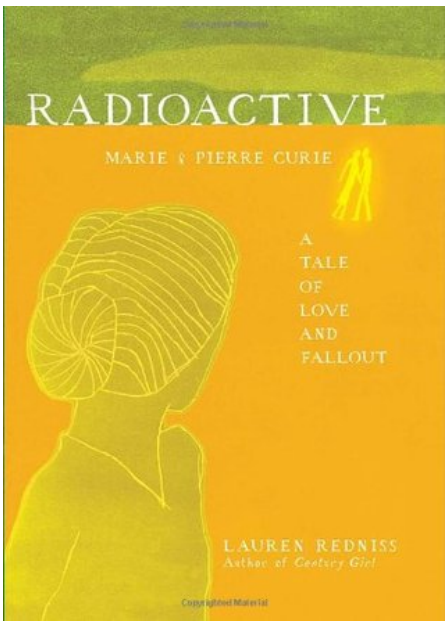

Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout

Lauren Redniss

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Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout Lauren Redniss
Radioactive is the visual journey into the life of Marie Curie, as told through the dazzling collage style of acclaimed author and artist Lauren Redniss. A brilliant visual storyteller, Redniss has hand-designed more than 100 color collages to tell Curie's story, fascinating in its scientific significance and its sometimes whimsical, sometimes haunting mix of romance and intrigue. Bringing together archival photos, images, and clippings with dazzling line drawings and a compelling narrative, *Radioactive* is far more than just an art book or a graphic novel: It is a stunning visual biography and a true work of art.

Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout Details

Date	:	Published December 21st 2010 by It Books (first published November 1st 2010)
ISBN	:	9780061351327
Author	:	Lauren Redniss
Format	:	Hardcover 208 pages
Genre	:	Nonfiction, Science, Biography, Sequential Art, Graphic Novels, History

From Reader Review Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout for online ebook

Ken-ichi says

This is an illustrated biography of Marie and Pierre Curie and an impressionistic exploration of the marks their pioneering research left on the world. As history, I thought it was great. Extensive reliance on primary sources, juxtaposition of the past (Marie's letters, a Russian map of Chernobyl) and the present (a phone interview with a nuclear security expert, collages by a survivor of Hiroshima), and a thorough list of annotated citations all made for a compelling, believable experience. As a work of art, the singularity of the work is impressive. Redniss not only created all the visuals and wrote the text, but she also designed the font and, I assume, did all her own typography. It's not comics (no attempts to depict time with sequential images), but this form of illustrated non-fiction is certainly unique and interesting.

That said, I'm not sure what the format contributes to the history, or to Redniss's interpretation. The illustrations are beautiful, ghostly, sad, largely stemming from the luminescent qualities of the cyanotypes and a palette of cool blues, greens, and oranges (radium, as Redniss points out in a colophon, glows faintly blue), all of which contribute to the mystery and melancholy underlying the work and lives of the Curies, but I find the line drawings inappropriately dehumanized. Faces are mostly expressionless, with deeply lined eyes, but otherwise rendered with minimal (even child-like) line work, often resembling some of Picasso sketches. The effect is eerie, and I don't think it illuminates the interaction between the deep passions and equally powerful intellects of the Curies in the way the text does.

Honestly, my favorite portion of the book was the quote from Loie Fuller in the beginning (herself a fascinating person at the edge of art and science), which captures the strange liminal sensation of the time (and of this book), when science's push against the boundaries of mystery was something you could see and touch.

> To see, to feel, to smell, to hear, to taste, these are the only invisible facts—but which we acknowledge are real—the sensations of horror that kills, of grief that prostrates, joy that uplifts, and faith that cures—what if these things can be registered and seen apart from the body, are they not then material things? And may they not indicate that other invisible materials exist—which are in reality material if we had the human capacity for observing them?... Perhaps Radium and its sister elements may one day help us here. We may not believe, but we do not know that we should not believe!

Also, check out this glowing (apologies) review in the Times.

Hannah Garden says

I thought this book was just so lovely. The illustrations are amoeba-y--grave and slender--elegant creepy jellicle elegies for the Curies. I like the text, too--the font is sick and the syntax is precise and gentle, like little wooden pieces that fit together with barely audible clicks.

