

In August 1930, on a voyage from Madras to London, a young Indian looked up at the stars and contemplated their fate. Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar--Chandra, as he was called--calculated that certain stars would suffer a strange and violent death, collapsing to virtually nothing. This extraordinary claim, the first mathematical description of black holes, brought Chandra into direct conflict with Sir Arthur Eddington, one of the greatest astrophysicists of the day. Eddington ridiculed the young mans idea at a meeting of the Royal Astronomy Society in 1935, sending Chandra into an intellectual and emotional tailspin--and hindering the progress of astrophysics for nearly forty years. Empire of the Stars is the dramatic story of this intellectual debate and its implications for twentieth-century science. Arthur I. Miller traces the idea of black holes from early notions of dark stars to the modern concepts of wormholes, quantum foam, and baby universes. In the process, he follows the rise of two great theories--relativity and quantum mechanics--that meet head on in black holes. Empire of the Stars provides a unique window into the remarkable quest to understand how stars are born, how they live, and, most portentously (for their fate is ultimately our own), how they die. It is also the moving tale of one mans struggle against the establishment--an episode that sheds light on what science is, how it works, and where it can go wrong. Miller exposes the deep-seated prejudices that plague even the most rational minds. Indeed, it took the nuclear arms race to persuade scientists to revisit Chandras work from the 1930s, for the core of a hydrogen bomb resembles nothing so much as an exploding star. Only then did physicists realize the relevance, truth, and importance of Chandras work, which was finally awarded a Nobel Prize in 1983. Set against the waning days of the British Empire and taking us right up to the present, this sweeping history examines the quest to understand one of the most forbidding phenomena in the universe, as well as the passions that fueled that quest over the course of a century.

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