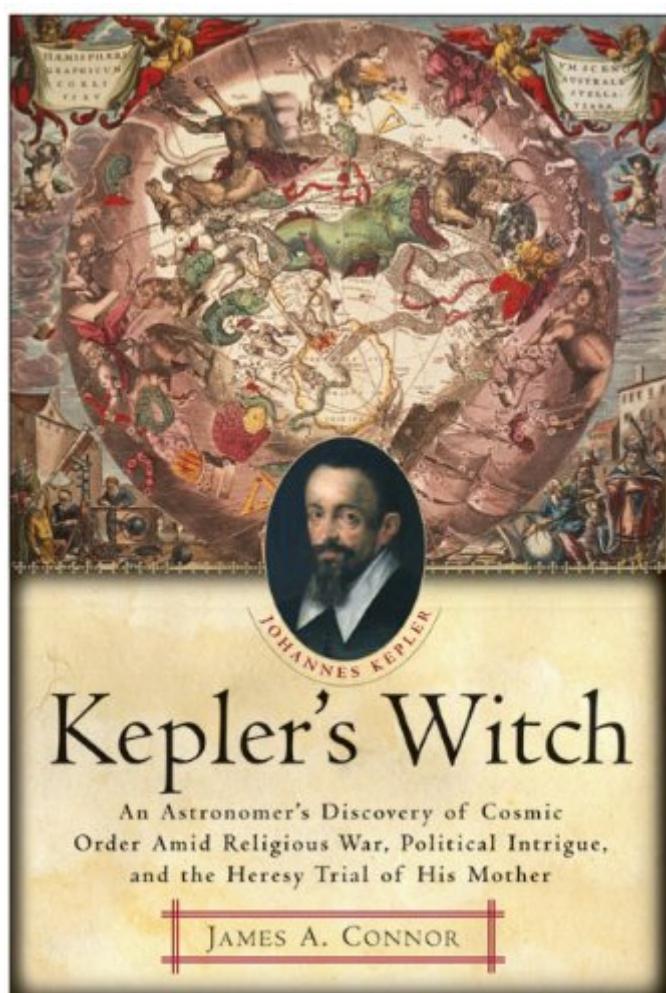


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Kepler's Witch: An Astronomer's Discovery Of Cosmic Order Amid Religious War, Political Intrigue, And The Heresy Trial Of His Mother



Synopsis

Set against the backdrop of the witchcraft trial of his mother, this lively biography of Johannes Kepler – ‘the Protestant Galileo’ and 16th century mathematician and astronomer – reveals the surprisingly spiritual nature of the quest of early modern science. In the style of Dava Sobel’s Galileo’s Daughter, Connor’s book brings to life the tidal forces of Reformation, Counter-Reformation, and social upheaval. Johannes Kepler, who discovered the three basic laws of planetary motion, was persecuted for his support of the Copernican system. After a neighbour accused his mother of witchcraft, Kepler quit his post as the Imperial mathematician to defend her. James Connor tells Kepler’s story as a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey into the modern world through war and disease and terrible injustice, a journey reflected in the evolution of Kepler’s geometrical model of the cosmos into a musical model, harmony into greater harmony. The leitmotif of the witch trial adds a third dimension to Kepler’s biography by setting his personal life within his own times. The acts of this trial, including Kepler’s letters and the accounts of the witnesses, although published in their original German dialects, had never before been translated into English. Echoing some of Dava Sobel’s work for Galileo’s Daughter, Connor has translated the witch trial documents into English. With a great respect for the history of these times and the life of this man, Connor’s accessible story illuminates the life of Kepler, the man of science, but also Kepler, a man of uncommon faith and vision.

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Customer Reviews

Since I have occasionally taught high school physics, I am fairly well acquainted with Kepler's Laws of Planetary Motion. I try to impress upon the students the difficulties Kepler faced in deriving these laws from the relatively crude naked-eye observations of Tycho Brahe, the absence of a mathematics capable of dealing with objects in motion (calculus), the ingrained conviction that objects in heaven, being perfect, must move in perfect circles, and the absence of any explanation for their motion. Connor's book makes it clear that these problems barely scratch the surface of what Kepler had to face in his life, and also that his accomplishments were far greater than I had known. I had read somewhere that his explanation for the motion of the planets was that they were moved by the holy spirit, but actually he postulated that their motion was a consequence of some sort of force put out by the sun, a prototype of the theory of gravity. He developed a mathematical approach to formulate his laws that were a prototype of calculus, and he developed the theory of optics. He was far ahead of his time in that he was able to drop beloved ideas, such as trying to explain planetary distances in terms of Platonic solids, when they belied the observations, instead of using ad hoc assumptions to make the observations fit his theory, as was done in the Ptolemaic system with its epicycles. Before reading Connor's biography, I knew nothing of the quite terrible problems Kepler faced in life while making his great discoveries in astronomy and physics. Many of his children died, his first wife died, he was rejected by his church, essentially for being too honest and intelligent, the Thirty Years War, a religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants, was raging, and then his mother was accused of witchcraft. Though she was arrested on laughably flimsy evidence, that was really no more than the accusations, she spent over a year in prison in such appalling conditions that she died not long after her release. However absurd our present world is, mankind has at least made great social strides since the 1600s. What kept Kepler going through all of these tribulations was his religious faith. Today the majority of scientists are atheists and materialists. For Kepler the order of the world was a shadow of the mind of God, so all his science was at heart a prayer. So God had planted truth in nature as wordless scripture, a companion to the Bible. An attitude regarded as simply quaint today, but quite at odds with his time when

