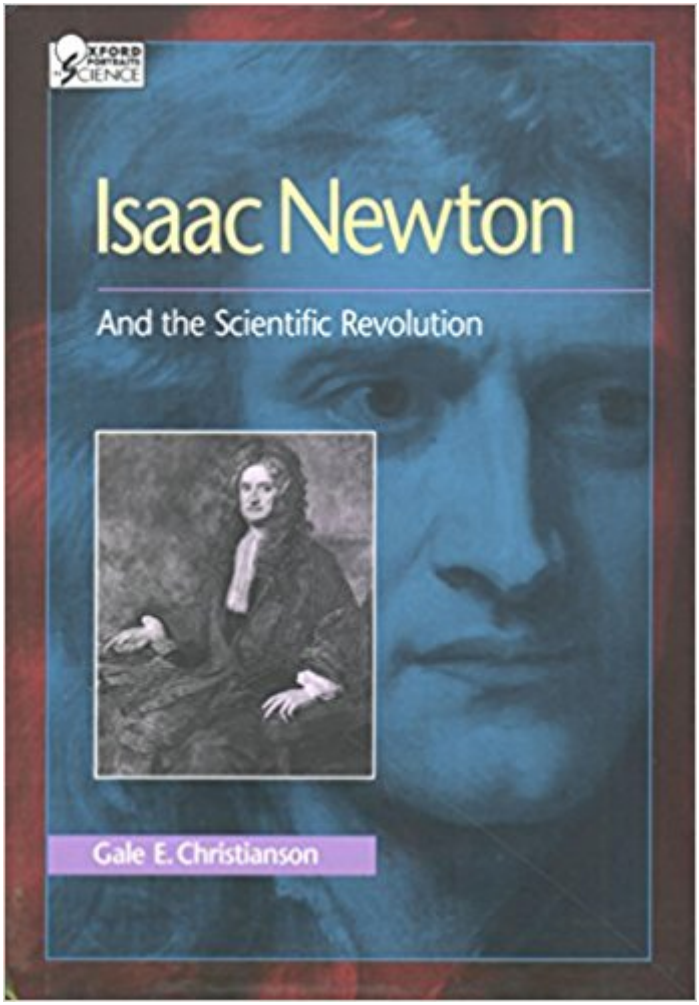
Isaac Newton: And The Scientific Revolution (Oxford Portraits In Science)



Synopsis

In 1665, when an epidemic of the plague forced Cambridge University to close, Isaac Newton, then a young, undistinguished scholar, returned to his childhood home in rural England. Away from his colleagues and professors, Newton embarked on one of the greatest intellectual odysseys in the history of science: he began to formulate the law of universal gravitation, developed the calculus, and made revolutionary discoveries about the nature of light. After his return to Cambridge, Newton's genius was quickly recognized and his reputation forever established. This biography also allows us to see the personal side of Newton, whose life away from science was equally fascinating. Quarrelsome, quirky, and not above using his position to silence critics and further his own career, he was an authentic genius with all too human faults.

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Customer Reviews

This book is a well-written overview of the life of Newton in a compact form. Gale Christianson presents a coherent, well-substantiated, and persuasive portrait of the personality of the great

