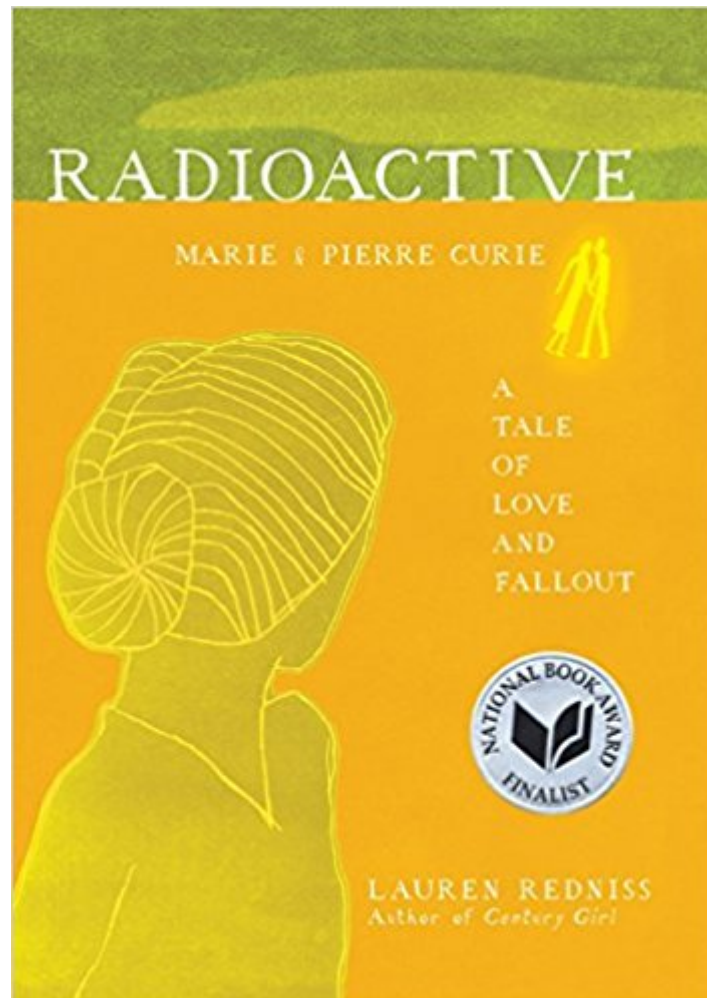




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Radioactive: Marie & Pierre Curie: A Tale Of Love And Fallout



Synopsis

In 1891, 24-year-old Marie Sklodowska moved from Warsaw to Paris, where she found work in the laboratory of Pierre Curie, a scientist engaged in research on heat and magnetism. They fell in love. They took their honeymoon on bicycles. They expanded the periodic table, discovering two new elements with startling properties, radium and polonium. They recognized radioactivity as an atomic property, heralding the dawn of a new scientific era. They won the Nobel Prize. Newspapers mythologized the couple's romance, beginning articles on the Curies with "Once upon a time . . . " Then, in 1906, Pierre was killed in a freak accident. Marie continued their work alone. She won a second Nobel Prize in 1911, and fell in love again, this time with the married physicist Paul Langevin. Scandal ensued. Duels were fought. In the century since the Curies began their work, we've struggled with nuclear weapons proliferation, debated the role of radiation in medical treatment, and pondered nuclear energy as a solution to climate change. In *Radioactive*, Lauren Redniss links these contentious questions to a love story in 19th Century Paris. *Radioactive* draws on Redniss's original reporting in Asia, Europe and the United States, her interviews with scientists, engineers, weapons specialists, atomic bomb survivors, and Marie and Pierre Curie's own granddaughter. Whether young or old, scientific novice or expert, no one will fail to be moved by Lauren Redniss's eerie and wondrous evocation of one of history's most intriguing figures.

