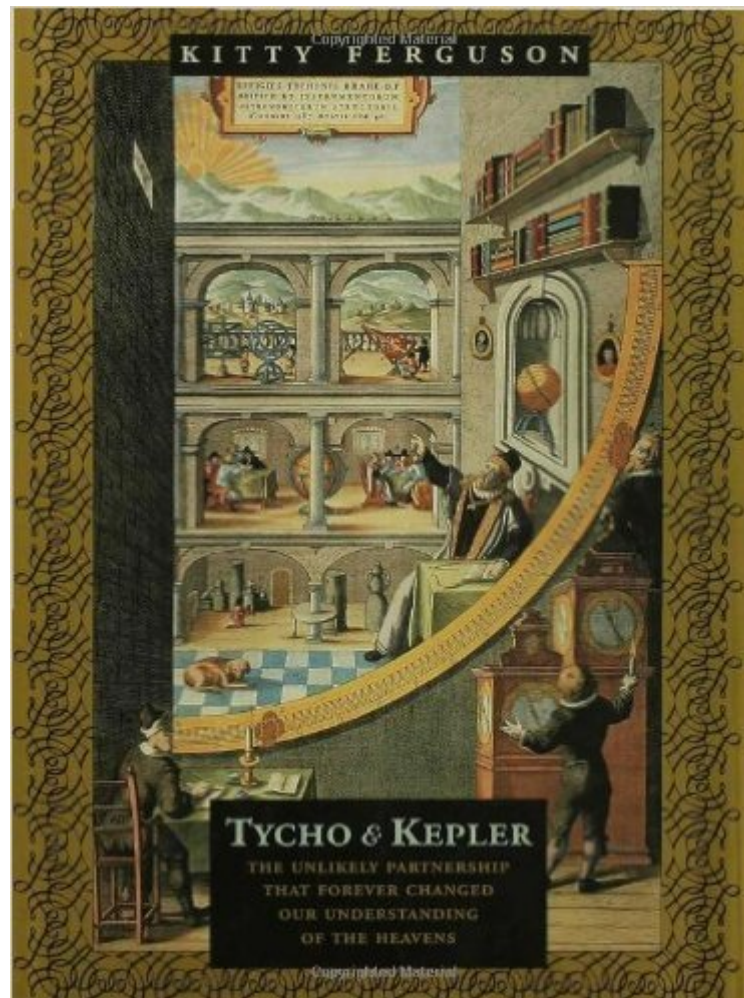


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Tycho & Kepler



Synopsis

On his deathbed in 1601, the Danish nobleman and greatest naked-eye astronomer, Tycho Brahe, begged his young colleague, Johannes Kepler, "Let me not seem to have lived in vain." For more than thirty years-- mostly in his native Denmark and then in Prague under the patronage of the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II-- Tycho had meticulously observed the movements of the planets and the positions of the stars. From these observations he developed his Tychonic system of the universe-- a highly original, if incorrect, scheme that attempted to reconcile the ancient belief that the Earth stood still with Nicolaus Copernicus's revolutionary rearrangement of the solar system some fifty years earlier. Tycho knew that Kepler, the brilliant young mathematician he had engaged to interpret his findings, believed in Copernicus's arrangement, in which all the planets circled the Sun; and he was afraid his system-- the product of a lifetime of effort to explain how the universe worked-- would be abandoned. In point of fact, it was. From his study of Tycho's observations came Kepler's stunning three Laws of Planetary Motion-- ever since the cornerstone of cosmology and our understanding of the heavens. Yet, as Kitty Ferguson reveals, neither of these giant figures would have his reputation today without the other. The story of how their lives and talents were fatefully intertwined is one of the more memorable sagas in the long history of science. Set in a singularly turbulent and colorful era in European history, at the turning point when medieval gave way to modern, *Tycho & Kepler* is both a highly original dual biography and a masterful recreation of how science advances. From Tycho's fabulous Uraniborg Observatory on an island off the Danish coast to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor, Rudolph II; from the religious conflict of the Thirty Years' War that rocked all of Europe to Kepler's extraordinary leaps of understanding, Ferguson recounts a fascinating interplay of science and religion, politics and personality. Her insights recolor the established characters of Tycho and Kepler, and her book opens a rich window onto our place in the universe.

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Customer Reviews

Tycho & Kepler - The Unlikely Friendship that Forever Changed Our Understanding of the Heavens is, for the most part, an excellent novel and easy read. Although it is a little confusing and dry at the times when complex astronomical concepts are being explained, they are outweighed by the wealth of historical accounts and gratuitous, but juicy tidbits. For instance, besides explaining the extensive instruments that Tycho built, Ferguson offers that he was also the first Dane to write a poem in Latin, that he had a twin that died at birth, and his aunt and uncle kidnapped him from his parents who wanted a girl and didn't much care. As for Kepler, not only did he develop the Harmonic theory, but had a miserable marriage, a mother accused and tried for witchcraft, and was the first author of a science fiction novel. Kitty Ferguson thus tells the life stories of the astronomers Tycho and Kepler in an informative, educational, yet narrative and interesting way. She effectively spans the 20-year gap between Tycho and Kepler by beginning the book describing Tycho's childhood and indeed his life exclusively up until the advent of a comet on December 27, 1571. Ferguson explains that, when Tycho saw the comet, he was out at one of his 60 manmade fish ponds on his estate at the Danish Isle of Hven, catching fish for dinner that evening. Meanwhile Kepler saw the same comet, but he was only five, and it was during a rare warm moment that he shared with his mother on a hilltop in Leonberg. Thus Kepler enters the story. For the rest of the book, Ferguson fluidly integrates the two men's lives, switching back and forth in an understandable, connected way.

Science needs observers to acquire data. Science also needs theoreticians to make comprehensive explanations of the data. In *Tycho & Kepler: The Unlikely Partnership that Forever Changed Our Understanding of the Universe* (Walker), Kitty Ferguson has given a dual biography of exemplars from both aspects, two who founded modern astronomy. This was a peculiar and unlikely partnership, more of shared data than of friendship or cooperation. The story, however, is a fascinating one of detail within the Copernican revolution, and of the difficulties of doing science within the religions and politics of the time. Tycho was a Danish nobleman, and was not supposed to have a career, much less a scientific one. His pursuit of documentation of the heavens was a rebellious break with the traditions of his society. He began keeping a logbook of astronomical

observations when he was sixteen years old, and complained even then of the inaccuracy of the tables which were supposed to tell planetary positions. He also railed about the imprecision of the cross staff by which angular distance between stars was measured. Tycho was not satisfied with the Copernican system, although he knew the Earth-centered Ptolemaic one was wrong. He proposed the "Tychonic" system, wherein the Sun orbited the Earth, and the other planets orbited the Sun. He was welcomed by Emperor Rudolf II of the Holy Roman Empire, who supported him in making a new observatory in Prague, but he died only four years later. Kepler's start was far different. Born near Stuttgart in 1571 into a peculiar and unnurturing commoner family, he was essentially rescued by the church. The Protestants were urging the importance of schooling, and he originally wanted to become a Lutheran minister.

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