Janet says

Gorgeous, improbably wonderful graphic novel about the love affair and scientific work of Pierre and Marie Curie. I saw it first in an exhibition in the New York Public Library, and fell in love with it. The volatility of the elements they were working with… the danger and the excitement… the illustrations are amazing. I still remember those shocking first minutes of seeing what Redniss had undertaken, breathtaking and enchanting.

Monika says

This is probably one of the most unique biographies ever written. It is the story of Pierre and Marie Curie, told throughout a series of incidents involving them and those they influenced, and surrounded by Dali inspired illustrations. It was absolutely gorgeous and it was hard to put down, despite its size. Lauren Redniss is unbelievably talented and her passion for the subject shines through every passage and illustration. If you are even remotely interested in the Curie family or just science in general, this is a book you absolutely have to own. Stunning.

Side note. If you own the hardback the cover will glow in the dark. Not really relevant, but worth mentioning.

Courtney Johnston says

It seems absurd to try to talk about this book without you being able to see it. It is easy enough to describe the story Lauren Redniss tells in this graphic biography, but hard to describe the emotional colour her images bring to her words.

The details of Marie Sklodowksa and Pierre Curie's joint biographies are reasonably familiar to readers of science history - his early scientific talent and her struggle to get a scientific education; their romance and marriage; their separate and joint research, and distillation of first radium and then polonium; his early death, and the famous story of Marie taking over his chair at the Sorbonne, walking in and picking up his lecture where he had left it; Marie's ongoing work and passionate (and scandalous) affair with Paul Langevin; her work in World War One with mobile x-ray units, where she was joined by her teenage daughter Irene, who herself went on to become a nuclear physicist, also working with her husband, Frederick Joliot and, like her parents before her, sharing a Nobel Prize with him; Marie's death from aplastic pernicious anaemia, the result of prolonged exposure to radiation, in 1934 aged 66.

What Redniss brings to the pile of literature that already surrounds the couple is a sense of the passion of their relationship - and especially of Marie as a physical and sensual woman - that is coupled to the intensity of their scientific research. I have always been somewhat puzzled, looking at the photos of Marie Curie once out of her teenage years, that this rather shadowy, rather dowdy woman could have been at the centre of one of France's most titillating love stories - that she could actually have duels fought over her. But Redniss makes tremendous use of archival material. From Marie's diary just before Pierre's death, written as the family was on holiday

> We collected flowering chestnut branches and gathered a huge bouquet of large water buttercups that you loved so ... We slept nuzzled against each other, as always ... I sat down against you and lay across your body ... I had a little clenching in my heart holding you there, but I felt happy...

And then after his death, run down by a horse-drawn cart on a rainy Paris street

> They brought you in and placed you on the bed ... I kissed you and you were still supple and almost warm.... Pierre, my Pierre, you are there, calm as a poor wounded man resting in his sleep, his head bandaged. Your face is sweet, as if you dream.
> ... My Pierre, I got up after after slept rather well, relatively calm. That was barely a quarter of an hour ago, and now I want to howl again - like a savage beast."

Four years after death, Marie fell heavily for his former student, the (married) scientist Paul Langevin. The two exchanged torrid letters when separated, even if only for a matter of hours. From Langevin:

> I am trembling with impatience at the thought of seeing you return at last, and of telling you how much I missed you. I kiss you tenderly awaiting tomorrow.

Redniss conveys more information in a small number of words than you would expect possible. She doesn't stint on the science or the story, and her style is personal, but never quirky or too I-thinky. You get the sense of someone who has conducted a great deal of researcj, and then pared back and pared back and pared back, without losing any colour.

And colour is at the heart of this book. Where Judith Schalansky's 'Atlas of Remote Islands', similarly a mix of words and images, was restrained in its palette, Redniss' book is joyous and unbounded. The end papers are ochre Rothko-esque colour fields, that feel soaked in pigment; each chapter is signalled by a midnight blue double-page spread with spidery white words picked out across it; the water buttercups are a radiant spray of yellow and red, blue and green. While Redniss' drawing style is not one I would spend time with on a wall - somewhere between Clemente, de Chirico and the happiest bits of Expressionism - paired with her story, it works.

