



In Her Own Words

Science writer Kitty Ferguson has established herself as an explorer of great questions, such as how we measure the universe and how the world began. Her recently reprinted *The Fire in the Equations* asks if there is room for God in our quest to understand the world through science. Ami Albernaz, *Science & Spirit's* books editor, recently spoke with Ferguson about what motivates her writing, and where she sees the science and religion dialogue heading.

Ami Albernaz: What inspires you to write about theories of everything and the interplay of science and religion, when it seems it would be easier to just tackle smaller issues?

Kitty Ferguson: My interest in these huge questions dates to my childhood. My father was a musician who also had a great interest in math and science—not at a terribly sophisticated level,



Photo courtesy of René Levine.

but in a way that made him want to share his enthusiasm with me and my brother and sister. I've written about having to go out to measure the height of a windmill by its shadow, and how my father would rearrange things at the dinner table and pretend they were parts of the solar system. My father had a real sense of wonder about the universe, and was also a devoutly religious man. He always taught us to think of God as more than anything: No matter how large

science was, God was more than that; however large the universe was, God was more than that. As children, we were just beginning to think of the questions—and they aren't irrelevant to the way we make choices in our lives.

AA: Do you want to get across in your writing that it is possible to have faith in both science and religion?

KF: Yes. *The Fire in the Equations* was a personal exploration of the question of whether or not you can accept what is coming from modern science and also believe in God, without committing some sort of double-think. It was not a question I knew the answer to when I first began doing research for the book. I didn't know where it would come down in the end. So it's a fair and honest exploration.

AA: Your writing style is very engaging: You weave together anecdotes, quotes, references to pop culture, and references to particular scientists. Is this something you consciously set out to do?

KF: When I read, if the author doesn't occasionally just stop the narrative and give an example, an anecdote, or something else to get the reader engaged, I find myself drifting off. Maybe I'm a lowbrow reader, but I think these things help. It makes abstract ideas a little more concrete.

If we're looking for places where big questions are addressed these days, very often you find it in theater and in motion

pictures. I think of Tom Stoppard's plays, Peter Shaffer's plays, [Federico] Fellini's movies. This is where you're really likely to encounter the big, unfathomable questions, addressed in interesting ways.

AA: What do you think of the common perception that science and religion are in conflict?

KF: I remember [The Open University emeritus professor of physics] Russell Stannard once speaking of a young man he ran into at the [Royal] Greenwich Observatory in England. This young man asked Russell what he thought of the problems of science and religion. The young man said about religion, "We can't believe any of that anymore; it's the age of science." To me that is such a narrow view of science, such a close-minded view of science, and not even a scientific point of view.

Science in the twentieth century and since has restored our sense of wonder in a way that everyday life and sometimes religion don't. I'd like to help clear the air of all the myths that have grown up around science and religion issues through the years. I keep running into otherwise very intelligent and well-informed people who say that Copernicus was persecuted by the Church for his science, and other things like that which aren't true. I would love to just clear the ground of all that, so that we can get on with a meaningful discussion. ©