

# THE OTHER EINSTEIN

*a novel*

**“Phenomenal and  
heartbreaking.”**

—Erika Robuck, national bestselling  
author of *Hemingway’s Girl*

MARIE BENEDICT

# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Discuss the various ways that gender affects the characters in this novel. Do you think gender would influence Mileva's life in the same way if she lived today?
2. How do the characters in the book—Mileva, Albert, their friends, their parents—experience religion, and does that change over the course of the story? How do Mileva's and Albert's different understandings of religiosity impact their relationship to each other?
3. This novel can be seen as a quest for understanding, a search for the divine in the natural order of the world. How does the study of math and physics become this quest for Albert and Mileva? Are they, either separately or together, successful in their crusade? Does unpuzzling life's mysteries have disparate meanings for them?
4. Betrayal is a recurrent motif in the book and an unfortunate reality in Mileva's life. What forms of betrayal does she experience? How does her reaction to those betrayals propel the story forward, for better or worse? Has Mileva engaged in betrayal herself?
5. Discuss the setting of the book, a world on the brink of astounding scientific discoveries, political upheaval, and ultimately horrible World War I atrocities. Does this historical setting affect the characters? What role, if any, does it play in shaping their lives?

6. Over the course of the novel, we learn a great deal about Mileva's childhood and early adult years. What life events led her to math and science? What hurdles did she have to surmount to even get her footing on that path?
7. From a very young age, Mileva assumes that she will never marry due to her physical disability. How is this disability both a blessing and a curse? How does her limp impact her differently at different life stages?
8. Mileva and Albert are drawn to each other from the beginning of their years together at the Polytechnic. What qualities compel them toward one another? Is their relationship "inevitable," as Mileva believes?
9. Mileva and Albert share the language of science, and it knits them together. Are they equal scientific partners from the start of their relationship? Do they become the "bohemians" they so frequently discuss?
10. Leaving Lieserl behind with her mother while she awaits Albert in Zürich and Bern is a huge, pivotal moment for Mileva. Do you think she made the right choice? Should she have stayed with Lieserl and disobeyed Albert's request?
11. The loss of Lieserl impacts Mileva tremendously, yet she doesn't fully share her feelings with Albert. Why does she keep her devastation from him? Do you think she should have been more open with him?
12. On several occasions throughout the novel, the characters undergo metamorphoses. What are Mileva's changes, and what instigates

them? Do some of them frustrate you or take too long? Does Albert change during the course of the novel? If so, how would you describe his evolution?

13. While Mileva does not form friendships until rather late in her life, the ties she forms are deep. How do her friendships and her acquaintances with other women factor in her ultimate life choices?
14. Albert Einstein is arguably one of the most famous figures of the twentieth century, but *The Other Einstein* shares a story about him that you might not have otherwise heard. Did this novel change your perception of him? About the stories we are told regarding other women in history?



# A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**Albert Einstein is such a well-known historical figure. Were you intimidated or afraid to humanize him? What struggles did you have turning him into a round character, not just an “idea” of a person most people have?**

I almost didn't write *The Other Einstein* because I found the notion of fictionalizing the iconic Albert Einstein incredibly daunting! Because Albert factors so prominently in Mileva's life, I had to muster my courage to share a side of Albert's personality that wasn't always flattering and that very likely contradicted the more widely held understanding of him, even though my depiction is fictional. Still, I had to remind myself periodically that I was telling an important story about Mileva's life, not Albert's, to reaffirm my commitment to the task.

***The Other Einstein* relies on a great deal of research. What was that process like?**

Researching *The Other Einstein* was both exhilarating and frustrating, especially since I'm an exhaustive researcher who prefers to use original source material. Of course, there is a vast amount of information—both original and secondary—about Albert Einstein, but the research material available about Mileva is more scant, making the process a bit more challenging. I was fortunate, however, that some letters between Albert and Mileva still exist, as well as some letters between Mileva and Helene. They were invaluable in conjuring up Mileva's voice.

**Mitza is a young woman in a man's world, both confident and uncomfortable at the same time. Did you draw on any personal experiences to write those scenes?**

I definitely channeled my early years as a very young lawyer at an enormous law firm in New York City when I wrote about Mitza's time at the Polytechnic. When I first started practicing as a commercial litigator in the 1990s, women lawyers were not as prevalent as they are today, and very often, I found myself as the only woman—and the youngest person—in a conference room or courtroom full of men. I remember well summoning my courage to speak or present in those situations, even when I knew that I was the only one with the correct answer. I drew upon those memories and experiences when I wrote about Mitza's own struggles to share her knowledge and insights in similar contexts.

**What drew you to the character of Mitza? Why not write the book from Albert's point of view?**

I have always been fascinated by the untold tales of history, and Mileva's story had long been hidden from view. Initially, I was drawn to her story because I was interested in viewing this critical period of Albert's life—when most of his revolutionary theories were formed—from a different perspective, one never before explored. But once I learned about Mileva's astounding rise from the relative hinterland of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the forward-thinking physics classrooms of fin de siècle Switzerland, I felt honor-bound to write about her own compelling life. As for point of view, the idea of drafting the story from Albert's perspective never really occurred to me; my interest is in unearthing the unknown, and Albert's past has been examined exhaustively. I felt like it was time for a new voice.

**While *The Other Einstein* is about a relationship, it is not a love story in the traditional sense. You do a fantastic job of capturing the idealism one feels at the dawn of a relationship, and the sometimes painful**

**truth of what that relationship actually is. Was that what you were after when you began the novel, to write the evolution of a relationship?**

At the outset, I did have a certain amount of interest in tracking the course of the relationship between Albert and Mileva. Theirs was a passionate affair and magnificent meeting of the minds that devolved rather dramatically over time. But I was also interested in exploring the process of scientific creativity that happened between them—that very moment of insight—and the attribution that happened afterward.

**Which character, if any, from the book did you relate to the most?**

More than any other character in the book, I probably connect with Mileva, particularly in two areas. First, as I mentioned before, I really relate to Mileva's experiences as a young woman navigating a man's world. Second, like Mileva, I have struggled with balancing the all-consuming aspects of life as a mother with the demands of life as a professional person. In *The Other Einstein*, Mileva feels torn between these two realms, and I know that there are many women like me who wrestle with this same issue today. In that way, Mileva's story is a very relevant, modern one.

**Have you always enjoyed science yourself, or was writing about physics and theory a whole new world for you?**

The irony about writing *The Other Einstein* is that I haven't always been a lover of science. In fact, I almost didn't write it because I found the science overwhelming. That said, once I dug into exciting scientific developments of this historical time period, I developed a new appreciation for mathematics and science—physics in particular. Viewed through Mileva's eyes, math and science become a way of discovering divine, universal patterns in our world, a notion I found very intriguing.

**Who are some of your favorite authors, and why?**

That is a tremendously hard question because I adore so many



authors, particularly writers of fiction. Certainly, I have perennial favorites like Jane Austen, A. S. Byatt, and Agatha Christie. But I admit to having some new favorites as well. I've really been enjoying recent releases by David Mitchell, Lily King, Ann Patchett, and Lev Grossman. New or old, I am drawn to authors who attempt to unravel the larger mysteries of time.