In particular, Redniss has adapted the photographic printing technique of cyanotype, where chemically treated paper is exposed to sunlight, with the positive spaces masked - the sunlight causes a reaction that turns the exposed paper Prussian blue - the colour of old-fashioned blueprints. The areas that were masked seem, when revealed, to let light shine through from a hidden source. As Redniss writes in an endnote

> Using this process to create the images in this book made sense to me for a number of reasons. First, the negative of an image gives an impression of an internal light, a sense of glowing that I felt captured what Marie Curie called radium's "spontaneous luminosity". ... Second, because photographic imaging was central to the discovery both of X-rays and of radioactivity ... Last, I

later learned, Prussian blue capsules were approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as a "safe and effective" treatment for internal contamination by radioactive cesium and radioactive thallium.

Interpolated with the story of Marie and Pierre's life is the 20th century's radioactive history: Chernobyl, Three Mile Island, radiation therapy, "fossy jaw", Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Redniss finds one small detail to illustrate each of these big stories: a woman in Pennsylvania who collects, photographs and presses flowers mutated by the fallout from Three Mile Island; a scientist who researches birds in the area surrounding Chernobyl; a Japanese woman who was 13 on the day the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, who makes for Redniss a paper cutout that shows how her father's blackened skin peeled off his body, exposing the red muscle underneath. Never sentimental, these interludes - especially this last - have incredible emotional heft.

And finally - the cover glows in the dark. What more delight can you ask for?

BookishStitcher says

A graphic novel on the life of Marie and Pierre Curie. This book is done in mixed media format containing drawings, paintings, photographs, and cyanotype print. This is probably the most interestingly done graphic novel I have ever read. The story of the two scientists is also fascinating. I highly recommend this book.

Mainon says

WOW.

This book is a new addition to my list of all-time favorites. Here is a short, incomplete list of the things I loved about it:

1. The subject. It's about Marie Curie, who is one of the most accomplished scientists of all time -- educational and inspiring! It's also about her actual discoveries, and how they changed the way we thought about the very nature of things. Double educational and inspiring! PS: did you know she was the first person, man or woman, to receive two Nobel prizes?

2. The breadth. The book isn't careful about tracking the life of Mme. Curie, or talking only about things she accomplished. It has an easy-going, free-association kind of style, like a conversation with a brilliant and well-read friend, that can range from a list of other Polish superstars to Mme. Curie's sex scandal to the scientists behind the Manhattan Project to the story of a couple who think visits to radioactive caves have helped treat the wife's Hepatitis C. And yet it all feels planned rather than disjointed!

3. The art. I'm a huge fan of books-as-art, where the experience of reading is enhanced by font, paper color and thickness, illustration, text size and color, and creative layouts. This book has all of that, and yet I never once thought a page seemed too busy or that anything lacked a purpose. Instead, every time I turned the page, I looked forward to seeing what my eyes would get to encounter next! PS: some of the images on the cover are glow-in-the-dark! And some of the internal illustrations were created using cyanotype, a photographic printing process that produces a cyan-blue print. Not only is it fitting that these illustrations

were created using a chemical process, but the result is reminiscent of the soft glow of radium that so entranced Mme. Curie.

4. The size. This is shaped like a coffee table book, tall and wide but slim. This makes it perfect for displaying and a pleasure to read (although there are one or two pages where the layout requires the font to be just a bit too small for my taste -- but then, having to peer closely at a few of the pages is also part of the reading experience!) This would also make a fabulous gift -- maybe for a new high school graduate?

In short, I can't think of another time when I've seen such a wonderful amalgamation of art and science in a single package. Also, I learned a lot, **and** enjoyed myself thoroughly (two things that I often experience singly, but nothing beats experiencing them at the same time!)

Six exclamation points in this review: this may be a new record.

Mark says

Redniss this year got a MacArthur "genius" grant for her work, and so I decided to check out her graphic history of Marie and Pierre Curie, which she illustrated and hand lettered, and in which she used a printing technique that allows some of the pages to glow in the dark, appropriately enough.

By and large, I thought this was terrific, except for one small quibble. She interrupted the chronological story of the Curies with somewhat random leaps forward into the present day to explain everything from Three Mile Island to Chernobyl to a cave where people go to get radon exposure, and I thought the technique was a little off-putting at times.

