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Is the book *Einstein's Wife* giving the real story of Mileva Marić Einstein?

Shouldn't we be suspicious of any book claiming in its subtitle to give "*the real story*" about anything?

The book *Einstein's Wife: the Real Story of Mileva Einstein-Marić* recently reviewed in several publications has three sections: the first one is written by David Cassidy, a science historian. He gives a sketchy account of Mileva Marić's life, summarized in a mere 90 pages, with the last 30 years of her life are reduced to one single page.

The so-called second section consists of seven pages written by Ruth Lewin Sime describing the situation for women in science at the turn of last century.

The core of the book is found in the last section written by Allen Esterson, a former lecturer in physics and mathematics and main instigator of this book. Esterson worked on this for two decades, obsessively picking at every argument ever made to support the claim that Mileva Marić Einstein was a scientific collaborator of her husband, Albert Einstein.

Esterson grinds his axe over 170 pages, redundantly attacking early and not so convincing arguments made by a handful of people in or before 1990. These early defenders of Mileva Marić did not have access to all the documentation that has since come to light, thanks mostly to the extensive research done by Radmila Milentijevic, Professor Emeritus of History at The City College of The City University in New York. In her extensive biography: [*Mileva Marić Einstein: Life with Albert Einstein*](#) published in 2015, Milentijević presents a full and consistent picture of a highly talented scientist who was denied having her chance at a scientific career due to the historical context and her personal circumstances.

Their early correspondence reveals how Marić and Einstein worked together closely throughout their studies reading,

discussing, calculating and debating together. Using existing documents and testimonies given by various people who knew Mileva and Albert in their early years, Milentijević draws a compelling portrait of a talented woman who had to abandon her own dreams of becoming a scientist and chose to sacrifice them to support those of her husband.

Despite having grades very similar to Albert Einstein, Mileva Marić was denied a degree. Not so surprising given that in 1896, she was only the fifth woman in the four decades since the founding of the Zurich Polytechnic Institute admitted to the Mathematics and Physics Section (Section VI) but none of the other four women had been granted a degree in Physics. In 1902, Elisabeth Stephansen became the first woman to graduate in Mathematics from Section VI of the Zurich Polytechnic Institute. Although Einstein received a degree, he failed to secure a teaching assistantship like the other students from his promotion. During three long years, he struggled financially and emotionally, unable to find an academic position partly because of antisemitism, but also because he had offended his professor and main referee. Without having a job, Einstein refused to marry Marić, even though she became pregnant in 1901.

Under these circumstances, it is not difficult to understand that she had everything to gain from letting him alone sign their joined article on capillarity, to help him make a name for himself, get a job and be able to marry her. Moreover, having no degree herself, she had no legitimacy to sign a scientific article. Working with Albert was her last chance to continue working in physics. As Milentijević demonstrates, these circumstances would explain why she accepted not to co-sign this common article, even though they both referred to this work as joint work in their letters. Testimonies and written documents show that this collaboration continued nearly until they separated. Einstein secured his first academic position in 1909, eight years after publishing this first article. By then, it was simply impossible for him to turn around and state that all his work had been done together with his wife.

Milentijević's careful analysis reveals a woman who not only acted as a scientific collaborator of Albert Einstein for the period covering his most productive years but also provided emotional support to a

young man who would not have succeeded nor become well known without that crucial help and support during the difficult years when he was unemployed and totally unknown.

Esterson is correct in attacking exaggerated claims such as that Mileva Marić did Einstein's math or the unverifiable statement that the physicist Joffe had seen the relativity paper signed by Einstein-Marity (the Hungarian version of Marić). These arguments are rather speculative and do not constitute solid evidence. But Esterson shows extreme bias when he discusses Albert and Mileva's school records. He depicts Mileva Marić as being a rather poor student while presenting Albert Einstein as brilliant. But a simple examination of their school records as provided in appendix B of his book reveals that they had very comparable marks. In fact, Mileva Marić's average of 4.75 out of 6 compares rather well to Albert Einstein's average of 4.74!

Esterson continues by systematically discrediting every single testimony given by friends, relatives and acquaintances of Mileva Marić. All these accounts are discarded as being "hearsay" or "hometown folklore". On the other hand, any testimony gathered by biographers of Albert Einstein from his relatives, colleagues or acquaintances are presented as solid evidence. This double standard permeates the entire book. One gets the message: whatever Serbs have said should be dismissed as attempts to promote Serbian achievements.

Contrary to their claims, Esterson and Cassidy bring no new evidence to Mileva Marić's story. The best evidence we have to date on the scientific collaboration between Albert Einstein and Mileva Marić comes from the 54 surviving letters they exchanged while they were students, of which 43 were written by Einstein to Marić. In these letters, Einstein abundantly refers to « *our new studies* », « *our research* », « *our viewpoint* », « *our theory* », « *our article* », « *our work on relative motion* ». Esterson shamelessly distorts their content, pretending for example that Einstein used these pronouns just to be nice to Mileva Marić. On the contrary, the fact that sometimes Einstein speaks of his own thoughts and finding and sometimes refers to their joint work only reflects that they were collaborating on these topics. As a physicist who has worked more than 20 years at CERN as part of large

scientific collaborations, I know how collaborating scientists often times work on their own, then discuss their findings or thoughts with their collaborators. This is what enables them to see flaws in their arguments, to confirm what they thought or discover some new aspects. By doing so iteratively, they can take their ideas one step further. It is clear that the different pronouns used by Einstein in his letters reflect different stages in that process.

Esterson and Cassidy also go through great lengths to convince the reader that they perfectly understand how difficult it was for women in science back in 1900 and still is today. This pseudo pro-woman sugar-coating does not really mask their fundamental purpose, which is simply to preserve the image of Albert Einstein as a lonely genius. They completely disregard the role played by Helen Dukas and Otto Nathan, Einstein's estate curators, in suppressing and controlling everything that could be written or said about Albert Einstein. They went to court to prevent Hans-Albert Einstein, Albert's and Mileva's son, to publish the letters he had from his parents. This delayed the publication of these letters and that of biographies of Albert Einstein until after their deaths in 1982 and 1987.

That MIT Press not only published this book but also organised a massive publicity campaign around it shows how the Einstein's myth is still prevalent today. In comparison, the most [comprehensive biography of Mileva Marić Einstein written by Prof. Radmila Milentijević](#) remains largely unknown, having received neither a press review nor any substantial distribution. Should we be surprised, even in the Me-Too era? How much longer will the contributions of talented women continue to be ignored or credited to a man?

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