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Customer Reviews

Best Books of the Month, December 2010: Lauren Redniss's brilliant biography-in-collage

is an astounding portrait of Marie and Pierre Curie, the husband-and-wife team who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1903. Broken into seven chapters (introduced with scientific terms that hint at the stories to come), *Radioactive* fuses quotes from the scientists themselves with ones from the Curies' own granddaughter, engineering and weapons experts, and even atomic bomb survivors that form a most interesting and informative narrative. Redniss's styling doesn't end with the way she tells the story: *Radioactive* is as visually stunning as it is factually rich. She jumps from black-and-white sketches to vibrantly colored depictions of the young couple's courtship, collaborations, and eventually Pierre's unexpected death. Within the stark pages of the chapter titled "Isolation," the reader feels Marie's loss; then in "Exposure" we watch as she falls in love again--this time under more controversial circumstances. Despite personal challenges, Marie continued to be ambitious and eventually became the first female professor at the Sorbonne, winning a second Nobel Prize in Chemistry. In *Radioactive*, Redniss shows a similar determination. Through her moody, evocative collages, she captures the drama of the Curies' lives and their contributions to science and medicine, sending the reader on a one-of-a-kind historical and biographical journey that any curious mind will appreciate. --Jessica Schein

A Look Inside Radioactive: A Tale of Love and Fallout Click on the photos below to open larger images.

Despite the tight quarters in his lab, Pierre Curie managed to find room for the delicate and grave foreign student. Marie Sklodowska and Pierre Curie wed on July 26, 1895. In 1900 Pierre strapped a tube of radium against his arm for ten hours. "To his joy, a lesion appeared," reported his daughter Eve.

"[An] excellent new book." (Robert Krulwich, NPR) "[A] sumptuously illustrated visual biography." *Radioactive* is an incisive look at science's greatest partnership. (Vogue) "One of the most beautiful books-as-object that I've ever seen." (Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*) "[Radioactive is] a deeply unusual and forceful thing to have in your hands. Ms. Redniss's text is long, literate and supple." Her drawings are both vivid and ethereal. *Radioactive* is serious science and brisk storytelling. The word "luminous" is a critic's cliché, to be avoided at all costs, but it fits. (New York Times) "Radioactive is quite unlike any book I have ever read" --part history, part love story, part art work and all parts sheer imaginative genius. (Malcolm Gladwell) "Absolutely dazzling. Lauren Redniss has created a book that is both vibrant history and a work of art. Like radium itself, *Radioactive* glows

with energy. (Richard Rhodes, author of *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize) “Radioactive offer innumerable wonders. Colors suddenly bloom into tremendous feeling, history contracts into a pair of elongated figures locked in an embrace, then expands again in an explosive rush of words. In this wholly original book about passion and discovery Lauren Redniss has invented her own unique form. (Nicole Krauss, author of *The History of Love*)

This is the first review I've ever been compelled to write. I also bought "Radioactive" after reading the New York Times' glowing praise. I couldn't put it down. After I read it, I couldn't go to sleep. I promptly ordered a dozen copies for friends, and wished I had the means to buy this book for everyone I know. This book changed my perspective on art, history, science and storytelling. First, the little things: the author created her own type based on the title pages of the New York Public Library; through evident hard work and determination, she tracked down astonishing anecdotes, photographs, gravestone rubbings, x-rays, and little known facts; the bibliography includes a breathtaking spectrum of sources, from interviews, lectures, biographies (in English and French), scientific journals, classified documents, correspondence, maps, notebooks, newspapers, scientific society proceedings; the illustrations are stunning. What unfolds on pages 83 - 85 is profoundly affecting and viscerally unforgettable. I am embarrassed by the number of superlatives in this paragraph. Now, the big thing: this book, like the story it tells, is a miracle. The reviewer below is entitled to his opinion. But may I offer a counterpoint. On page 94 Marie recalls a day in the meadows with her family, picking flowers. And there is an illustration of buttercups. Pages later, when Marie learns that Pierre is dead: "The flowers he had picked in the country remained fresh on the table." And then, let's say for curiosity's sake, you flip to the Notes and see this citation: "flowers...on the table." Curie Archives, microfilm, 4300. Perhaps you will "learn" "more" from a Wikipedia article. But I have rarely encountered a book that has made me feel so strongly and care more deeply about a topic (an entire world, really) that, prior to opening the cover, I had little interest in. Buy this book at once if you are a humanist; if you know anyone -- a journalist, artist, doctor, scientist -- looking for inspiration; if you believe in the confounding collision of serendipity, discovery, destruction and love; if you've never read a graphic novel; if there is a curious young woman in your life who you suspect might one day change the world with her intellect, or desperately wishes to. This book earns and deserves the attention of those of us who live beyond Wikipedia where stories are told, hearts swell and break, the buttercups matter (No. The buttercups are essential.), and man discovers a way to make mutant roses and glowing tubes of fairy light that change the course of

history.