The biographical information was great, though, and I had no idea what a melodramatic life the Curies had led. I knew about how sick they became through exposure to radiation, but I didn't know that Pierre was crushed to death beneath a horse and wagon, or that Marie became involved with a married French scientist five years later, and the ensuing scandal caused some members of the Nobel Prize committee to urge her not to attend the ceremony for her second Nobel.

It was also fascinating to see how her children carried on her work, and to know that she set up many mobile X-ray labs during WWI to help guide surgeons in doing wartime operations.

I marvel at the design work that accompanied the other intensive research for this book.

Emmy says

This is a unique and compelling book.

What I like most about it is how Redniss intertwines not only the scientific and personal lives of Marie and Pierre Curie, but also the lives of many individuals who were influenced by the Curie's discoveries (directly or indirectly). While the overarching Curie story is told chronologically, the other stories are woven in at purposeful times and this makes the connections even more impactful and insightful. For instance, after Marie was contemplating the structure and energy of the atom, the next two pages simply show a picture of

an atomic bomb test. This answers Marie's questions with startling force. One of the most moving side stories was of a Japanese girl, Sadae Kasaoka, who survived the bombing of Hiroshima. This was so vivid and moving that it was difficult to read. (view spoiler)

Redniss uses text, color, layout, quotes, and chronology effectively to create a powerful glimpse into these two important lives and the countless lives that they affected. I use this book when I teach to illustrate the idea of discovery, and how we are continually building upon what has come before and are constantly learning new facets about "old" discoveries. I also desire to show how the monumental figures in history are affected in their daily lives and how they are connected with other people, other ideas, and other discoveries.

K says

This was my first graphic novel (well, not really a novel -- graphic work of non-fiction? too long), and I think the medium may just not be for me. If I had to describe this book in one word, that word would be "distracting."

I was distracted by everything, particularly the pictures and the artistic but annoying-to-read font. The narrative itself was distracting, jumping around in time and space even though it all connected back to radioactivity. A more tolerant reader might have appreciated the collage-like effect, which clearly involved a lot of effort and creativity. I acknowledge all that, but it just wasn't for me.

Sometimes it felt like Redniss just didn't have that much to say, and was using art and gimmicks (like putting only a few words on a page) to stretch the story to book length. It really felt more like I was reading an article than a book. Sometimes I felt like the story was dumbed down, although that may have simply been a visceral reaction to having pictures in my books which I thought I outgrew a long time ago. Other times I felt like it was over my head with all the chemistry stuff. Science is not usually my preferred reading area, and although I ended up enjoying books like The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks and The Disappearing Spoon: And Other True Tales of Madness, Love, and the History of the World from the Periodic Table of the Elements, I think that attests to the quality of those books rather than to my aptitude for or interest in science reading. Unfortunately, Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie is not one of the books that managed to bridge the gap between me and science.

So three stars because I recognize the creativity here and a lot of interesting bits about the Curies and radioactivity, but only three because it just didn't work that well for me.

Linda Robinson says

As a total art design project, the book is stellar. Using cyanotype prints is brilliant, the bluish glow irresistible; mesmerizing the enthralled reader like a 50s illusionist until one wonders if a CT Scan needs scheduling. Redniss designed the type (Eusapia LR, named for Eusapia Palladino, a spiritualist, whose seances the Curies attended), and it fits the radioactive subject matter. Reverse white type on a dark background is hard to read; and the orange pages are close to impossible, but perhaps having to peer closely at the text imprints the words better. Interviews with people who have worked with, dug around and been toasted by radiation add mutant flavor to the tale of love and fallout. The Curies' + descendants is a bizarre tale, and Redniss shares it as art that accentuates the horror of the killer elements, the blinding light of the

physics, the sublime restfulness of amour, and the ridiculousness of humanity on its quest for the ultimate healer/destroyer. Redniss has created something entirely new - like the Joliet-Curies and their artificial radioactivity.

Jasmine says

okay this is my last review before I go on vacation. [yay!!!] and since I have no intention of talking to any of you while I'm on vacation [nothing personal I'm just not bringing my computer or talking to anyone who isn't my best friend] I better make it good.

This book is perfectly fine. I is not worth the run on it that occurred, but I get why it didn't end up on back order like so many of the others and we got it in again pretty quick. it's nothing to write home about.

