



Isaac Newton: The Last Sorcerer

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Unknown to all but a few, Newton was a practicing alchemist who dabbled with the occult, a tortured, obsessive character who searched for an understanding of the universe by whatever means possible. Sympathetic yet balanced, Michael White's *Isaac Newton* offers a revelatory picture of Newton as a genius who stood at the point in history where magic ended and science began.

Isaac Newton: The Last Sorcerer Details

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Author : Michael White

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A says

A biography which lays out Newton in an unflattering manner, and describes in great detail his shortcomings. However, you also get a sense of what facilitated this man's great discoveries (calculus most notably) and his publications (Principia). The only aspect preventing me from giving this 5 stars is the occurrence every 50 pages or so of dedicating a page or two to repeating almost verbatim an introduction to a topic as the book closed on said topic rather than summing up what was just described or just moving on to the next topic. It really deserves a 9 out of 10, but I would suggest this to anyone wanting a true narrative of the life of possibly the greatest mind of the 17th century, but also a man delving into topics of alchemy and religious fanaticism.

Leanne says

Thus far, this is the closest book I have read on Isaac Newton about his extremely dark, creepy, misanthropic soul! This dude's inner life is scary and I love it! I can so relate to it! To be born such a genius--to get a view of life so young that no one on his little farm can possibly understand--was his impetus in the search for meaning 'cause it sure wasn't apparent in the society he inhabited! In order for him to feel anything remotely representing a life of meaning--he had to discover the godliness of the Universe and he spoke its language few can speak! I also know for sure he murdered his compatriots in order to obtain the privileges of a fellow at Cambridge! And I am going to be the one to write the book on it! I only imparted 3 stars cause the author, as do all the others--talk way too much about his successes. I am going to write about the extremely dark nature of this man's soul that lead him to such godlike adoration among scientists.

Richard says

I loved this! Sir Isaac was a real piece of work, and his character is at least as fascinating as his discoveries. And, best part, no equations! Science without the numbers. Perfect for a math-phobe like me.

John says

A very interesting read. Learned many things about Newton not known to me before it reading. Enjoyed learning about his time at the Royal Mint. We need people like him today in government. His alchemist interest did not interest me. His social life or lack of it did not surprise me but his reaction to criticism did. This was my 3rd Michael White book and all were 4 star works. I think I have 5 more to read.

Emily says

White has biographed several influential men of science. He looks at a lot of primary material and writes extensively about multiple facets of his subjects' lives. However, as somebody who has read a lot of academic writing lately, I feel that some of White's claims about Newton's character and motivations are unfounded or at least not properly documented. They're really neat and plausible ideas, but they're more disputable than White seems to allow. Oh well.

Excerpt for my own notes: "According to the Roman histsorian Justin, Pythagoras believed that: God is one. And he is not, as some think, outside the world, but in it, for he is entirely in the whole circle looking over all generations. He is the blending agent of all ages, the executor of his own power and deeds; the first of all things, the light in heaven; the Father of all; the mind and animating force of the universe; the motivating factor of all the heavenly bodies."

quoted from Justin Martyr, "Exhortation to the Greeks", as quoted in S.K. Heninger Jr, /Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics/ (San Marino, Cal.: The Huntingdon Library, 1974), p. 202

And then Newton's religious ideas: "God does not himself control directly the gravitational forces that keep the planets in motion, nor does he provide directly the medium via which universal gravitation operates. Instead, teh incorporeal ether which facilitates the phenomenon of gravitation (and perhaps other forces) is actually the body or spiritual form of Jesus Christ" (351). Here Newton sees Jesus as "the agent by whom God created all things in this world," or, a la the Gospel of John and mystics like Eckhart, the Divine Logos, or Word.

Rita says

This book was amazing. It was readable even though I know very little about the subject and his experiments. I skipped a few paragraphs where the writing was too technical but I learned so much about Newton and the times in which he lived. I had no idea so many changes occured in such a short time and how some of his theories have held up to this day.

