RADIOACTIVE

Marie and Pierre Curie, a Tale of Love and Fallout

By Lauren Redniss

208 pp. Dey Street Books. 2010.

Artist-writer [Lauren Redniss](https://laurenredniss.com/)' *Radioactive* is the illustrated love story of Pierre and Marie (née Marya Sklodowska) Curie on facing pages (his, verso and hers, recto). This 2011 National Book Award finalist in non-fiction is also about the Curies' discovery of radium and its practical applications from plate tectonics to hypothermia; their professional accolades and moral conscience; and the unintended consequences of death, destruction, and despair. The Curie partnership began as an office romance, and grew to a family affair, with five Nobel Prizes in the étagère. [Marie Curie](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/1903/marie-curie/biographical/) (1867–1934) was the first person ever to win two Nobels, in physics and chemistry. During World War I, Marie designed mobile X-ray units, known as "petites Curies," to support French doctors operating at the battlefront. On the eve of World War II, Marie's daughter and son-in-law Irène and Frédéric Joliot-Curie discovered artificial radioactivity, having "provoked rather than simply observed [radioactivity]" (166), and ignited the possibility of limitless energy. . . and a nuclear chain reaction. The author uses mixed, archival materials to luminous effect, for example, Hiroshima bombing survivor Sadae Kasaoka's paper cut-out depicting the injuries sustained by her father, muscles exposed through melted skin; a map of Chernobyl's Compulsory Evacuation Zone; the thermoplastic radiation mask worn by a Connecticut teenager in 2001 to treat non-Hodgkins lymphoma; and a quote by nuclear engineer Steven Howe, "Nuclear power and propulsion will be the key technology that enables space travel" (183). For the rest of us, there are specs for a [fallout shelter](https://www.safecastle.com/pages/falloutshelters?_pos=2&_sid=332c2718d&_ss=r). —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*,6 November 2021