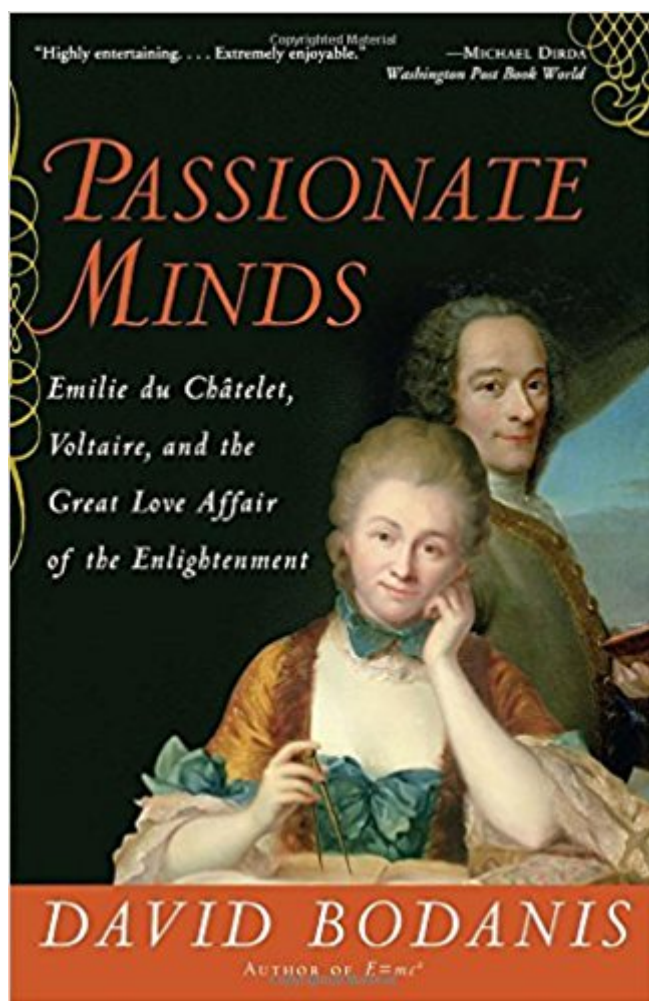




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Passionate Minds: Emilie Du Chatelet, Voltaire, And The Great Love Affair Of The Enlightenment



Synopsis

It was 1733 when the poet and philosopher Voltaire met Emilie du Châtelet, a beguiling and married aristocrat who would one day popularize Newton's arcane ideas and pave the way for Einstein's theories. In an era when women were rarely permitted any serious schooling, this twenty-seven-year-old's nimble conversation and unusual brilliance led Voltaire, then in his late thirties, to wonder, "Why did you only reach me so late?" They fell immediately and passionately in love. Through the prism of their tumultuous fifteen-year relationship we see the crumbling of an ancient social order and the birth of the Enlightenment. Together the two lovers rebuilt a dilapidated and isolated rural chateau at Cirey where they conducted scientific experiments, entertained many of the leading thinkers of the burgeoning scientific revolution, and developed radical ideas about the monarchy, the nature of free will, the subordination of women, and the separation of church and state. But their time together was filled with far more than reading and intellectual conversation. There were frantic gallopings across France, sword fights in front of besieged German fortresses, and a deadly burning of Voltaire's books by the public executioner at the base of the grand stairwell of the Palais de Justice in Paris. The pair survived court intrigues at Versailles, narrow escapes from agents of the king, a covert mission to the idyllic lakeside retreat of Frederick the Great of Prussia, forays to the royal gambling tables (where Emilie put her mathematical acumen to lucrative use), and intense affairs that bent but did not break their bond. Along with its riveting portrait of Voltaire as a vulnerable romantic, *Passionate Minds* at last does justice to the supremely unconventional life and remarkable achievements of Emilie du Châtelet—including her work on the science of fire and the nature of light. Long overlooked, her story tells us much about women's lives at the time of the Enlightenment. Equally important, it demonstrates how this graceful, quick-witted, and attractive woman worked out the concepts that would lead directly to the squared part of Einstein's revolutionary equation: $E=mc^2$. Based on a rich array of personal letters, as well as writings from houseguests, neighbors, scientists, and even police reports, *Passionate Minds* is both panoramic and intimate in feeling. It is an unforgettable love story and a vivid rendering of the birth of modern ideas. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Passionate Minds is both glorious and heartbreaking. For two centuries Emilie du Châtelet has been a quiet heroine, her name rarely invoked outside the science classroom. Now David Bodanis has not only brought her to life, but also uncovered one of the great love affairs of the eighteenth century. • "Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* installs Emilie in the front row of the pantheon of Enlightenment natural philosophers. • "The Times (London) Fast-paced, engrossing, and enlightening, *Passionate Minds* is a can't put it down read a mélange of colorful, fascinating characters, and ideas captured in an irresistible mix." • "Barbara Goldsmith, author of *Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie* Highly entertaining . . . and holds the most agreeable surprises. . . . A story well worth the retelling, and Bodanis tells it vividly. • "Sunday Times (London) Riveting, moving, often hilarious, *Passionate Minds* is gritty social history and hard science and romance all rolled into one. Both fast-paced and profound, *Passionate Minds* is an intellectual roller-coaster ride that puts the excitement back into the Enlightenment. • "Emma Donoghue, author of *Slammerkin* This is an absorbing tale based on extensive research, and it takes full advantage of both heroes' propensity for coining quotable witticisms. Bodanis eloquently evokes women's restricted lives during the eighteenth century. • "The Guardian Bodanis is good at explaining complex science and skillful in weaving together two unconventional, complex, and intellectually reforming lives. . . . David Bodanis has taken up one of the great stories of the period, a potent mix of romance, science, and history. . . . There is never a dull moment. • "Sunday Telegraph