So I order this to read for our book club, thinking it would be just a normal account of the Curies' discovery of radioactivity. The book arrives. Surely there must be some mistake; this looks like something for children -- pages filled with big colored illustrations mingled with occasional paragraphs of handwritten text. But no, while often childlike, the book is never childish. And the mixture of media gives only a hint of how widely author-artist Lauren Redniss has foraged to fill her cornucopia of art, science, and history. She starts by apologizing to Marie Curie for ignoring her insistence that "there is no connection between my scientific work and the facts of private life." Not only does she make such a connection, she glories in it. Look at the chapter headings of the first part: Symmetry, Magnetism, Fusion; scientific terms, but also personal ones. In the opening chapter, Redniss portrays the separate lives of Pierre and Marie in symmetry, on opposite pages, before showing the magnetism that drew them together as a couple, and the fusion that produced a child. But she also tells us of Pierre's work on the symmetry of crystals, and Marie's on magnetism and radiation. The question of atomic fusion (and fission) lies far in the future. But Redniss goes there too. At the very end of the first part, amid drawings of Marie and Pierre embracing in their laboratory, she has the words: "The new science needed a name." Turn the page to a double spread glowing in a muted cloudburst, containing only the words, "I coined the term radioactivity." Then look again, and you realize that the cloudburst is really an atomic blast -- not at all in your face, but lurking there as a threat. Although the longer second part continues with the story of the Curies, it strikes off sparks in many other directions: spiritualism, for example, the dancer Loïe Fuller, a list of famous Poles. A photograph of a man receiving radium treatment for a tumor in 1920 is juxtaposed with the first-hand account of a tumor survivor in 2001. Soon, we are jumping to Chernobyl, the Manhattan Project, and Three-Mile Island, and each time Redniss finds some unexpected witness to bring her message home. An FBI surveillance report; photos of the mutant zinnias and roses found near Harrisburg; the reports of a biologist studying wildlife in the Ukraine. One of the most effective spreads in the book is also the simplest, a black paper cutout used by a survivor of Hiroshima to show how her father's blackened skin peeled away at a touch. "A tale of love and fallout," says the subtitle. Nothing is predictable, neither the great discoveries nor their unexpected consequences, and love is the least logical thing of all. So by jumping around in subject and time, Redniss is only celebrating the power of surprise. She is thinking outside the box, way outside. The skill with which she balances the glory of the Curies' discoveries and their continued benefits against their terrible consequences would be remarkable even in a book that was

all text. But the illustrations offer a further layer of unpredictability. In almost no case does she simply illustrate the action; her drawings are bold, somewhat expressionist, even disturbing. I can't say that I like them as art, but as a constantly shifting matrix for a subject that refuses to be pinned down, their effect is powerful indeed. My only real complaint is that patches on the hard cover are printed in slightly raised ink like fine sandpaper, that you fear coming off on your hands. But close the cover and put out the lights, and you will see their purpose: the book literally glows in the dark!

Lauren Redniss has led the reader through the story of two scientists, their discovery, and what grew out of it, in a totally unexpected way. The story is more of a collage than anything else. There's a fair amount of biography, with illustration, mixed in with quotes, journal entries, and what may at first seem like unrelated bits of news and other trivia. In the end, though, everything in here has a purpose. The story of Marie and her broken heart and body is told, in the end, with heartbreaking poignancy. If possible, the story of radioactivity and the consequences of its discovery, is even more heartbreaking. I should make clear, though, that Redniss' gift to the reader isn't purely factual. Anybody can read the facts of Hiroshima and know that something terrible happened. No. The way Redniss connects the story of the Curies to the history of radioactivity makes things click on a much deeper level. It's almost like a poem that affects you deeply, even if you don't really know why. Perhaps this review is a little scattered, and perhaps the book might seem that way, too, but Redniss, at least, has a reason for everything, and in the end, her book is magic. I couldn't recommend it highly enough.

Use this for a graduate class - very artistic book that still aids in learning about radioactivity. Definitely more engaging than the majority of science textbooks.

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