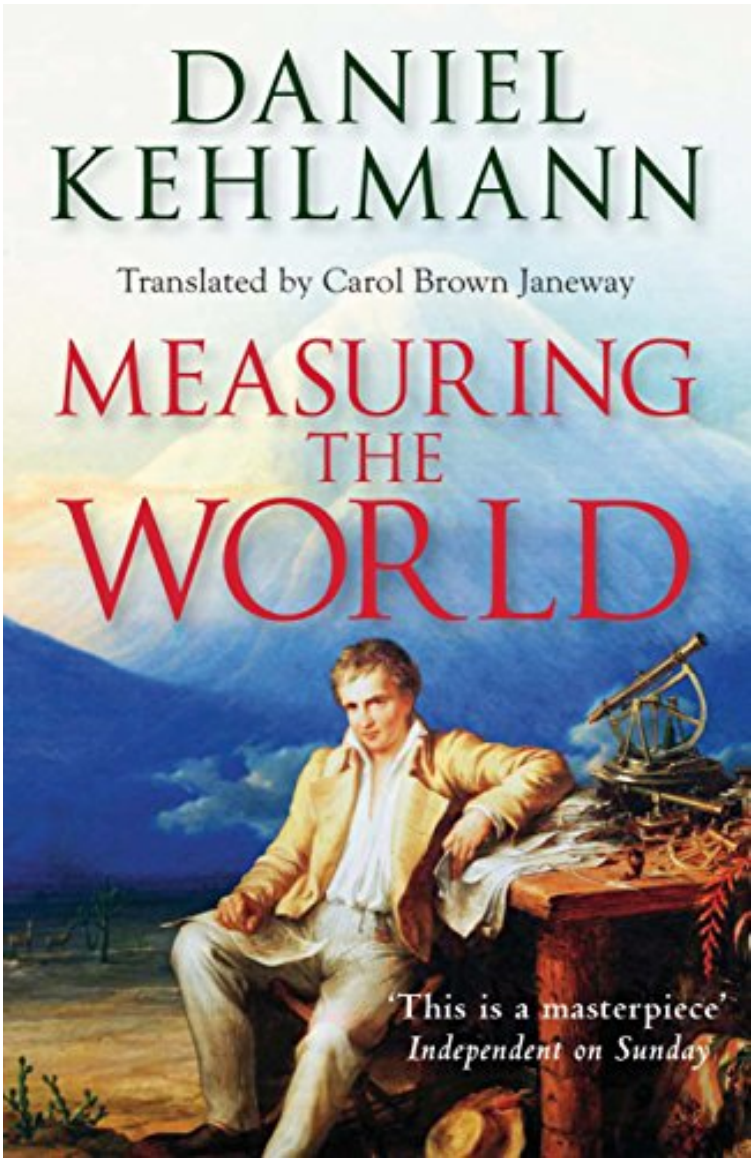
Measuring the World (English Edition)



Par Daniel Kehlmann
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Par Daniel Kehlmann : Measuring the World (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Measuring the World (English Edition):

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMeasuring the World recreates the parallel but contrasting lives of two geniuses of the German Enlightenment - the naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt and the mathematician and physicist Carl Friedrich Gauss. Towards the end of the 18th century, these two brilliant young Germans set out to measure the world. Humboldt, a Prussian aristocrat schooled for greatness, negotiates savannah and jungle, climbs the highest mountain then known to man, counts head lice on the heads of the natives, and explores every hole in the ground. Gauss, a man born in poverty who will be recognised as the greatest mathematician since Newton, does not even need to leave his home in Gttingen to know that space is curved. He can run prime numbers in his head, cannot imagine a life without women and yet jumps out of bed on his

wedding night to jot down a mathematical formula. Measuring the World is a novel of rare charm and readability, distinguished by its sly humour and unforgettable characterization. It brings the two eccentric geniuses to life, their longings and their weaknesses, their balancing act between loneliness and love, absurdity and greatness, failure and success.ExtraitThe Journey In September 1828, the greatest mathematician in the country left his hometown for the first time in years, to attend the German Scientific Congress in Berlin. Naturally he had no desire to go. He had been declining to accept for months, but Alexander von Humboldt had remained adamant, until in a moment of weakness and the hope that the day would never come, he had said yes. So now Professor Gauss was hiding in bed. When Minna told him he must get up, the coach was waiting and it was a long journey, he wrapped his arms around the pillow and tried to make his wife disappear by closing his eyes. When he opened them again and Minna was still there, he told her she was a hindrance, and limited, and the misfortune of his old age. When that didnt work either, he pushed back the coverlet and set his feet on the floor. Bad-temperedly, he performed the most minimal ablutions and went downstairs. In the parlor, his son Eugen was waiting with a bag packed. As Gauss caught sight of him, he flew into a rage: he broke a jug that was standing on the windowsill, stamped his foot, and struck out wildly. He wasnt even to be calmed when Eugen to one side of him and Minna to the other laid their hands on his shoulders and swore that he would be well taken care of, he would soon be home again, and everything would be over in no time, just like a bad dream. Only when his ancient mother, disturbed by the noise, emerged from her room to pinch his cheek and ask what had happened to her brave boy did he pull himself together. Without warmth he said goodbye to Minna, and absentmindedly stroked the heads of his daughter and youngest son. Then he allowed himself to be helped into the coach. The journey was a torture. He called Eugen a failure, took the knobbed stick away from him, and jabbed it full force at his foot. For a time he stared out of the window, a frown on his face, then asked when his daughter was finally going to get married. Why didnt anyone want her, what was the problem? Eugen pushed back his long hair, kneaded his red cap with both hands, and didnt want to answer. Out with it, said Gauss. To be honest, said Eugen, his sister wasnt exactly pretty. Gauss nodded; the answer seemed a plausible one. He said he wanted a book. Eugen gave him the one he had just opened: Friedrich Jahns German Gymnastics. It was one of his favorites. Gauss tried to read, but seconds later he was already glancing up to complain about the newfangled leather suspension on the coach; it made you feel even sicker than usual. Soon, he explained, machines would be carrying people from town to town at the speed of a shot. Then youd do the trip from Gttingen to Berlin in half an hour. Eugen shrugged. It was both odd and unjust, said Gauss, a real example of the pitiful arbitrariness of existence, that