BUT do not for a second think I'm saying this is a bad book. It's not, it's just not a great book. What do I mean? The art is seldom relevant to the pictures, it's beautiful but weird and unnecessary. There is a lot of text on each page in a very unpleasant font (subjectivity for the win). HOWEVER, I learned a lot from this book, like all the Marie Curie mythology total bull she knew the radiation was killing her, she wasn't some innocent idiot walking around carrying radium. Generally all the characters very cool people, they don't believe in patenting science, they all were pacifists. They are awesome.

I think you could read this book to kids, it gets a little sexual, but those parts lean more towards the boring then the interestingly dirty so you could probably convince the kid to skip them. Or read them I mean kids are aware of sex aren't they?

It's a good book for people who know nothing about marie curie [me] but aren't willing to spend more than a few hours learning about her.

Roger Brunyate says

Way Outside the Box

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!

Carl says

I had no idea what I was getting into when I picked this book up from the library. I just knew it was recommended highly by others, and as a scientist I was interested in the topic of the Curie's and radioactivity.

My first clue that I was in for something quite different was the size of the book–it was 8.5 x 11. When I opened it I was even more surprised. There were no white pages with black print text, except for an occasional one which was very different from the traditional ones. Instead there were pages with line drawings and cyanotype prints and some text. The cyanotype prints are interesting because they replicate the glow of radium, which Marie and Peter Curie discovered. The text, or print, itself is interesting because it was created by the author for this volume.

The story is interestingly told–how Marie and Pierre Curie loved and studied and discovered radioactivity. But in between the telling of this story are interesting stories and pages about radioactivity subsequent to the Curies and their discoveries: the Manhattan Project, the Nevada underground testing, the Chernobyl disaster, and others.

This is truly a unique and interesting book, and I'm glad I read it, or whatever I did with it.

Alicen says

I loved this book for the sheer fact that when I put it down the other night and turned off the lights it GLOWED. A beautiful book in its genre-bending (is it a biography? A graph novel?) that I highly recommend (although I will note for those who know a lot about Marie Curie's life already it might be a tad boring).

Robyn says

THE COVER GLOWS IN THE DARK!

Dedication:

> With apologies to Marie Curie, who said, “There is no connection between my scientific work and the facts of private life.”

Part biography part historical account, *Radioactive* looks at Marie Curie’s scientific accomplishments, her personal life, and her everlasting effect on our world. Lauren Redniss’ thoughtful technique provides the reader with a unique visual experience.

What Dazzled: I can say I haven’t encountered anything quite like this, or if I have it didn’t leave much of an impression. I was astonished at the amount of information packed into 208 pages where many of the pages were only artwork. The author focuses primarily on Marie Curie beginning with her early years secretly attending college, working as a governess, and falling in love (not with Pierre Curie). Our attention is also drawn to different time periods and the events taking place such as the Manhattan Project and an interview of a personal account of chemotherapy in 2001. Together this was just an amazing package.

What Fizzled: I won’t lie, I didn’t love the artwork. Several times I thought, *this looks like children’s scribbles*. It’s definitely not a style I want hanging on my walls, but I did come to appreciate it. More so when I read the author’s note about cyanotype print and Eusapia LR typeface.

Jots and Thoughts: *Radioactive* really made me think about what is a graphic novel, and whether or not this is one. First, there’s no easy definition of what exactly constitutes a graphic novel. Some guidelines have been used in regard to form, content, and publication. I’m sure as I continue to read more and learn more about graphic novels my opinion will change, but for now I feel *Radioactive* is right on the line of being considered a graphic novel. In particular there’s three pages dedicated to the topic of Pierre Curie’s death beginning on page 96. The scene starts with text but the next 5 pages rely solely on Redniss’ artwork to convey the events. The horse-drawn carriage pulling a massive cargo load / the driver and horse trying to stop but the load’s momentum pushing them onward / two figures carry a limp body away. Visual storytelling, right? But for the most part the text is what pushes the narrative along while the artwork and photographs provide atmosphere. But that’s not entirely accurate, because there are other great examples of when the text hands the narrative baton to the artwork. This is going to take some time to process.

This is being turned into a movie!

Elizabeth A says

This book is an illustrated biography of Pierre and Marie Curie, and be forewarned that the cover art glows in the dark. It took me several moments to realize that I was not experiencing a paranormal event one dark night.

