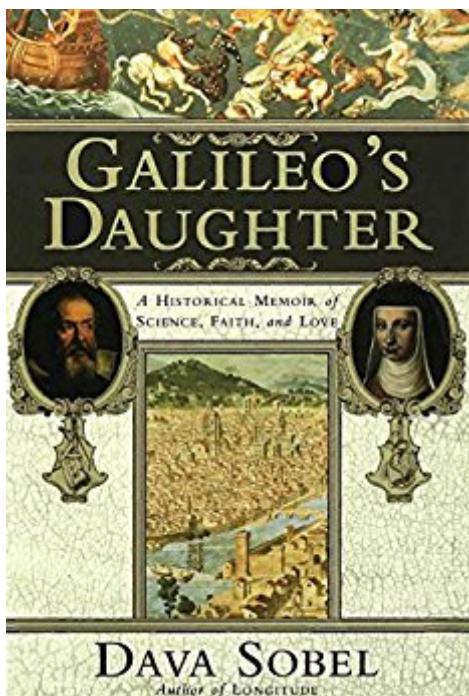


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# Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir Of Science, Faith And Love



## **Synopsis**

Inspired by a long fascination with Galileo, and by the remarkable surviving letters of Galileo's daughter, a cloistered nun, Dava Sobel has written a biography unlike any other of the man Albert Einstein called "the father of modern physics- indeed of modern science altogether." Galileo's Daughter also presents a stunning portrait of a person hitherto lost to history, described by her father as "a woman of exquisite mind, singular goodness, and most tenderly attached to me." Galileo's Daughter dramatically recolors the personality and accomplishment of a mythic figure whose seventeenth-century clash with Catholic doctrine continues to define the schism between science and religion. Moving between Galileo's grand public life and Maria Celeste's sequestered world, Sobel illuminates the Florence of the Medicis and the papal court in Rome during the pivotal era when humanity's perception of its place in the cosmos was about to be overturned. In that same time, while the bubonic plague wreaked its terrible devastation and the Thirty Years' War tipped fortunes across Europe, one man sought to reconcile the Heaven he revered as a good Catholic with the heavens he revealed through his telescope. With all the human drama and scientific adventure that distinguished Dava Sobel's previous book *Longitude*, Galileo's Daughter is an unforgettable story

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

Dava Sobel has accomplished what is nearly impossible when dealing with a subject who is as well known, and documented as the life of Galileo. There must be literally hundreds of books on the man, and his works. Dava Sobel not only finds new source information, the letters of Galileo's eldest Daughter Sister Maria Celeste, but also uses them to expand on what is commonly known about Galileo the Scientist, the accused Heretic, and gives us Galileo the Father. It could be argued that the book is as much about Galileo as his Daughter, but that would be misplacing the emphasis of the book. We learn of the extremely harsh life of Cloistered Nuns, the medicines that Galileo's Daughter made and treated him with. This to me was fascinating as opposed to just knowing that Galileo was often sickly. From the detail in the book one could recreate these medicinal treatments if one chose to. This type of detail would not normally interest me, but here it is presented as a Daughter trying to maintain the physical health, as well as constantly buttressing the man's faith as he was accused, tried, sentenced, and watched his life's greatest work banned by his own Church. And to have this torment take place with the consent of a man that Galileo counted as a friend, both prior to his being Pope, and when he became Pope Urban VIII. I feel the Authoress did a brilliant job of handling the religious issue. Rarely can this be attempted without the writer being branded anti-Catholic. She was able to state the facts, without editorial comment, by which she successfully navigated a secular minefield. Some of the facts are so petty and mean-spirited that was it not for the fact they came from Vatican Records, Dava Sobel would find herself the target of the narrow-minded.

Sobel's biography of Galileo does many things. As a result, it doesn't cover any one of its aspects in tremendous depth, but does do a good job of covering each of them. This also helps make the book more enjoyable to read. A straight up, full frontal discussion of the great scientist's theories on motion would have been tough for a reader not well-versed in math and physics. By contrast, when Sobel talks about Galileo's scientific breakthroughs, it's clear what the subject is, even if some details are left out. It also hits some new territory in its revealing of Galileo, the person, especially his relationship with his daughter. Her correspondence with him shows a woman of ironclad (almost self-flagellating) faith, devoted love for her father (which he clearly shared) and the two of them as just ordinary folks who worry not only about the movement of earth, but also about the laundry. Galileo is also shown to have a sense of humor; when fined for not wearing his uniform at

university, he circulated a tongue-in-cheek poem asking if clothes were really necessary at all. The book also does a nice job of illuminating Galileo's true greatest feat - changing our definition of "science". In his time, the "natural philosophers" held that the universe was unchanging, that math was useless as a tool to describe the world, and that "if Aristotle said it, it must be true." These concepts are total anathema to science today, thanks largely to Galileo, who disproved them. With due respect, I'd also like to correct a few errors in some other reviews. Galileo's book "A Treatise on the Tides", did indeed try to use the tides to prove that the earth was not stationary in space. But he claimed that it was earth's motion which caused tides, not the Moon.

Some authors are very good telling you about history. Others are very good at putting you into history. Both have their place. But an author who can do the latter is special and Dava Sobel is one of the latter. Her book, *Longitude*, was her first and is excellent, bringing to light a crucial and little known part of scientific history. The story of Galileo is better known but often misunderstood by even science teachers like myself. However, by framing the Galileo's story around his daughter's letters (Galileo's replies are lost) we get the feeling of being there in the early 17th century and a real taste of Galileo's successes and setbacks. I suppose that many people might be put off by this style of history-telling. It is often difficult for a 21st century person to understand the interests and cares of people 25 years ago let alone 400 years ago. I think it's fascinating, however, to see the differences: a time when science was new, creating an awe that is lost on modern people, and religion permeated peoples lives, God's world being as present as the physical one. As a Catholic, I was particularly interested in Galileo's struggles with the Church. I have often felt this period to be in many ways a low point in Church history. Interestingly, it turns out to be what these things often are: a struggle between both high- and low-minded Church officials, where political issues end up winning out over theological and philosophical ones. Galileo's conviction by the Inquisition (on what appears to be a vote of 7-3) was caused by many factors and his continued support by many highly placed Catholics even after his conviction shows the lack of unanimity in opinion.

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