

VIEWPOINTS

Book Review: Rudan I: Thus Spoke Tesla: A Story of Genius. A New Look at the Life, Work, and Legacy of Nikola Tesla. Edinburgh: International Society of Global Health, 2025, pp. 1–478. (in English) ISBN 978-1-7385104-7-4

Davies Adeloye

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No abstract.

Igor Rudan's *Thus Spoke Tesla* is an attempt to resurrect of one of the most brilliant minds in the entire human history. Across thirty-seven chapters, Rudan reconstructs the inner and outer world of Nikola Tesla, the genius inventor - a man who brought us electricity as we know it. But what makes this book extraordinary, in addition to many new and unexpected revelations about Tesla, is its deep exploration of the phenomenon of neurodivergence: how and why do “geniuses” arise, and whether medicine should study human “genius” as a form of disability – because it often makes people socially and financially dysfunctional, with Nikola Tesla being a prime example.

Rudan's approach rejects easy polarity that has dominated Tesla literature for decades: the images of “the sainted mystic” or “the misunderstood eccentric”. Instead, he builds a multi-dimensional portrait that integrates Tesla's neuropsychology, cultural background, scientific approach, and philosophical thought. The result is a work that reads like a fusion of scientific history, psychological novel, and philosophical essay.

The early chapters unfold with an almost novelistic rhythm. The book begins in rural Lika, a landscape of storms, discipline, and silence, where young Nikola is shaped by a father's stern rationality and a mother's creative intuition. Rudan's prose captures the paradox that will define Tesla's life: the tensions between his obedience to father and his wild imagination; and between the teachings of his faith and his strong, original and independent reasoning.

Through Tesla's adolescence in Karlovac and Graz, Rudan traces the emergence of the archetype of the “rebel-engineer”: Tesla was a young man at war with both institutions and his own perfectionism. Rudan's account of Tesla's disillusionment with academic formalism in Graz is particularly powerful: he exhibits the moral courage of an independent and free thinker, who was unwilling to accept the limits of the known.

The middle chapters of the book carry Tesla across the great stage of industrial revolution and what was considered modernity and progress during his time: from Budapest and Paris to New York, where he becomes, for a brief and blinding moment, Edison's protégé. But from that safe and very promising position, Tesla soon turns into Edison's rival. Rudan excels at portraying this clash not merely as a professional disagreement about alternating versus direct current, but as a civilizational divergence between pragmatic capitalism and visionary idealism. Edison becomes a symbol of an emerging world where profit guides progress. Tesla, on the other side, stands for a vanishing world, where science should serve beauty and harmony.

In Rudan's interpretation, Tesla's career is a spiral, rather than a steady ascent. Due to many challenges that his neurodivergence brought upon him, he shows a repeated pattern of creation, revelation, and exile. The chapters on Colorado Springs and Wardenclyffe are the emotional heart of the book. Here, the great inventor gradually turns into a kind of a prophet, and his laboratory becomes a temple of faith in pure energy. Rudan does not simply recount the technical details of the magnifying transmitter; he narrates them as a genuine human drama of a lone genius trying to converse with the planet itself.

The Wardenclyffe project, Tesla's "cathedral of wireless energy dreams", stands in Rudan's telling as one of the great moral parables of modern history. The structure's collapse marks not only the end of Tesla's fortune, but the victory of a culture that values immediate profit over boundless and ingenious curiosity that could lead to universal enlightenment. In all this, Rudan remains remarkably objective, and resists melodrama. He sees Tesla's failure as personal transformation instead of tragedy, when the inventor became a philosopher, and material invention progressed into metaphysical exploration.

The later chapters expand beyond biography into cosmology. Rudan guides the reader through Tesla's later writings, the reflections on resonance, vibration, frequency, and the unity of all matter, and places them in conversation with modern physics. His discussion of scalar waves, quantum entanglement, and the parallels between Tesla's thought and string theory is daring, but also very disciplined. He neither indulges pseudoscience, nor dismisses speculation; instead, he shows how Tesla's intuition anticipated the language of a century still to come.

One of the most striking sections explores Tesla's fascination with "automata." Rudan convincingly argues that Tesla was, in effect, the first roboticist, and also a pioneer of artificial intelligence - being the first to imagine machines capable of autonomous learning and decision-making. In a luminous passage, Rudan links this insight to the modern fields of cybernetics and machine learning.

Equally compelling is Rudan's excavation of Tesla's reflections on health, hygiene, and diet. He identifies the inventor as a pioneer of public health and preventive medicine, decades before epidemiology emerged as a formal science. Tesla's writings on clean water, nutrition, and balance between body and environment appear, under Rudan's analysis, as the earliest sketches of what we now call global health and development.

If the book's scientific analysis is firmly objective and very rigorous, its cultural commentary is quite courageous. Rudan devotes entire chapters to dismantling the nationalist appropriation of Tesla's identity. "Whose was Nikola Tesla?" is a question he addresses with honesty and grace. Born to Serbian parents in a Croatian land within the Austrian Empire, Tesla was, in Rudan's conclusion, "his own". He belonged not to any nation, but to the entire humanity. This stance, delivered with historical precision and moral conviction, elevates the book beyond biography into civic ethics. In an era when science is once again entangled with tribal identity, Rudan's portrayal of Tesla as a citizen of the world feels not only accurate, but urgently necessary.