Roger says

In my opinion, Michael White has written an excellent, well researched biography of one of our greatest scientists. He explains in detail how Isaac Newton had a troubled childhood and how this may have adversely affected his personality in later life, leading him to be very secretive, trusting few people and disliking criticism, and resulting in him being reticent to publish his theories. His Principia, for example, was twenty years in the making and when it was published it was in Latin and deliberately written in a way to ensure very few people would be able to understand it.

White also does a good job of explaining the bleak atmosphere at Cambridge University in the 17th century, and the workings and politics of the Royal Society, then in its infancy. Both institutions were very different then to how they are in the 21st century.

As the title of the book suggests, White places much emphasis on Newton's alchemy endeavours, and how

Newton saw alchemy as a way of explaining nature and the universe, and providing an insight into the mind of God. To Newton, and to many others of the period, alchemy meant a lot more than transmuting base metals into gold, or finding the elixir of life. Newton was not alone in believing that ancient civilisations had a much fuller understanding of nature, the universe and God and that these revelations had been lost in the mists of time but could be re-discovered through the ancient art of alchemy and by studying the bible. White explains all of this very clearly. Newton carried out an enormous number of alchemical investigations to try to unlock the meaning of life, as well as undertaking detailed analyses of the bible for similar purposes. Whilst I could accept that someone in that era, even someone like Newton, could see good reasons for carrying out alchemy and re-interpreting the bible, unfortunately White didn't convince me that Newton's research in these areas had been crucial to leading him to his conclusions on gravitation. To me that really didn't make sense and in a way this is a pity because it seemed to be an important objective of the book.

Another theme through much of the book was the personal antagonism between Newton and others. A prime example was Newton's abhorrence of Robert Hooke, and vice-versa. This mutual loathing is documented elsewhere but I did feel that White painted Hooke to be blacker than he really was. Other accounts refer to Hooke's popularity and his honesty. I can't help feeling that both scientists were equally to blame for the detestation that existed between them. Likewise, Newton held a grudge against the Astronomer Royal, John Flamsteed, who he felt was hindering his work on the second edition of the Principia by dallying over the provision of astronomical observations. Newton used Machiavellian methods to undermine Flamsteed, even using Prince George as a way of getting at the data. Another victim of Newton's malevolence was the polymath Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who had independently invented calculus, but who found himself being accused of stealing Newton's (then unpublished) work. Newton was unforgiving of those who he believed had crossed him and he bore grudges against these individuals for ever more.

But from the book we learn that whatever Newton did, he invested all of his efforts into that undertaking, be it carrying out investigations into alchemy, optics and gravitation, running the Royal Mint, or being President of the Royal Society. Over his lifetime he acquired many enemies and seems to have made few friends. And those friends he did make did not always get the loyalty from Newton they may have expected in times of adversity.

Overall, Michael White paints a vivid picture of a genius who was a workaholic but also a vindictive misanthrope who sought to destroy those he fell out with. On the whole a thoroughly nasty individual but one who was nevertheless widely respected for his abilities, if not for his personality. I look forward to reading more biographies by White.

Tmillet says

It seems like biographies are divided into those that place the person at quasi-demigod status and those that are trying to debunk that idea in light of new evidence or difference of opinion etc. If I had to put this book into one of those two categories it would be the latter type. It was a well written and well researched book but I felt like a lot of the book was trying to show how horrible of a person Newton was or how he was possibly homosexual based on the premise that he had a male roommate for so long, (that dialogue went on for far too long). I found out a lot of good information as well but that just didn't seem to be the focus. It's possible I just began reading this in hopes of finding out how great of a man Newton was and became disappointed with the truth that he likely wasn't.

Cheryl Lassiter says

Anyone interested enough in the life of Isaac Newton to devote years to researching and writing about it, especially to bring to light one of the more unexplored aspects of his work, is all right in my book.

White's writing is straightforward, easily understood, perhaps in need of a bit of flair in the vein of Stacy Schiff or Deborah Harkness. This was published in 1997, however, in the days before the lively novelistic style met, fell in love with, and eventually married dry old historical nonfiction (to my undying appreciation and gratitude!).

