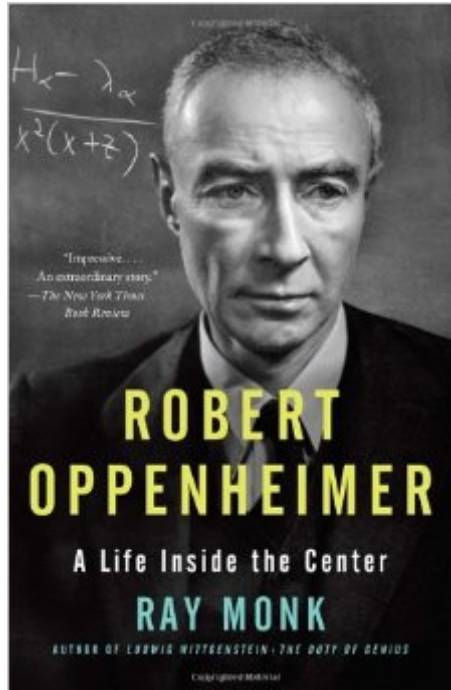


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Robert Oppenheimer: A Life Inside The Center



Synopsis

An unforgettable story of discovery and unimaginable destruction and a major biography of one of America's most brilliant and most divisive scientists, Robert Oppenheimer: A Life Inside the Center vividly illuminates the man who would go down in history as the father of the atomic bomb. Oppenheimer's talent and drive secured him a place in the pantheon of great physicists and carried him to the laboratories where the secrets of the universe revealed themselves. But they also led him to contribute to the development of the deadliest weapon on earth, a discovery he soon came to fear. His attempts to resist the escalation of the Cold War arms race coupled with political leanings at odds with post-war America led many to question his loyalties, and brought down upon him the full force of McCarthyite anti-communism. Digging deeply into Oppenheimer's past to solve the enigma of his motivations and his complex personality, Ray Monk uncovers the extraordinary, charming, tortured man and the remarkable mind who fundamentally reshaped the world.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When news came of this new biography of Robert Oppenheimer, Oppenheimer fans like myself were naturally inclined to ask, "What's new"? In the past decade or so there have been several portraits and biographies of the father of the atomic bomb, with the culmination of these efforts being Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin's Pulitzer Prize-winning volume "American Prometheus". With so many around, do we need another biography? In this case the answer is a qualified yes. Monk who is the acclaimed biographer of Wittgenstein and Russell has produced a thoughtful and insightful

portrait that covers a lot of the same ground as other books but also sheds much clearer insights into Oppenheimer's character and a handful of key events from his life. The UK edition of the book is titled "Inside the Center", both as a reference to Oppenheimer's wish to be at the center of science and policy, as well as an allusion to his own lack of a unifying center. The book is very well-written and presents a judicious balance of detail and broader discussion. The writing is clear and crisp and delivers a solid, authoritative account of the subject matter. Monk's main goal is to illuminate the central dilemma of Oppenheimer's life; that of identity. His second goal is to pay attention to those aspects of Oppenheimer's science which have been glossed over by other biographers. Oppenheimer was a brilliant, complex individual who excelled at a variety of things, an astonishingly quick thinker and wide-ranging intellectual who was as much at home with Sanskrit and French literature as with theoretical physics. Yet he was a man who kept on searching for a core identity that would hold it all together. Monk looks for the root of this crisis in Oppenheimer's rejection of his German-Jewish background.

Throughout his life J. Robert Oppenheimer always maintained a certain reserve, preferring to remain at a remove from others even during his periods of greatest eminence. As Ray Monk demonstrates in this superb biography, this distance was both a help and a hindrance to Oppenheimer, allowing him to achieve unprecedented success but causing him to be so distrusted that eventually his career was forced to a premature end. J. Robert Oppenheimer was born to a wealthy and secularized Jewish family in New York City in 1904. He early achieved academic success at the Ethical Culture School, going on to Harvard and then Cambridge. Although he was not raised in a religious household and felt little connection to his Jewish heritage, that inheritance always caused him to feel himself to be an outsider, even when he became one of the best known and most influential people in the field of physics. During the 1930s Oppenheimer, like so many during the Depression years, was drawn to left wing causes and became a financial supporter, if not an actual member, of the Communist Party. He married more out of duty than love and fathered two children for whom he had little time. During World War II he was the head of the Manhattan Project which developed the atomic bomb. This made him famous and indeed a hero to most Americans in the post war years until his opposition to the developing Cold War and the race to build a hydrogen bomb caused him to become suspect in the eyes of some politicians, most notably Senator Joseph McCarthy. A series of investigations led to Oppenheimer's security clearance being withdrawn in the early 1950s. While he continued to break new ground and encourage others to do likewise, his name seemed forever tainted when he died in 1967.

Science affects everyone of us. According to Einstein "The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday events." It is illuminating to learn of Robert Oppenheimer in details that have never been discussed before at such an intimate, serious in depth level. His background in Ethical Culture, his family collection of Van Gogh and other assorted art luminaries. His fine equestrian abilities. His battle with keeping an old Packard in bearable running condition. It's all here. Like trying to fly a kite. You can devour hundreds of pages just getting this unique story airborne, but when it finally glides in the literary sky, it soars. You have a book of beauty that is filled with tears and passion, and disaster and failure. You finally visualize the whole man. The reader knows J. Robert Oppenheimer like you've never known him or anyone else for that matter. His haberdashery, his bungalow named "Perro Caliente," the floor plan of his parents fine apartment on Riverside Drive. And it's all in there, before you even arrive at the likes of a Roy Cohn or Senator Mc Carthy or Edward Teller, and a host of other adversaries. This monumental book is overflowing with insight. It surpasses the serious biography about Oppie's great contemporary genius, Dirac. The book opens more doors than the great Isaacson work on Einstein. You will never get a finer layman's explanation of how the world changed in that dazzling thirty year run from the twenties to the fifties. There was another world out there in that remarkable century, devoid of Babe Ruth or the Cotton Club or Scott Fitzgerald, or Lucky Luciano, or prohibition. It was a much bigger shocking world, that sadly killed more human beings than all the five gangster families of New York ever killed.

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