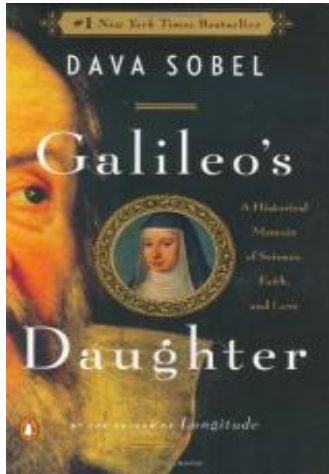


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# Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith and Love

by Dava Sobel

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## About the Book

Dava Sobel has had a lifelong fascination with Galileo and her latest book, **Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith, and Love**, brings the famous scientist vividly to life while offering a unique perspective on his trial for heresy and subsequent years under house arrest.

Just as Sobel made John Harrisons search to determine longitude a compelling story for modern readers in *Longitude*, she makes Galileos scientific struggles and achievements fresh and alive through her own knowledge of the history of science and the insightful letters of his daughter, which Sobel has translated from the original Italian.

When she was thirteen Galileo placed his oldest daughter, Virginia, in the Convent of San Matteo in Arcetri, a mile from Galileos home in Florence, where she took the name Maria Celeste and devoted herself to the hard, poverty-stricken life of the Poor Clares. They corresponded regularly and 124 of her letters to Galileo still survive (his letters to her were most likely destroyed).

Maria Celestes letters reveal an intense devotion between father and daughter and chronicle the momentous events of Galileos later career. They also provide keen insight on Galileos theories of the heavens, his trial for heresy, and his abjuration and eventual punishment. Sobel goes beneath the science-versus-religion symbolism to reveal how the social, psychological, and political aspects of Galileos trial all converged in an inevitable showdown.

The turbulent time in which Galileo and Maria Celeste lived is a vivid background for their stories. Sobel skillfully renders the horrors of the bubonic plague as it swept through Italy, the toll of the Thirty Years War, the difficulties of travel and communication between cities in Italy, as well as the flamboyant ways of the Medicis, who were Galileos patrons.

In **Galileo's Daughter**, Sobel reveals a personal side to Galileo that has never been presented before, while rescuing an extraordinary woman from the depths of history.

## Discussion Guide

1. What impressions or ideas did you have about Galileo before reading Sobel's book? Did the book change any of your opinions, and if so, how?
2. In what ways did the insertion of the full-length letters of Suor Maria Celeste, and the excerpts from the Rule of Saint Clare and the testimony from Galileo's trial, affect the narrative flow of the story?
3. If you have ever carried on an in-depth correspondence with a friend or family member, compare that experience to keeping in touch by telephone or e-mail. Is long-hand letter writing becoming a lost art?
4. How would you characterize Galileo's behavior as a father to each of his children? Was Galileo's relationship with Suor Maria Celeste an ideal father-daughter relationship?
5. What part did Galileo's frequent bouts of illness play in his personal and professional decisions?
6. Which aspects of convent life at San Matteo were most surprising or disturbing?
7. Who are the heroic figures in the story? Was Castelli a hero? Signor Geri? Suor Luisa?
8. Which arguments did Galileo employ to reconcile his scientific discoveries with his religious beliefs? How do these compare with the current stance of the relationship between science and religion?
9. How do you think Galileo would react to the news that Pope John Paul II had called for a reexamination of his affair?
10. Given the suggestion in one of Suor Maria Celeste's letters that she wrote out the final manuscript for Galileo's Dialogue, how do you imagine the two of them might have worked together? How do you think each of them expected the final product to be received?
11. Censorship constituted a routine part of the publication process of the 17th century. What part does it play today?
12. For what crimes or infractions was Galileo brought to trial? Did his accusers see him as truly a heretic or merely disobedient?
13. Viewed in this age of televised court cases, what did you think of the legal process of Galileo's trial?
14. Why did Galileo abjure his belief in the Copernican system? What do you think would have happened to him and his family if he had refused to abjure?

15. Can Galileo's arguments in defense of the Copernican model of the universe be applied to recent debates about the teaching of evolution in the classroom?
16. Which scientific ideas of Galileo's turned out to be wrong? How could incorrect assumptions lead him in the right direction for establishing modern science?
17. Is it possible for us to look at the culture of the 16th centuryits class system, the options available for women, commonly held views on how diseases are spreadwithout imposing a 21st century perspective?
18. Can you see any similarities between the 17th-century reaction to the bubonic plague and modern responses to the AIDS epidemicin terms of popular superstitions, medical treatments or government intervention?
19. Galileo believed that the Bible was a book a about how to go to heavennot how heaven goes. Do you agree with him?

## Author Bio

Dava Sobel, a former *New York Times* science reporter, is the author of *LONGITUDE*, *GALILEO'S DAUGHTER* and *LETTERS TO FATHER*. In her 30 years as a science journalist, she has written for many magazines, and co-authored six books, including *IS ANYONE OUT THERE?* with astronomer Frank Drake and *THE ILLUSTRATED LONGITUDE* with William J. H. Andrews. Sobel has been awarded the National Science Board's prestigious Individual Public Service Award, the Bradford Washburn Award from the Boston Museum of Science, and the Harrison Medal from the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.

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