



by Tobias Hürter  
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translation is published.

## The Age of Uncertainty: How Physics Changed the Way We See the World (1895 – 1945)

*Das Zeitalter der Unschärfe. Die  
glänzenden und die dunklen Jahre der  
Physik (1895-1945)*

### review

Tobias Hürter's *The Age of Uncertainty: How Physics Changed the Way We See the World (1895 – 1945)* is a gripping account of how scientists' breakthroughs and discoveries redefined our understanding of the world and the reality in which we live in the first half of the twentieth century.

Hürter weaves together the stories of the scientists' lives with their groundbreaking discoveries and the shifting societies they lived in. The book is structured chronologically, with each chapter headed by a year and a city. The opening chapter, "Paris, 1903: The first rips", takes Marie Curie's celebration upon completing her PhD as the starting point for an exploration of her life and research, while "Bern, 1905: The patent clerk" sees Albert Einstein posting a letter which goes on to change the world. Other chapters, such as "Berlin, 1918: Pandemic", offer a more general historical overview. The chapters are mostly short (sometimes just a page or two long) and the tone is immediate, almost informal, making for an engaging read.

Part of the book's appeal comes from Hürter's elucidation of how

scientific discoveries intersect and interact with world events. Sometimes this is in ways that are relatively obvious, with wars and repression forcing scientists to scatter across the globe, bringing them into contact with new colleagues and new research interests; at other points the interaction is more surprising. It is only by chance that Italian physicist Guglielmo Marconi does not sail on the Titanic's maiden voyage (instead leaving for New York just three days earlier). However, the radio telegraphy equipment he has built saves the lives of the passengers who make it onto the lifeboats of the ill-fated ship, putting the importance of electromagnetic theory beyond doubt.

Despite the host of famous names he deals in – Curie, Einstein, Schrödinger – Hürter dispels the myth of the individual genius, not only by his foregrounding of the context the physicists work in, but also through the picture he builds up of a network of international scientists, all feeding into (and frequently vehemently disagreeing with) each other's work. This approach also ensures that the book never feels disjointed, but maintains a clear narrative arc.

This is an engaging popular science book that will appeal to fans of Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. Hürter's wide-ranging focus has something to offer to a broad spectrum of readers, whether or not they are already familiar with the scientific theories under discussion.

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## about the author



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**Tobias Hürter**, born in 1972, studied Mathematics and Philosophy in Munich and Berkeley and holds a PhD in mathematics. He has been writing about science, technology and philosophy for magazines and newspapers since 2000. He worked as an editor at the MIT Technology Review and was deputy editor at Hohe Luft, a philosophy magazine that he co-founded. He is now a permanent freelance editor at DIE ZEIT Magazin Wissen. Hürter has already published several nonfiction books. His new book, *The Age of Uncertainty*, was acquired at fierce auction by Klett-Cotta and will be published in November 2021.

Previous work: *Die verrückte Welt der Paralleluniversen*, PIPER (2009); *Du bist, was Du schläfst. Was zwischen Wachen und Träumen alles geschieht*, PIPER (2011); *Der Tod ist ein Philosoph*, PIPER (2013)

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