



many hardships in her childhood: Her mother died when she was 10, and the family's financial situation was precarious. Moreover, because Poland was occupied by Russia at the time, the family was sub-

jected to Russia's hegemony. Yet Curie was nurtured to be a Polish patriot and was expected to excel academically. The impression Goldsmith provides is that Curie's uncompromising approach to science was in large part molded by such childhood difficulties; those same difficulties also rendered her susceptible to episodes of depression that would plague her later in life. Curie's passion for science and its impact on her intimate relationships are recurring themes in the book. In her husband Pierre Curie, Marie found true love and, perhaps more important, a scientific partner. One concludes from Goldsmith's presentation that Pierre considered his wife to be at least his intellectual equal, and a major component of their mutual attraction was a shared passion for science. That same passion limited the amount of time and attention Curie devoted to her children, Irène and Eve, and led to exhaustion and bouts of depression. Curie's working-mother dilemma still applies today.

As a scientist, I am grateful for the accuracy with which Goldsmith presents the process of scientific discovery. Curie's success required not only genius but also hard work and a refusal to compromise standards. She obtained minute quantities of pure radioactive compounds at the expense of enormous physical effort. Literally tons of pitchblende were subjected to multiple boiling and chemical-extraction steps to yield minuscule amounts of radium. Goldsmith's descriptions of the machinations associated with obtaining the pitchblende and then distilling it to the final desired product provide a lesson in the reality of the scientific process that can be appreciated by all readers.

Goldsmith has written several other books that examine women's lives in the context of history, and her biography of Curie, set at the beginning of the 20th century, naturally includes many incidents of gender bias. For example, the official nominating letter for the 1903 Nobel Prize in Physics cited the work of Pierre Curie and Henri Becquerel while completely ignoring Marie's contributions. But a member of the Nobel Prize committee

objected to the omission and informed Pierre, who refused to accept the prize without the inclusion of Marie. Once the injustice was corrected, the prize was awarded to Henri Becquerel, Marie Curie, and her husband Pierre. The associated monetary prize, normally 70 000 gold francs for each awardee, was given in full to Becquerel while the Curies had to split 70 000 francs. Many other equally egregious incidents are described in the text. However, it is not clear from Goldsmith's account whether Curie acknowledged that any of those incidents were rooted in sexism.

The myth that has grown up around Curie is that she was a sympathetic victim, but Goldsmith's portrait is more nuanced: Curie is tough and sometimes unsympathetic. Her toughness was necessary for her success in science, yet it also rendered her uncompromising at times. For example, as radium salts were purified by laboratories throughout the world, standardization became necessary. Several prominent scientists, including the likes of Ernest Rutherford, asked Curie to provide a radium sample for the standardization, but she refused. Her protectiveness undoubtedly stemmed in part from the enormous effort expended to obtain the radium. However, it is also possible that her actions simply reflected her wish to exert control on the field.

Goldsmith succeeds in providing a thoughtful study of her complex subject that can be appreciated by all readers. In *Obsessive Genius*, she effectively dispels the myth of Curie's life of "towering perfection" and reveals many of the personal and social difficulties the scientist faced. However, a major criticism of the work is that despite the implication of the title, little is revealed about Curie's own psychology. Apparently, as with her precious radium, Curie maintained protective control over revealing that facet of her life.

Dorothy Beckett
University of Maryland
College Park

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