

# WINIFRED CONKLING

on writing

# RADIOACTIVE!

**In early June 2015, Twitter exploded with comments about a Nobel Prize–winning biologist who destroyed his career when he made sexist remarks at a luncheon hosted by women scientists.** First he addressed his female colleagues as “girls,” then he proceeded to insult them and suggest that men and women should work in sex-segregated laboratories. While these statements seem outrageous today, one hundred years ago they would have been applauded.

A century ago, physicist Lise Meitner was denied access to the laboratories at the Institute of Chemistry in Berlin. The supervisor at the lab told her that he was keeping her out for her own good: Her hair, which she wore in a bun, might catch fire if it came too close to a Bunsen burner. (He ignored the fact that the men in the lab sported perilously long moustaches, beards, and other elaborate facial hairstyles.)

Instead of giving up, Meitner set up her own laboratory in a small room in the basement that had once served as a carpenter’s workshop for the Institute. When she needed to use the bathroom, she had to walk down the street to a hotel with a women’s room. Her lab partner, chemist Otto Hahn, was employed by the Institute, but Meitner worked as his unpaid assistant for the first five years of her career. Despite the challenges, Meitner went on to discover the element protactinium and to become the first female lecturer at the University of Berlin Physics Department; she later went on to make the intellectual breakthrough that defined nuclear fission and



## WINIFRED CONKLING

is the award-winning author of *Passenger on the Pearl: The True Story of Emily Edmonson’s Flight from Slavery* and the middle-grade novel *Sylvia & Aki*, winner of the Jane Addams Children’s Book Award and the Tomás Rivera Award. Conkling studied journalism at Northwestern University and received an MFA in writing for children and young adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She lives in Northern Virginia.

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**Sexism has no place in the laboratory—or anywhere else.**

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revolutionized the study of physics.

Unlike Meitner, Irene Curie had access to the laboratories at the Radium Institute in Paris, but not because scientists in France were more progressive than those in Germany. Irene's parents, Nobel Prize-winning physicists Marie and Pierre Curie had founded the facility. Even with her impeccable scientific pedigree, Irene had to endure harsh remarks from other researchers who called her the "Crown Princess of Science" and initially questioned her abilities. It did not take long for Irene to step out from her parents' shadows and prove that she deserved to be respected as a top-notch physicist in her own right.

Both Meitner and Curie had to prove their intellectual vigor and defend their reputations not once but everyday. They shared a single-minded devotion to a life of science and their passion for their work equaled or surpassed that of any man in the laboratory. Many female scientists today are equally dedicated to their work.

It is unjust that women in science continue to face prejudice in the workplace. My mother attended medical school in the 1950s, and she had to tolerate snide remarks and discrimination to pursue her dream. Two of my three daughters are interested in careers in the sciences and both have been discouraged in both subtle and overt ways. During a medical shadowing program for pre-med students, my oldest daughter was told repeatedly that she should consider a career as a physician's assistant rather than a medical doctor so that she would have more time to stay home with her babies. This happened in the year 2015, not 1915.

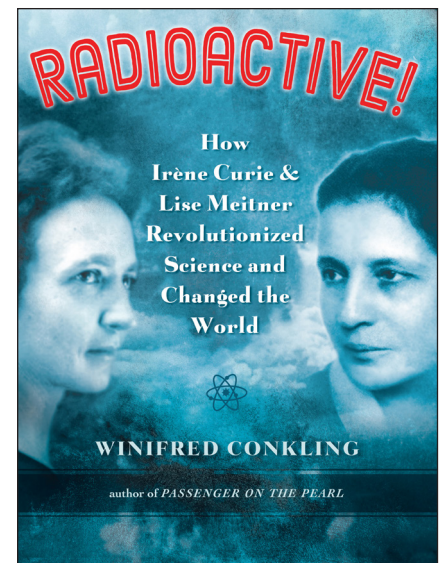
Sexism has no place in the laboratory—or anywhere else. Women have made notable breakthroughs in all scientific fields. Some, like Curie, have earned Nobel Prizes and other honors. Others, like Meitner, have been overlooked for recognition all too often while their male colleagues have been honored for achievements that rightfully should have been shared with their female co-workers.

When Irene Curie earned her doctorate in physics from the Sorbonne in 1925, many journalists took a special interest in the accomplishment. At a reception after her graduation, a French reporter asked Curie if a career in physics might be too difficult for a woman. "Not at all," Curie said, "I believe that men's and women's scientific aptitudes are exactly the same." That was true one hundred years ago, and it is still true today.

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