Linda says

Did you know that Newton is responsible not for the telescope but for the clarity of the lenses of a telescope? And for your reading glasses? And he didn't work for ADM!;-)

I am amazed with all of the accomplishments of this man - who was identified, appropriately, as the most influential person in history. His contributions include math (found a mathematical approach to proving the orbits of the planets around the sun), science (he really didn't 'discover' gravity, rather he proved it), astronomy, alchemy, and government (he designed and oversaw the English mint - he put people to death for shaving coins - rather extreme, but it stopped the practice).

Not surprisingly, Newton's personal life was not as full and was very tumultuous. He isolated himself socially due to his poor self awareness and criticism of those he found 'inferior'. Sad for someone so accomplished.

Keith Parrish says

I fished this book out of the discard pile at our middle school library. Turns out I should have left it there. Dry as dust, based largely on the (not always supported) conjecture of the author and with a questionable thesis at best. Of course the biggest question I have is - What nimrod thought this was a good book for a middle school library in the first place? I like history, and I like science, and even I thought this was boring.

Carl says

This book, like promised in the beginning, does show some negative sides to Isaac Newton, but it does not dwell on them. Although I have not read any of Isaac Newton's other biographies to make a comparison, I feel that "The Last Sorcerer" was fair and humanized the man. I still came away with a greater appreciation for Isaac Newton and his work. The Last Sorcerer also gives good insight to the Royal Society of the late 1600s and early 1700s. It is incredible the amount of scientific progress that was achieved in a relatively short period of time.

Mary Osborne says

Most of us know Isaac Newton as one of the most influential scientists of all time. He discovered gravity, calculus, theories on mechanics and optics, the mathematics of orbiting planets. What is less well known is Sir Isaac's fascination with alchemy. That this man of science became somewhat obsessed with "The Great Work" might seem to be a paradox, but White's examination of Newton's writings and alchemical experiments reveal how his dabbling furthered techniques in chemistry and influenced his approach to scientific problem solving in general. He lived at the cusp of the Enlightenment, the movement toward rationality, and yet this most brilliant of minds maintained an unshakable faith and belief in the divine order of all things.

I read this book because I am planning to feature him as a character in book three of my Alchemy Series. Sir Isaac's life offers some great material to work with!

Kevin says

I didn't really know what to expect from Newton's life. I had thought, in a hazy way, it followed a simple pattern of five years genius, 50 years crazy alchemy and paranoia. The theme of this book though is that the science, the occultism, and the religious mania can't really be separated and actually fed one another.

Newton was notoriously anti-social as a young man, and if he'd stayed the same all his life it would have been kind of a painful read. But there's a surprising development of character, even well into the 18th century. Kind of hilarious how petty and efficient he was in running the Royal Society to boost his own reputation. And I was vaguely aware he had something to do with the Royal Mint, but did you know he essentially operated as a private investigator for years, chasing down and executing counterfeiters with a network of agents in 11 counties? All while working 16 hour days helping to save the British economy? There's a TV show I'd want to watch.

Kind of got a weird anti-Catholic vibe from the parts about King James, but maybe his motives really were that transparently sinister. Really not so sure about the implications of homosexuality between Newton and Fatio, and Newton and Wickins (maybe he just got on well enough with them to want to live together?), but I guess the trouble with popular histories is you never know how much to trust -- the author certainly spends enough time bashing previous biographers.

Also would have liked to see more mathematical content, especially during the aggravatingly brief summary of the calculus wars. Don't just drop the word "*fluxions*" around like that and not tell me the whole story, man. It started off okay, inserting entire chapters of background scientific history (glossed over too much in places, but still welcome), but in the sections on the Principia Mathematica it became pretty clear there weren't going to be any laws or equations showing up.

Mostly it made me want to read books about the recurring supporting characters, Leibniz, and Halley, Hooke and the rest of the Royal Society. Wasn't Benjamin Franklin around at the same time? What I actually want is a book where they meet in the late 17th century, and solve mysteries of crime and science together. But this one was pretty diverting.

Ak Hauck says

After reading about Paracelsus, I re-read this book on Newton. I think the most fascinating thing that comes from reading this and other books about the beginnings of modern science, is that it was borne out of alchemy. We tend to look back on history and judge its famous and infamous figures through the lense of Modernity. Better to let history speak for itself. White does a good job of placing Newton in his times.
