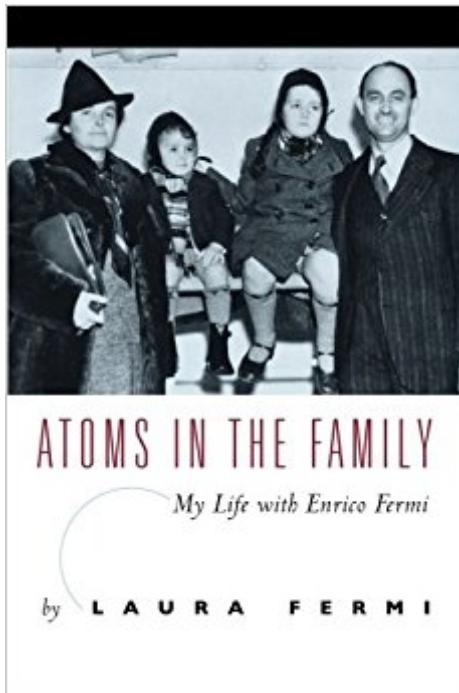




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Atoms In The Family: My Life With Enrico Fermi



Synopsis

In this absorbing account of life with the great atomic scientist Enrico Fermi, Laura Fermi tells the story of their emigration to the United States in the 1930s—part of the widespread movement of scientists from Europe to the New World that was so important to the development of the first atomic bomb. Combining intellectual biography and social history, Laura Fermi traces her husband's career from his childhood, when he taught himself physics, through his rise in the Italian university system concurrent with the rise of fascism, to his receipt of the Nobel Prize, which offered a perfect opportunity to flee the country without arousing official suspicion, and his odyssey to the United States.

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Customer Reviews

“If Laura Fermi is short on domestic candor, she makes up for it in excellent science-chronicling. Her accounts of Fermi's critical experiments in Italy will delight the lay reader without horrifying the pure scientist.” (Ralph E. Lapp New York Times) “Fermi's biography by his wife is a polished, lively piece on the man who won the Nobel Prize for work in nuclear physics and who helped to make the atom bomb. Covering their life together through three decades and two continents, there are intimate pictures of the early teaching days in Rome in an increasingly fascistic Italy, of other scientists who were their friends, and of the years at Columbia, Chicago, and Los Alamos. Valuable.” (Kirkus) “Damn original, these Fermis.” (New York Times)

My life with Enrico Fermi. In this absorbing account of life with the great atomic scientist Enrico Fermi, Laura Fermi tells the story of their emigration to the United States in the 1930's—part of the widespread movement of scientists from Europe to the New World that was so important to the development of the atomic bomb at Los Alamos. Combining intellectual biography and social history, Laura Fermi traces her husband's career from his childhood, when he taught himself physics, through his rise in the Italian university system concurrent with the rise of fascism, to his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1938, and his odyssey to Columbia University, Los Alamos, and the University of Chicago.

This is an outstanding biography of one of the world's leading physicists of the 20th century, Enrico Fermi, that was written by his wife Laura Fermi. Fermi's early work done in the 1930s in Rome with a small team of highly proficient physicists is beautifully described, including the famous experiments that earned Fermi the Nobel prize on new isotopes produced by neutron bombardment of targets spanning most of the periodic table. This work led onto the Fermi's move to USA in the 1940s and Fermi's seminal construction of the first nuclear power reactor in a squash court at Chicago University, and his later work on the atomic bombs of WWII done at the Los Alamos laboratory. Throughout the book Laura Fermi succeeds in describing her husband's experiments in terms anyone can appreciate. I first read the book in 1961 when I was a university student in New Zealand, and it was partly responsible for my continuing on in physics. My recent purchases of the book were for my grandchildren. My only misgiving with the current edition is with the less-than-perfect quality of the photographs that are included.

Mrs. Laura Fermi is a gifted and talented writer. Enrico Fermi is truly a giant of physics in the early 20th century as we all know. Mrs. Fermi does a beautiful job of making us see the loving husband and father who shared her life. We see Enrico hiking and skiing in the Italian Alps. Enrico was proud of the fact that he could out walk and climb young men his junior. Enrico never bragged about his genius and considered it only as a gift he was born with. He most proud of the fact that he was always in tremendous shape and full of superhuman energy. He could outwork all his peers and staff. He was tireless while working on a problem. He had the ability to break a very difficult problem down into simpler pieces and explain it so others would understand it clearly. We all know the scientist, Dr. Enrico Fermi and his legacy. But you must read this wonderful story of the real-life man, Mr. Enrico Fermi, to appreciate all his work and all the help he gave others for which he took

no credit.

Until coming across this biography I was unaware of spouses serving as biographers. But after reading this book, I must admit - What better person to learn from about Enrico Fermi, one of 20th century's renowned theoretical-cum-experimental physicists, than from his wife of 26 years, Laura Capon Fermi?! *Atoms in the family* - My life with Enrico Fermi provides an episodic account of events from both Enrico and Laura Fermi's lives with a major focus on Fermi's war time efforts in the 1940s. In some sense, it serves as a biography of Enrico Fermi and an autobiography for Laura Fermi. It's split into 2 parts, with part I describing their encounter, marriage and Fermi's work life in Rome, Italy during the 1920-30s in the midst of rising fascism under Benito Mussolini's dictatorship. It culminates with their flight along with their children and maid from Rome, Italy to New York City, United States in 1938 to escape persecution (since Laura was Jewish) from a fascist government that had by then colluded with Nazi Germany. Part II details their years and efforts at becoming Americanized, Fermi's involvement in the construction of the super-secret Chicago Pile-1 at Met Lab, University of Chicago and finally their secluded life at Los Alamos, New Mexico as participants in the US Army-led Manhattan District Project which resulted in the first atomic bomb. Since activities at Los Alamos were heavily classified, most sections in this part were pieced together by Laura Fermi from the Smyth report that was released after the end of World War II in 1945. (Apparently more details can be found in a hard-to-find book named *Atomic Quest* by Arthur Compton) For a biography, strangely this book is richly illustrated with around 3 dozen black and white photographs which do a very good job at diverting the attention of the reader from the text. To top it, Laura Fermi uses an engaging prose style which at times turns philosophical (e.g., her description of parting of ways with friends and with her homeland) and at other times, very witty (such as pointing out Enrico Fermi's idiosyncracies). What I was surprised by was the absence of any details of Enrico Fermi's final days. The date of publication by University of Chicago Press and the copyright date on this book appears on the 1st page as 1954 and Enrico Fermi passed away in 1954 of stomach cancer. Addition of these details would have offered closure to this otherwise engaging biography. All in all, I would rate this as an excellent purchase. For a deeper understanding of the background behind some of the projects that Fermi worked on, I would suggest picking up David Bodanis' classic book (IMHO) " $E=mc^2$: A biography of the world's most famous equation". Yup, that's right, biographies can be written for equations too. Who knew?!

The definitive biography of the man. Good mix of 'science' and 'personal' life. And now 7 more

words to meet requirement.

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