the physical world was seen as the domain of the devil and therefore a source of deception. Doubting the existence of God would have been literally unthinkable for Kepler, and it is unlikely that he could have accomplished what he did without his faith. How times have changed. Connor's book deals more with Kepler's life and times than going into the details of his scientific accomplishments. This makes it an excellent book for the non-scientist. One thing that I recall having heard in a lecture many years ago was that in doing his calculations he made errors which managed to cancel each other out. The probability of that occurring by pure chance has got to be really low. Perhaps his subliminal mind caught the error, and made another error to correct the first one? Kepler would count that as evidence for the divinity of the human mind.

•Why Kepler?• (1). This is the question James A. Connor attempts to answer in his book Kepler's Witch: An Astronomer's Discovery of Cosmic Order Amid Religious War, Political Intrigue, and the Heresy Trial of His Mother. Connor has taken the monumental task of explaining to a non-scientific audience why they should be interested in Kepler and why he considers Kepler a man worth knowing• (2). At the outset, Connor briefly lists Kepler's scientific accomplishments and puts them in perspective within the historical scientific community. He refers to Kepler as "an equal to Galileo" and "a precursor to Newton"• (3). He informs his audience "Kepler is the man who finally confirmed Copernicus"• (3). Connor then rhetorically questions, if Kepler is indeed a man worth knowing• (2) then why do many Americans "not even know Kepler's name"• (4). Why has Kepler effectively "been written out of the history of science"• (4). In order to answer these questions Connor has, first and foremost, drawn upon original source documents such as Kepler's own letters and journal entries. Connor also drew upon the writings of Max Caspar, a biographer of Kepler, who Connor informs us "collected and edited all of Kepler's sundry writings, from his scientific work to his letters to the account of his mother's witchcraft trial"• (6). Additionally, Connor informs us where possible he "ferreted out the original German and translated it myself"• (6). In explaining his process of collecting source material Connor also endeavors to answer the question "Why?• He informs us he did, "All of this to dig out the life of a man worth knowing"• (6). "A man" Connor describes as being "caught between the grinding wheels of history, not only religious history, but scientific as well"• (5). For the most part Connor's book is a chronological journey through Kepler's life suffering and his triumphs• (5). The main exception to the chronological journey is Connor's

introductory salvo into Kepler's life which is the opening of an event which actually occurs much later in Kepler's life, the trial of his mother for witchcraft. Connor sets the stage for Kepler's life by endeavoring to answer the unspoken question of how could a deeply religious and scientific man have a mother who was on trial for witchcraft? This topic draws his audience in with a subject that even neophytes to the subject of science or history would find captivating. By opening his book with this event Connor brings the reader to the point of climax in the witchcraft trial and then leaves them wanting more. He then takes the reader back to the beginning of Kepler's life and walks through all the personal, political, religious and scientific events which contributed to making Kepler a man worth knowing (2). Later the reader is brought back to the trial and provided the outcome to the witchcraft trial in the proper chronological sequence of Kepler's life. Throughout the book Connor deftly weaves together Kepler's journals and letters with history of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation as well as incidents of scientific intrigue and personal issues of Kepler's own life. At the same time, he draws parallels between Kepler and his mother to show how both landed themselves in such precarious political and religious positions. In order to put Kepler's personal beliefs in context Connor walks us through Kepler's family history politically, economically and religiously by painting a picture of Kepler studying for a position of Priest within the Lutheran Church. It is while Kepler is undertaking his religious studies that Connor introduces us to Kepler's conflicting religious beliefs and the personality traits that combined to cause Kepler such difficulty later in his life. To understand Kepler the man, the philosopher, the scientist, Connor states one must first understand Kepler the Lutheran. The new faith was in his marrow, and all his science was at heart a prayer (40). Connor uses this tapestry of Kepler's religion and his science to explain to the reader the issues of Kepler's life and how they relate to the Reformation. One significant issue for the scientists of Kepler's day was how nature related to scripture and Connor explains how this brought Kepler into conflict with the religion he held so dear. For Luther, God's divine law was revealed only in scripture the study of nature could never reveal the wholeness of the truth. Astronomy must therefore be separate from theology (40). Connor then explains Kepler's conundrum by explaining for his audience Philip Melanchthon's position on the same subject, For Melanchthon, as for Kepler, the order of the world was a shadow of the mind of God (41). This position was counter to many of the scientific community of the time and indeed in our day as well. Another pressing religious issue of Kepler's day was that of the sacrament of the Eucharist and Connor uses this issue to

