

Booklist

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★ **The Pope of Physics: Enrico Fermi and the Birth of the Atomic Age.**

Segrè, Gino (Author) and Bettina, Hoerlin (Author)

Oct 2016. 368 p. Holt, hardcover, \$30. (9781627790055). 530.092.

Suspected of Fascist sympathies, the Italian-born physicist Enrico Fermi looked like a bad security risk to the FBI in 1940. That judgment lends piquant irony to Segrè and Hoerlin's illuminating biography of the immigrant genius who earned a prime place among the elite scientists who watched the planet's first mushroom cloud rise above New Mexico sands. Sparing readers the technical details, the authors recount how this genius brought cutting-edge science to his native land, uniting a team of talented countrymen—the Boys of Via Panisperna—intent on assaulting the mysteries of the atom. After many of these mysteries yielded to Fermi's revolutionary slow-neutron probing, Fermi parlayed his Nobel Prize into a ticket out of Mussolini's dictatorship and into America, where he constructed the world's first atomic-fission pile on a University of Chicago squash court. As a man of pure scientific devotion, reputedly sharing with the Pontiff a magisterial infallibility, Fermi established himself (despite the FBI's misgivings) as a leading spirit of his new country's Manhattan Project. By exploring Fermi's friendships, his marriage and family life, and his postwar concerns about morality in an atomic age, the authors also give readers glimpses into something of Fermi's personal, nonscientific attributes. A balanced portrait, rich in revealing anecdotes.

— *Bryce Christensen*