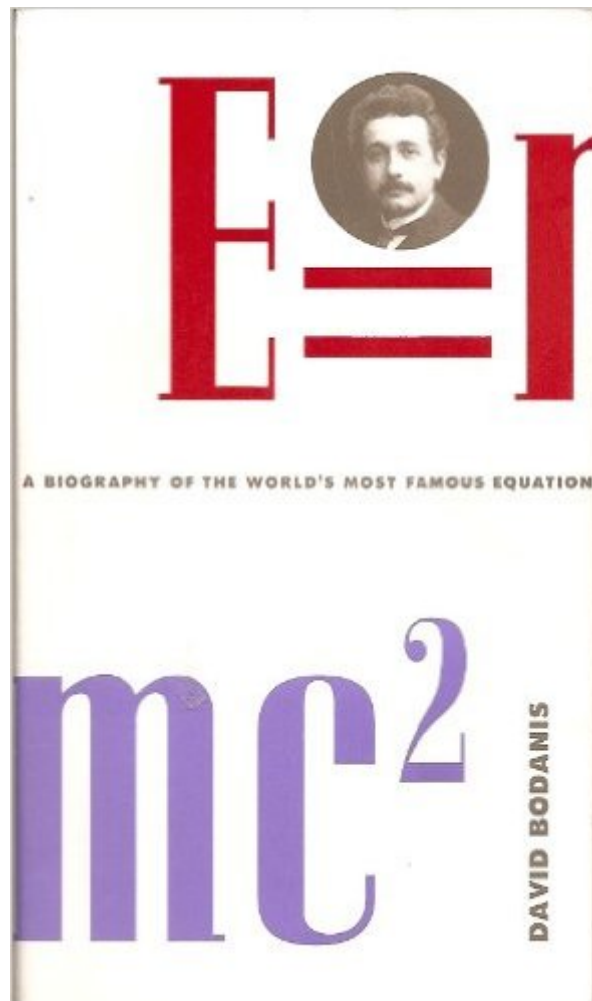


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E=MC² A Biography Of The Worlds Most Famous Equation



Synopsis

2000. Author: David Bodanis. Publisher: Walker & Co. 176 pages. Paperback.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Bodanis rightly points out that the special theory of relativity is unjustly considered to be impossible to understand. With that as his starting point, in this "biography of the world's most famous equation" Bodanis takes us through the background of each element of the equation ($E=mc^2$) and leads us through their union by Einstein in 1905. Then he takes us through some of the implications this equation has had for the twentieth century, including the development of the atomic bomb and the discovery of black holes. All in all, Bodanis does a fine job with his book. His presentation is easy enough to follow so that nearly anyone should be able to get the basics here. Additionally, the story, as he tells it, is motivated historically which is something that I really like. We meet a number of the important figures in scientific history (including the important women, two of whom get a lot of time in this volume--Emile du Chatelet and Lise Meitner) and learn about their contributions to the development of the theory. The main weakness of this volume is that it is also too simplistic. It serves as a great introduction for the scientifically challenged but there is very little depth here. (To someone who has read Richard Rhodes' brilliant "The Making of the Atomic Bomb" this lack of depth in certain areas will stand out.) Also, Bodanis' judgement of certain figures--Heisenberg and Hahn, in particular--is rather harsh. I may even agree with his assessment but people's lives, especially in times of war, are more complicated than can be summed up in a few negative lines. Still, Bodanis has done a fine job here.

Bodanis' book is a quick and easy read, introducing readers to $E=mc^2$, the personalities involved in its creation and use, and its consequences on Earth and in stars. Bodanis tells vivid stories that make the science and history come alive. Some of these stories are substantially true, and many are misleading. By oversimplifying the science, Bodanis makes it more accessible but introduces inaccuracies. His descriptions of fission and particle creation and annihilation are good examples of $E=mc^2$, but one of his favorite examples is problematic. Bodanis twice repeats the popular misconception that an object gains mass as its speed approaches the speed of light (p.52, 81), and exaggerates this fiction with descriptions of the object "swelling" as it accelerates. While an inconspicuous note in the appendix (p.250) acknowledges that this explanation is not really true, many readers will not find the note, and if they do, they'll find the cartoon image easier to remember. Bodanis' pattern of oversimplification disappoints in a book that aims to educate the public. Another of the book's apparent strengths becomes a weakness. Its emphasis on simple, vivid portraits of key characters too often comes at the expense of deeper understanding of both the history and the science. Bodanis makes a habit of vilifying Authority and lionizing youthful independence and undersung women scientists. Lise Meitner's story is particularly compelling (and consistent with other histories), but Bodanis' more one-dimensional characterizations lose credibility. For example, his Heisenberg is simply an evil scientist while Einstein is a good and humble genius. History, however, tells more complex stories than Bodanis does.

I first heard of this book from the TV show of the same name. The show, presented on PBS by Nova on October 11, 2005 was one of the highlights of the year so far. Assuming that the book would be better than the show I immediately went out and bought it. I was not disappointed. The show was great. The book is great. The show brings out the essence of the book in an extremely easy way. The book backs up the show with greater detail. The show will undoubtedly be repeated watch for it, go buy the book now. Basically this book/show talks about each term in the famous equation. What is energy, where/when did we start to think of it? And what's mass? And of course c , the speed limit of the universe. This book uses these terms as the starting point to explain how each of these terms were developed. And then Einstein put them together. The way the book/show treats Lise Meitner is superb. She was at the cutting edge of nuclear physics for 55 years. In 1992 the 109th element was named Meitnerium (Mt) in her honor (Einsteinium is number 99). One point not mentioned, at the time when she was developing the basic theory of radioactivity as depicted in the show, she was sixty years old, not the young actress playing her part. Einstein called her 'The German Madame Curie.' In one scene in the show Einstein is talking to his first wife Mileva Maric. He is explaining the

equation. His wife asks if he would like her to check his mathematics. Mileva Maric was no dummy. Largely forgotten until the recent publication of the love letters Einstein wrote to her, she provided enough input into Einstein's theories that she probably should have been listed as a co-developer, but in those days women just couldn't do those things.

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