you were born into a particular time and held prisoner there whether you wanted it or not. It gave you an indecent advantage over the past and made you a clown vis--vis the future. Eugen nodded sleepily. Even a mind like his own, said Gauss, would have been incapable of achieving anything in early human history or on the banks of the Orinoco, whereas in another two hundred years each and every idiot would be able to make fun of him and invent the most complete nonsense about his character. He thought things over, called Eugen a failure again, and turned his attention to the book. As he read, Eugen in his distress turned his face fixedly to the window, to hide his look of mortification and anger. German Gymnastics was all about exercise equipment. The author expounded at length on this or that piece of appara- tus which he had invented for swinging oneself up or around on. He called one the pommel horse, another the beam, and another the vaulting horse. The man was out of his mind, said Gauss, opened the window, and threw the book out. That was his book, cried Eugen. Quite so, said Gauss, dropped off to sleep, and didnt stir until they reached the stop at the frontier that evening and the horses were being changed. While the old horses were being unhitched and the new ones harnessed up, they ate potato soup in an inn. The only other guest, a thin man with a long beard and hollow cheeks, inspected them furtively from the next table. Everything pertaining to the body, said Gauss, who to his irritation had been dreaming about gym apparatus, was the true source of all humiliation. He had always considered it a sign of Gods malicious sense of humor that a spirit such as his should be trapped in a sickly body while a common or garden-variety creature like Eugen was, to all intents and purposes, never ill. He had had a severe attack of smallpox when he was a child, said Eugen. He had almost died. You could still see the scars! True, said Gauss, hed forgotten. He pointed to the post horses outside the window. It was actually quite funny that the rich needed twice as much time to make a journey as the poor. If you used post horses, you could change them after every section. If you had your own, you had to wait until they were fresh again. So what, said Eugen. Naturally, said Gauss, if you didnt think that much, this would seem obvious. As would the fact that young men carry sticks, and old men dont. Students carry a knobbed stick, said Eugen. It had always been that way

and always would be. Probably, said Gauss, and smiled. They spooned up their soup in silence until the gendarme from the frontier post came in to ask for their passports. Eugen gave him his permit: a certificate from the Court which said that although he was a student he was harmless and was permitted to set foot on Prussian soil if accompanied by his father. The gendarme looked at him suspiciously, inspected the pass, nodded, and turned to Gauss. Gauss had nothing. No passport, asked the gendarme, astonished, no piece of paper, no official stamp, nothing? He had never needed such a thing, said Gauss. The last time he crossed the border from Hannover had been twenty years ago. There hadnt been any problems then. Eugen tried to explain who they were, where they were going, and at whose bidding. The Scientific Congress was taking place under the auspices of the crown. As guest of honor, his fathers invitation came, so to speak, directly from the king. The gendarme wanted a passport. There was no way he could know, said Eugen, but his father was honored in the most distant countries, he was a member of all Academies, had been known since his first youth as the Prince of Mathematics. Gauss nodded. People said it was because of him that Napoleon had decided not to bombard Gttingen. Eugen went white. Napoleon, repeated the gendarme. Indeed, said Gauss. The gendarme demanded his passport again, louder than before. Gauss laid his head down on his arms and didnt move. Eugen nudged him but it did no good. He didnt care, said Gauss, he wanted to go home, he didnt give a hoot. The gendarme fidgeted uneasily with his cap. Then the man from the next table joined in. All this would end! Germany would be free, and good citizens would live unmolested and travel sound in mind and body, and would have no further need of bits of