



Loving Faster Than Light: Romance and Readers in Einstein's Universe by K. Price, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012

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What does love and romance have to do with Einstein's theoretical science? While one of the physicist's amorous peccadillos led him to lose the money from his Nobel Prize as alimony for his first wife, many others infuriated his second wife. We know about the famous physicist's romantic obsessions from his published correspondence, *The Love Letters of Albert Einstein*, and from books about it, such as *Einstein in Love*. But Katy Price is after a deeper connection in *Loving Faster Than Light*.

The cover modestly claims to focus on "the popular reception of relativity in Britain," but inside we find much more. Her work is a unique contribution to the history of a pertinent emotion (love) and of a persistent literary genre (romance). What is more, the author offers us a novel approach to the study of science and literature.

Central to the theory of relativity were claims about communication at a distance. Central to the motivation for engaging in long distance communication was love and romance. With Price's contribution, evidence is now mounting that a deeper connection is to be found (alas, not between ourselves) but between science, literature and our emotions.

Price studies the work and correspondence of the astronomer Arthur Eddington, one of Einstein's main popularizers and the man responsible for catapulting the physicist to fame after he organized the famous eclipse expedition that proved the theory. She focuses on how Eddington explained the theory of relativity by reference to an affair with "a lady on Neptune." Even if the extraterrestrial lady "returns the sentiment," the astronomer pointed out how the lovesick Earthling could never be fully sure of her love. Einstein's theory showed how absurd it was to believe that "she is thinking of me now," because the traditional concept of "now" was no longer valid. For Price, this example reveals the intertwined histories of love and relativity.

Price compares references to love and romance in popular accounts in the theory of relativity to those appearing in the popular press, in pulp science fiction (such as in H.G. Wells), and in poetry (particularly William Empson). Her comments about the relation of science to popular science writing are particularly insightful. Instead of seeing newspapers as simply *reporting* science news, she considers them as *creating* audiences who accept a particular image of science. By considering media reporting as a world-making process, the connection between press journalism and modern science strengthens. Price's book points to a new direction for thinking about science in the modern world beyond the common "interchange and exchange model." Yes, both scientists and the public were often interested in the same themes, such as life on Mars, but

she is not only interested in tracing topics of interest to both. "Scientists," she argues, "do to natural phenomena what newspapers do to prominent social figures: catch them at a disadvantage."

Drawing on recent research by press historians, Price shows newspapers doing much more than merely delivering the news. They actively create audiences, and therefore forge a particular image of science. In the "interchange and exchange model," cultural references in scientific texts serve a merely illustrative function, but Price takes a different approach. Chapter 2, "Einstein for the Tired Business Man," centering on popular physics writing from the 1920s and 1930s, provides evidence of how modern science and modern daily press journalism emerged alongside each other.

The next chapter, "Cracks in the Cosmos: Space and Time in Pulp Fiction," offers us a reading of Einstein-themed stories "in their political context." The author finds that "the enrollment of Einstein's universe" in these accounts served to diffuse a dangerous "revolutionary sentiment." In particular, Price identifies a strong association of Einstein's universe with the new "uncanny" media environment of war propaganda, daily print, cinema newsreels and wireless. The connections she uncovers are even stronger than she suggests: Einstein's electrodynamics provided the framework for understanding telegraph, telephone and radio communications during this period.

While most historians of physics focus on how Einstein redefined the concept of "simultaneity," Price's work shows how it may be more pertinent to see him as redefining the related concept of the "now." Eddington remarks about how the "lady in Neptune" would "have to think of you continuously for eight hours on end in order to circumvent the ambiguity of 'Now'" are an ideal starting point. Love and science meet in their concern for the precise meaning of "now."

The category of the "here and now"—as it was understood by physicists, as it was redefined by new media, and as it was intimately felt—can provide strong links between these separate fields. A few years after Einstein's theory made a splash in learned and popular circles, Heidegger questioned the seemingly self-evident concept in his monumental *Being and Time*. Walter Benjamin, shortly before his death, turned to studying transformations in art and technology by reference to prior changes in the "here and now." The "Here and Now," argued Ernst Bloch a few decades later in *The Principle of Hope*, "is a utopian category, in fact the most central one." Price focuses on literature, but additional connections can be found in philosophy. *Loving Faster than Light* is a convincing and delightful account of how modern physics negotiated problems of presence—of(in)existence and (in)communication—just as much as it explored the technical behavior of light.

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