From the Hardcover edition.

DAVID BODANIS taught a survey of intellectual history at the University of Oxford for many years and is the author of several books, including *Electric Universe*, *The Secret House*, and the

bestselling $E=mc^2$. Originally from Chicago, Bodanis lived in France for a decade and currently lives in London, England. From the Hardcover edition.

This was my first exposure to Voltaire and to Madam Chatelet. What a thrilling ride! I come away with enormous respect for both of their contributions to science and philosophy, but with special admiration for M. Chatelet and for what she managed to accomplish when women were trapped in social anonymity. If you love history, romance, mathematics, science, intrigue, and/or philosophy, this is a must read.

A worthy read. Sheds terrific light on early 18th century France, particularly the role of women. Du Chatelet is a fascinating character who needs to be more widely recognized for her role in framing Newton's work in a more understandable light and in setting the framework for later developments. And the book also provides for a most readable biography of Voltaire.

Very intriguing look at this brilliant woman who was seeking answers to deep questions of life and how things work while also seeking companionship and acceptance on a personal level. Her ability to overcome the conventions of her time and the restrictions put on her by virtue of merely being a woman make her quite a role model. She was supportive of Voltaire and encouraged him to become more than he may have become on his own, until his own selfish behavior pushed her away and they continued on as close friends until her death. An unusual couple with fascinating lives.

The love affair Emily du Chatelet and Voltaire that lasted over many years. This 18th Century intellectual had been mostly forgotten, It was unthinkable then that a woman could be a serious scientist in the Age of Enlightenment, which she was. Her achievements were cut short when she died in childbirth at age 40. She left a number of books and unprinted manuscripts. The book is extremely well written, giving also a good biography of Voltaire. I recommend it as a pleasure to read.

A great read about a highly influential pair of brilliant people, who found each other and did incredible work, in separate spheres. Excellent descriptions of the era and details to place these 2 in their significant place in their own day... and in history. I just wish my math skills would allow me to grasp the details of du Chatelet's work more completely!

"Passionate Minds" is the best and most clearly written book I've read on Mme de Chatelet and Voltaire. Many books by specialists on the subject can't appeal to a general audience or capture Mme de Chatelet's life and genius the way this book does. Intriguing as a biography, but not as historical fiction (the way some have described it). So glad to see this remarkable woman get the attention she deserves in our times.

What an era! I'm glad to be alive today...Emilie was so smart and gifted and luckily had men that believed in her enough to give her help along the way. But her persistence and genius persevered and she was able to get justly deserved recognition. Too bad she died so young...

Loved this book! The subject matter is so rich and the characters are so dramatic and larger-than-life that it would have been easy to make this a (Gasp!) bodice ripper but luckily the material fell into the right hands. Emilie du Chatelet has been a fascination for me ever since I learned that she was the reason Voltaire understood Newton. I also think it's cool that until quite late into the 20th century hers was the only French translation of the Principia. Thank you DB for bringing her to such glorious life.

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