He is equally fearless in examining Tesla's mythological afterlife. The chapters on posthumous mythmaking, such as the New Age interpretations, conspiracy theories, and pseudo-scientific cults that surrounded his name, are models of intellectual fairness of a biographer. Rudan neither ridicules nor romanticizes any of them; he treats them as cultural symptoms, as evidence of a collective hunger for meaning in an age that has lost faith in both religion and science. Tesla, he suggests, became the saint of the disenchanted, the icon of the counter-culture movements, and the patron of those who still dream of invisible forces and supranatural phenomena.

The final chapters are breathtaking in scope. Rudan surveys the global monuments, museums, and institutions that now carry Tesla's name, from Smiljan to New York, and from the Niagara Falls to Silicon Valley. He describes the transformation of Tesla from neglected genius to cultural icon, which is an emblem equally embraced by engineers, environmentalists, futurists, and mystics.

But beyond commemoration lies continuity, because Rudan then skilfully traces the conceptual lineage of Tesla's work into today's technologies: wireless communication, renewable energy, robotics, and even electric cars. His analysis of Tesla's intuitive connection to modern sustainability, through his early warnings about fossil fuels and his vision of clean, abundant energy, is very engaging and powerful. When Rudan writes about the "green transition" as the delayed realization of Tesla's ideals, the book becomes almost a manifesto for the 21st century.

The closing meditations on Tesla's pacifism, his moral integrity, and his belief that humanity is "one organism of many cells", all have the serene gravity of scripture. The book ends, appropriately, not with death, but rather with a diffusion of the legacy of one extraordinary man: Tesla dissolves into the modern world he helped create, his presence now felt in every current and every screen.

Rudan's penultimate chapter, "*The Greatest Inventors in History*", provides a masterclass in comparative intellectual history. He situates Tesla among Franklin, Galileo, Faraday, Maxwell, Pasteur, Curie, da Vinci, and Edison, i.e., a pantheon of minds that shaped civilization. In this, he remains very objective and refuses to rank them mechanically. Instead, he constructs a taxonomy of creativity: the scientist who discovers, the engineer who perfects, and the inventor who imagines. Tesla, he concludes, occupies the rare intersection of all three.

This chapter also serves as an implicit self-portrait of the author. Rudan, himself a scientist of global renown, writes with the empathy of a peer: he is also someone who left Croatia to pursue a dream of becoming a scientist at the world stage, so he understands from within what it means to live by ideas and for ideas. His commentary on the distinction between discovery and invention, and on the loneliness of intellectual originality, carries the authority of the author's deep personal experience.

Stylistically, the book is a triumph of balance and objectivity. Rudan's prose is precise and musical at the same time. It is strongly factual, but it also manages to feel emotional. Each chapter is self-contained, but also a part of a much greater architectural design, moving from the microcosm of childhood to the macrocosm of the entire human civilization. The rhythm alternates between narrative intimacy and philosophical meditation, creating a texture reminiscent of Walter Isaacson's *Einstein* combined with the moral resonance of Stefan Zweig's *Stellar Moments of Humanity*.

What distinguishes Rudan's voice is humility. Despite his clear encyclopaedic command of science, history, and culture, he never overshadows his subject. He allows Tesla to speak through his essays. The translator's restraint and the decision to keep the syntax close to Croatian rhythm, even in English, preserves an almost musical cadence. This is how he manages to achieve that the book feels European, dignified, slightly archaic, but perfectly suited to Tesla's era.

Reading *Thus Spoke Tesla: A Story of Genius* is a revelatory experience. The book arrives at a moment when humanity is once again confronting the ethical limits of its inventions, from artificial intelligence to genetic editing and renewable energy. Tesla, as Rudan portrays him, becomes the conscience of modernity: the reminder that technology without morality could be just noise.

Rudan's Tesla is neither the eccentric saint of pop culture, nor the prophet of free energy beloved by conspiracy theorists. He is a disciplined visionary, a bridge between romantic imagination and scientific rigor. His story, in Rudan's telling, becomes a parable about the fragility of genius in a marketplace of mediocrity, and about the responsibility of societies to protect their dreamers before they are physically gone. Perhaps the book's most enduring message lies in its discrete insight: that invention is not merely a technical act, but a moral one. To invent, Rudan suggests through Tesla's life, work, and legacy, is to expand the sphere of human possibility.

At 37 chapters and about 500 pages, the book is vast, yet not a page feels redundant. It is meticulously researched and elegantly written. It is both scientifically objective and emotionally profound. It combines the clarity of a scientist, the discipline of a historian, and the sensitivity of a poet. *Thus Spoke Tesla* will stand, I believe, as the definitive intellectual biography of Tesla for a generation. It honours both the man and the mystery, showing how the two are inseparable. In the end, Rudan achieves what few biographers of scientific figures have ever done: he makes the reader *feel* the intelligence, enthusiasm, energy and inner light of a genius who is now long gone.

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Disclosure of Interest

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