explain how Kepler found himself at odds with his Lutheran faith. Although passionately Lutheran, Kepler differed with Lutheran dogma over the subject of the ubiquity doctrine. Indeed, Kepler's own beliefs on the subject sided more with the Calvinist position on this doctrine. Kepler's position on this doctrinal point, from which he would not depart is one that got him in so much trouble in his later life (44). Kepler had a deeply passionate nature and this affected how he approached and argued for his beliefs, whether they be scientific or religious. Connor explains these traits would ultimately be why Kepler found himself a teacher of mathematics instead of being the preacher and pastor he had originally desired to become. Connor illustrates Kepler regularly employed an aggressive defense of his ideas and would set both his teachers and his schoolmates teeth on edge (45). Later this aggressive style would cause problems for him both politically and professionally. Connor parallels the events and personality traits of Kepler with those of his mother. Regarding Kepler's mother, he states she committed the ultimate sin-she made everyone nervous (231). By this point in his book Connor has repeatedly shown us that Kepler had regularly made people nervous as well, both religiously and scientifically. He then places this within the cultural context of German history. Unfortunately Katharina, Germany was at the pinnacle of its witch mania (232). Similarly, Connor states Unfortunately, Kepler was a genius born half a century too late, at a time when the reformation was finding its feet (71). Ultimately the traits of stubbornness and strength of personal will are what enabled Kepler and his mother to withstand the suffering and rejection they both experienced. Even after her trial, when the town rejected her utterly and threatened to stone her to death (242) she would not bend under rejection and persecution. Johannes, likewise, would not leave the Lutheran church in spite of its many rejections (242) and he would find himself excommunicated from the religion he loved and at odds with the scientific community. Connor has achieved his goal. He has introduced us to a man worth knowing and walked us carefully through the historical events of the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation and Thirty Years War. He has shown us the irony of Kepler finding complete harmony astronomically while living in a time of political and religious turmoil. Connor has convincingly explained for his audience why Kepler is not better known today. The difference for Kepler, Connor explains, was Unlike with Galileo, whose struggles with the Inquisition had more to do with angry astronomers and philosophers and finally the proud intransigence of Pope Urban VIII, the persecution of Kepler, like his mother's later witch trial, was a matter of gossip (243). Kepler made people nervous when he would not separate his science from his religion nor bend his unique blend of religious doctrines to their desires. In the

end, Kepler was alone. He held to his beliefs and would not change them. By introducing his readers to Kepler, Connor has also efficiently introduced them to the turbulent and momentous times of the Reformation.

I loved this book. It is at once a biography of Kepler, and an insightful rendition of the society in the throws of the Counter-Reformation. Conner illuminates just why the findings of Kepler, Galileo, and Tyco were so inflammatory. He makes plain the religious and political tensions, and he brings the feeling of real people to Kepler and his contemporaries. This a period I was only marginally familiar with and I was most willing to be immersed in Kepler's world (only to visit, mind!). The structure of the book was a bit odd, in that it went back over information several times - once with direct quotes and first person accounts and again integrated into the author's account. Excellent footnotes. Try reading this book before visiting Prague. It will add a layer of richness and insight to both the experience and the reading.

This book gives a clearer understanding of the role of religion and its impact on science as well as those living during Kepler's lifetime. At times the book required a focused attention to the information shared--so I would not necessarily describe this book for "light reading" unless you are seriously into historical details. After completing the book I found it to be very informative, interesting, detailed and educational simultaneously. I also found for me a personal satisfaction of having completed the book without abandoning it at some point in the process of my reading efforts.

This is an enjoyable book as long as the reader knows it is not about the science of Kepler but about the customs and beliefs and the religious conflicts (main theme) of his time. But I had no idea what Kepler went through because of his religious beliefs and so I did enjoy the book

This is such a wonderful book that I would urge anyone with an interest in history or science to read it.

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