paper. The incredulous gendarme asked for his passport. That was exactly what he meant, cried the man, and dug around in his pockets. Suddenly, he leapt to his feet, knocking over his chair, and bolted outside. The gendarme gaped at the open door for several seconds before pulling himself together and going in pursuit. Gauss slowly raised his head. Eugen suggested that they set off again immediately. Gauss nodded and ate the rest of his soup in silence. The little gendarmes hut was empty, both officers having gone after the man with the beard. Eugen and the coachman together pried the barrier up into the air. Then they drove onto Prussian soil. Gauss was in good order now, almost cheerful, and talking about differential geometry. It was almost impossible to imagine where the investigation into curved space would lead next. Eugen should be glad he was so mediocre, sometimes such questions could be terrifying. Then he talked about how bitter his youth had been. His own father had been hard and dismissive, so Eugen should think himself lucky. He had started to count before he could talk. Once his father had made an error when he was counting out his monthly pay, and this had made Gauss start to cry. As soon as his father caught the mistake, he immediately fell quiet again. Eugen looked impressed, even though he knew the story wasnt true. His brother Joseph had made it up and spread it around. His father must have heard it recounted so often that he had begun to believe it himself. Gausss conversation turned to chance, the enemy of all knowledge, and the thing he had always wished to overcome. Viewed from up close, one could detect the infinite fineness of the web of causality behind every event. Step back and the larger patterns appeared: Freedom and Chance were a question of distance, a point of view. Did he understand? Sort of, said Eugen wearily, looking at his pocket watch. It didnt keep very good time, but he thought it must be between four-fifty and five in the morning. But the laws of probability, Gauss went on, pressing both hands against his aching back, werent conclusive. They were not part of the laws of nature, and there could be exceptions. Take an intellect like his own, for example, or a win at a game of chance, which any simpleton could undeniably pull off at any time. Sometimes he actually theorized that even the laws of physics were merely statistical, hence they allowed for exceptions: ghosts or thought transference. Eugen asked if this was a joke. He couldnt answer that himself, said Gauss, closed his eyes, and went into a deep sleep. They reached Berlin the next day in the late afternoon. Thousands of little houses in a chaotic sprawl, a settlement overflowing its banks in the swampiest spot in Europe. The first splendid buildings were beginning to go up: a cathedral, some palaces, a museum to house the finds from Humboldts great expedition. In a few years, said Eugen, this would be a metropolis like Rome, Paris, or St. Petersburg. Never, said Gauss. Horrible place! The coach bumped over badly laid cobblestones. Twice the horses shied away from growling dogs, and in the side streets the wheels almost stuck fast in the wet sand. Their host lived in the Packhof at number 4, in the middle of the city, right behind the building site of the new museum. To make sure they didnt miss it, he had drawn a very precise plan with a fine pen. Someone must have seen them from a distance and announced their arrival, for a matter of seconds after they pulled into the courtyard, the main door flew open and four men were running towards them. Alexander von Humboldt was a little old gentleman with snow-white hair. Behind him came a secretary with an open pad of writing paper, a flunkey in livery, and a young man with whiskers carrying a stand with a wooden box on it. As if

