

[PDF] A Man Of Misconceptions: The Life Of An Eccentric In An Age Of Change

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Description:

From Galileo, Kepler, Newton, and Copernicus all lived around the same time as Athanasius Kircher, the subject of this excellent biography. As a thinker and writer, Kircher (ca. 1601–80) was at least as tireless as those guys, so how come we haven't heard of him? As it turns out, Kircher, who conducted research into such fields as magnetism, optics, acoustics, and hieroglyphics (and plenty more), had what Glassie calls a "major susceptibility to nonsense." He was, frankly, flat wrong—sometimes hugely, comically wrong—about a lot of things. His translations of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, for example, turned out to be "wildly inaccurate." But Kircher is no buffoon. For, among his many stumblings, there were also some genuine contributions to science: a book on optics, to name one, contained one of the earliest descriptions of a microscope. And, even though his

translations of the hieroglyphics were off base, he did help to show that the (relatively) modern Coptic languages could be used to decipher the ancient Egyptian language. An entertaining and enlightening biography of a man who has been, probably unfairly, almost entirely left out of the history of science. --David Pitt

Review "Like his subject, Athanasius Kircher, writer John Glassie has the rare gift of authentic quirkiness. *A Man of Misconceptions* leaves you contemplating the big questions, delightedly scratching your head, and laughing—all at the same time."

—Mark Kurlansky, author of *Cod* and *Salt*

"I've been waiting my entire adult life for someone to write a popular biography of the loopy, ingenious scholar-priest Athanasius Kircher, and John Glassie has delivered marvelously. A man of insatiable curiosity and staggeringly diverse intellectual passions, Kircher may have been the greatest polymath of all time—or at least the most eccentric."

—Joshua Foer, author of *Moonwalking with Einstein*

"Glassie brings the ultimate mad professor Athanasius Kircher vividly to life, revealing him to be a kind of cross between Leonardo da Vinci and Mr. Bean. A most entertaining foray into the history of science."

—Ross King, author of *Brunelleschi's Dome*

"A marvelous insight into the mind of one of the world's most eccentric thinkers. Glassie brings Kircher to life—and what a life it is!"

—Adrian Tinniswood, author of *The Verneys* and *Pirates of Barbary*

"What a brilliant and revealing book about a fascinating character, one I had no previous knowledge about. Glassie's genius is to make Kircher and his era come alive for us centuries later in such a way that I can hear and touch him." — Abraham Verghese, author of *Cutting for Stone*

"This fascinating biography of the Renaissance polymath Athanasius Kircher explores the birth of modern science through the life of one of the last pre-modern geniuses."

—*The New Yorker*

"[A] brisk new biography...stirring...with impressive verve and un-Kircherian concision."

— *The New York Times*

"In his quirky biography of Athanasius Kircher ... Mr. Glassie uses Kircher as something of a comic foil to show how erroneous ideas about investigating nature helped lead to modern science... [A] spirited telling."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

"You will come away from Glassie's book ... feeling inspired by the incredible inventive spirit of the man behind such creations as the 'cat piano' and 'the speaking trumpet' — and at the same time a bit sad that such characters as Kircher have been left mostly forgotten in the winds of time. You'll feel more knowledgeable about everything because of this book."

— *The Atlantic Wire*

"Hooh boy! ... Why do I love Kircher so much? Chalk it up to the man's passion for scientific inquiry, and his boundless curiosity about how the world works."

— *Scientific American*

"Glassie's biography ... brings into stark relief the pressures of the intellectual climate he lived in ... a time when witch trials flourished, prevailing logic said bees spontaneously generated from dung, and when it was widely believed that something called the vegetable lamb plant of Tartary produced actual sheep as its fruit."

— *The Daily Beast*

"In the course of his life, Kircher opined, almost invariably incorrectly, about the nature of light, magnetism, and the geography of the earth...Glassie has a genuine affection for Kircher despite the latter's laughably bizarre theories and self-aggrandizing egotism. In fact, the author's affection humanizes Kircher, making him oddly credible."

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"An entertaining reminder that skepticism can be good."

—*Library Journal*

"excellent...An entertaining and enlightening biography of a man who has been, probably unfairly, almost entirely left out of the history of science."

—*Booklist*

"His sharp eye for the absurd helps Glassie make Kircher's story interesting and superbly human.... Glassie tells Kircher's complex story with humor and genuine passion, using fascinating details to bring us into Kircher's world. "

— Bookslut

"What makes *A Man of Misconceptions* fascinating is how it sets the intellectual scene of the 17th century ... and it's that clarity of scene that helps make sense of a contradictory character."

—*Mental Floss Magazine*

"Fun and magisterial ... A simply fascinating book about a fascinating figure."

— *Baltimore City Paper*

"Very entertaining."

— NPR's "Science Friday"

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