I have mixed feelings about this book. Marie Currie is someone I have been fascinated with since I was a kid, and it was fun to read about her again, and learn quite a few new interesting nuggets in the process. The art in this book is wonderfully evocative - ghostly and luminous, but towards the latter half of the book, there was almost too much text, and muddling of the main story line. Still, I liked it, and will certainly be reading other books by this author.

Lara says

My husband gave this to me as an early Valentine's Day gift because he heard about it on NPR and knows me really well--I mean, how could I resist an art book that combines history, science and a love story? That GLOWS IN THE DARK? So yeah, it was an *excellent* gift.

This is basically the story of Marie and Pierre Curie--their marriage and their work, and the things that came out of both aspects of their relationship. The narrative moves back and forth through history from the late 1800s/early 1900s up to present time, touching on Chernobyl, the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko, Hiroshima, and many other parts of our world that have been affected in some way by the Curies' work. The art is beautiful and haunting, and though some reviewers have called it passionless, I have to disagree and say that it fits perfectly with the story Redniss is telling here. There's a lot of tragedy that surrounds the Curies and their work, and I think Redniss has done an excellent job of portraying that in her illustrations. And the typeface she created for this project also fits perfectly. It all adds up to make the story feel like a fairy tale.

My only complaint about the book as a whole is that I felt the narrative didn't tell quite as clear of a story as I would have liked. But that's really only a minor problem in my mind--the presentation is so well done I almost don't even care. :)

Kurt says

Here's the short form. Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, A Tale of Love and Fallout is a biography of Marie Curie. That is roughly accurate and thoroughly uninteresting. In addition to being beautiful and beautifully told, this book is the story of Marie Curie, of her discoveries of radium and polonium, and of the legacies of them all.

Redniss begins her first chapter, **Symmetry**, cleverly and counter-intutively. On the left hand page is information about Pierre Curie, whom, we can pretty safely deduce, will be the husband of Marie. On the right hand page is the first news of Marie Sk?odowska. So far so good. Turn the page and a non sequitur, more information about Pierre but written in a way that doesn't connect to the previous page.

Ah.

The left hand pages of **Symmetry** are all Pierre. The right hand pages are all Marie.

Redniss is not always so aggressive about her structure, but it's smart to make her move in the opening pages because it teaches us that we have to be ready for the next trick, whatever it might be. Throughout her writing, the author locates the parallels between the Curies' love, lives, and research, and intertwines them from one chapter to the next. It is a tight and smart dramaturgical trick, nor does she get carried away with it. She discusses Marie Curie's first Nobel prize - in physics, with her husband and fellow researcher Henri Becquerel - and how Alfred Nobel made his fortune from which he could dispense philanthropic cheer via his development of dynamite. Similarly, Redniss notes, the Curies' discovery of radium and its use as a tool for treating cancer is also the foundation of the knowledge that will bring us the atomic bomb.

Then there's the artwork.

"Cyanotype" is a photographic processing technique that results in a distinctive blue tint - blueprints! - and is the basis of Redniss's work, although she goes on to paint and add to the basic backdrop throughout. The results are washes of bright color that often as not echo the content of the associated text. Or in the example above, the text on the right mirrors the positive space of the portrait on the left.

Not to be leave anything to someone else's choices, she further designed her own font for the book. The details of the artwork and the design are included at the end of the book.

I'm trying to keep in mind that all of the reasons I think this book is amazing and fantastic are the exact same reasons you might find it pretentious or cloying or overwrought or overly complicated. For me, it is a marvel of nonfiction storytelling that honors not only the subject's chronological life, but also the fallout of that life (Redniss's pun, not mine) and how one person (or one discovery) can ripple out forward. The metaphorical and symbolic possibilities of the artwork further enhance the writing by suggesting ideas and details without claiming them as written text would have to do, albeit perhaps with a caveat here and a caveat there.

This is probably a work that will divide its readership quickly and easily. If you don't care for the artwork, you'll be turned away from the text. The structure is the next hurdle, but I'm willing to bet that if you embrace the first, you'll embrace the second.

Summer says

I thought this was okay. The art wasn't particularly impressive to me and the narrative was disjointed. It would talk about periods of Marie Curie's life chronologically but then it would suddenly jump ahead in time and switch topics periodically. It did contain some interesting information but I would recommend watching a documentary or read a biography about Marie Curie over this.