rehearsed, they took up their positions. Humboldt stretched out his arms towards the door of the coach. Nothing happened. From inside the vehicle came sounds of hectic speech. No, cried someone, no! A dull blow rang out, then a third no! After which there was nothing for a while. Finally the door swung open and Gauss clambered carefully down into the street. He shrank back as Humboldt seized him by the shoulders and cried what an honor it was, what a great moment for Germany, for science, for him personally. The secretary was taking notes, and the man behind the wooden box hissed, Now! Humboldt froze. This was Monsieur Daguerre, he whispered without moving his lips. A protg of his, who was working on a piece of equipment which would fix the moment on a light-sensitive silver iodide plate and snatch it out of the onrush of time. Please hold absolutely still! Gauss said he wanted to go home. Just a moment, whispered Humboldt, a mere fifteen minutes, tremendous progress had been made already. Until recently it had taken much longer, when they tried it first he had thought his back wouldnt hold out under the strain. Gauss wanted to pull himself free, but the little old man held him with surprising strength and murmured, Bring word to the king. The flunkey was off at a run. Then, probably because that was what was going through his mind at that moment: Take a note. Check possibility of breeding seals in Warnemnde, conditions seem propitious, give me proposal tomorrow. The secretary scribbled. Eugen, who was only just climbing out of the coach with a slight limp, made his apologies for the late hour of their arrival. There was no late here, and no early, murmured Humboldt. Here there was only work, and the work got done. Luckily it was still light. Not to move. A policeman entered the courtyard and asked what was going on. Later, hissed Humboldt, his lips pressed together. This was an unauthorized gathering, said the policeman. Either everyone went their separate ways or this would become police business. He was a chamberlain, Humboldt hissed. Excuse me? The policeman bent forward. Chamberlain, Humboldts secretary repeated. Member of the Court. Daguerre ordered the policeman to get out of the picture. Frowning, the policeman stepped back. First of all, anyone could claim the same thing, and secondly, the ban on gatherings applied to everyone. And that one there, pointing to Eugen, was clearly a student. Which made it particularly ticklish. If he didnt immediately make himself scarce, said the secretary, he would find himself in difficulties he couldnt even begin to imagine. This was no way to address an officer, said the policeman nervously. He would give them five minutes. Gauss groaned and pulled himself free. Oh no, cried Humboldt. Daguerre stamped his foot. Now the moment had been lost forever! Just like all the others, said Gauss calmly. Like all the others. And indeed, when Humboldt inspected the exposed copper plate with a magnifying glass that same night, while Gauss snored so loudly in the room next door that he was audible throughout the entire apartment, he could recognize absolutely nothing on it. Only after a time did he think he saw a maze of ghostly outlines begin to emerge, the blurred sketch of something like an underwater landscape. In the middle, a hand, three shoes, a shoulder, the cuff of a uniform and the lower portion of an ear. Or then again, not? With a sigh he threw the plate out of the window and heard a dull crash as it landed in the courtyard. Seconds later, like everything else at which he had ever failed, he had forgotten it.From the Hardcover edition.From Publishers WeeklyLoosely based on the lives of 19th-century explorer Alexander von Humboldt and a contemporary, mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss, Kehlmann's novel, a German bestseller widely heralded as an exemplar of "new" German fiction, injects musty history with shots of whimsy and irony. Humboldt voyages to South America to map the Orinoco River, climb the Chimborazo peak in Ecuador and measure "every river, every mountain and every lake in his path." Gauss is the hedgehog to Humboldt's fox, leaping out of bed on his wedding night to jot down a formula and rarely leaving his hometown of Gttingen. The two meet at a scientific congress in 1828, when Germany is in turmoil after the fall of Napoleon. Other luminaries appear throughout the novel, including a senile Immanuel Kant, Louis Daguerre and Thomas Jefferson. The narrative is notable for its brisk pacing, lively prose and wry humor (curmudgeonly Gauss laments, for instance, how "every idiot would be able to... invent the most complete nonsense" about him 200 years hence), which keenly complements Kehlmann's intelligent, if not especially deep, treatment of science, mathematics and reason at the end of the Enlightenment. (Nov.)