physicist, together with an informed and balanced discussion of the several family members and contemporaries -- at the university, academy of science, and court-with whom Newton lived. Christianson has condensed the findings of his 1984 biography of Newton, "In the Presence of the Creator" (New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan), but employed the lighter touch of his book of essays, "Writing Lives Is the Devil! Essays of a Biographer at Work" (Archon, 1993), in framing Newton's life within the contemporary events of English history, an approach suitable for "the general public," the term used by Oxford U.P. to characterize the intended reader.Awkwardly, the first chapter begins with a dramatic account of the execution of Charles I in 1649, which is followed immediately by a non-sequitur: "Woolsthorpe Manor [Newton's birthplace]... was a lonely place seven years before the king's death" (p. 11). Happily, however, the account soon displays some sympathetic honesty: the boy nursed a grudge for having been separated from his mother, and he did well in his schoolwork only after the boy immediately above him in academic rank kicked him in the stomach. He left for the university with a girlfriend waiting behind in Grantham.Much the best aspect of this book is its informed treatment of controversial aspects of Newton's personal life. Christianson discusses the possibility that Newton had a homoerotic attraction to Nicolas Fatio de Dullier (likely), that he had a breakdown induced by metallic fumes from his alchemical experiments (unlikely), and that, during his service as Master of the Mint, he personally enlisted perjurers to convict the counterfeiter William Chaloner (certain).Christianson has remarked that he seldom has had the final say in the titles of his books. And despite its title, this book explains very little, if anything, of what Newton contributed to the Scientific Revolution; the methods of modem science are taken as unproblematic, even in 1660, and Christianson devotes less than two pages to Newton's innovations in mathematics. Descartes's cosmology and philosophic work receive no mention at all, and Newton's mechanics are interpreted as extensions of Galileo's ideas. Perhaps the low point in this telescoping of context into an inexplicable outpouring of genius occurs in the discussion of the "Philosophical Notebook", which, Christianson informs us, begins with notes on the works of Aristotle. Newton introduces a new topic with the following "revolutionary sentence," which also makes an appearance in the title of the chapter: "I am a friend of Plato, I am a friend of Aristotle, but truth is my greater friend" (p. 22). But as the Latin tag "amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas" is a translation of a phrase commonly attributed to Aristotle (see the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, ed. Angela Partington, 4th ed. [Oxford University Press, 1992], p. 26), Newton was more likely paraphrasing his textbook here than announcing a new program for looking at the world.In any case, the book has a beautiful set of well-chosen illustrations and ample margins for notes; it is altogether a quality production that is available at an reasonable price.

As the meager 160 pages indicates, this book does not dig deeply into Newton’s life or his works.It does a good job, however, of covering the gist of his life.During his 84 years, Newton accomplished much. But I wanted to know what made Newton what he was. How did he become so profoundly engrossed in math and physics? What drove him? Why was he such a loner? What gave him such tremendous propensity for hard work?Newton’s psychology, upbringing, and development as a foremost intellect of his time (perhaps of all time) are covered only superficially.Newton also never married but was honored with the highest distinction and awe. Many justifiably looked upon him as an intellectual titan without peers.I thought there was much to his life besides facts and anecdotes. Too bad this book never goes much beyond that.There is humor spread throughout this book. I was left chuckling a few times.Overall, I recommend this book. This book is like a deluxe Wikipedia version of Newton’s life. It won’t set the standard for biographical excellence, but it is still a entertaining and fascinating read.

My son picked out this book for an assigned biography project (grade 5). He enjoyed the book and has gotten excited about researching Newton’s work and legacy. It is accessible without dumbing things down, and it tells a compelling story without adding fluff or questionable conjecture. A great book for older kids who are interested in science, history, technology, math, and more.

an joyful reading!

Well written, in-depth book on one of the greatest scientists of all time. The book flows nicely, and has a lot of little facts you didn’t know about Newton. Touches slightly on his work, but focuses mainly on his life, achievements and conflicts.

Christianson has done a wonderful and remarkable job in bringing the Genius (Isaac Newton) alive in pages that is toned with the backdrop of English history. All the major points of this Great Man’s Life are covered with an interesting and engaging writing style. There is hardly any "filler " material here, it is to the point, chronological and as I’ve mentioned, written in a very interesting and engaging way that keeps you interested from chapter to chapter to the very end. Superb job, loved every page !!

I loved this biography for its depth and fascinating insight into the perplexing and most complicated

life of Isaac Newton. What an interesting and extremely devoted man. He immersed himself in science to the exclusion of nearly all other interests and relationships, and found himself very alone in his pursuits. However, as most men and women of powerful intellect, he was driven by the need to prove his theories and to understand the Creator's world.Christianson explores Newton's deep Christian feelings and beliefs, his political ideas, and his scientific discoveries and controversies with extraordinary precision and elegant language. This is definitely the best biography I have read this year (2007). I'm so glad I invested the time and money in this glorious and inspiring biography of a never-to-be-forgotten genius!

I have never read a biography quite as good as this. This book has some of the best descriptions of Newton that I've ever heard: "Like Leonardo da Vinci and Benjamin Franklin, Isaac Newton was not just an aimless childhood tinkerer, but a tinkerer playing with ideas and mechanisms." It has so many interesting details about his life, such as the jumping contest at school, or the many different clocks that he made. This book made me realize that Newton wasn't just a great scientist, but a political figure as well, with a seat in Parliment, head of the Royal Society, and Director of the Mint. If it is possible, Cristianson would be my nominee for the Pulitzer Prize.