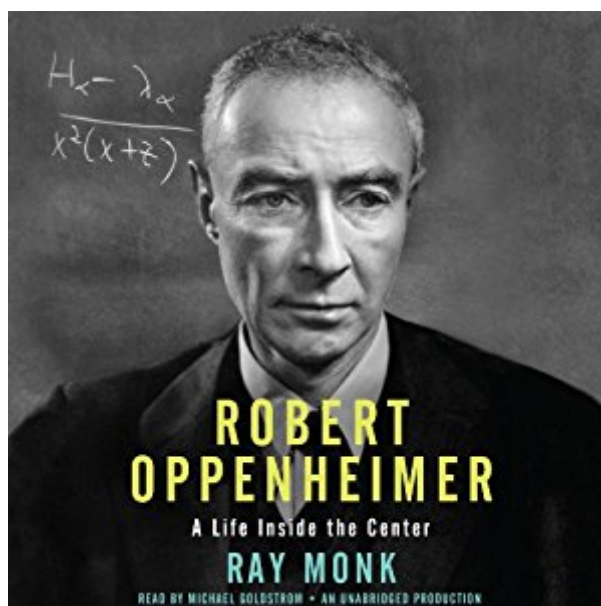


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Robert Oppenheimer: A Life Inside The Center



Synopsis

Robert Oppenheimer was among the most brilliant and divisive of men. As head of the Los Alamos Laboratory, he oversaw the successful effort to beat the Nazis in the race to develop the first atomic bomb - a breakthrough that was to have eternal ramifications for mankind and that made Oppenheimer the "Father of the Atomic Bomb." But with his actions leading up to that great achievement, he also set himself on a dangerous collision course with Senator Joseph McCarthy and his witch-hunters. In *Robert Oppenheimer: A Life Inside the Center*, Ray Monk, author of peerless biographies of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell, goes deeper than any previous biographer in the quest to solve the enigma of Oppenheimer's motivations and his complex personality. The son of German-Jewish immigrants, Oppenheimer was a man of phenomenal intellectual attributes, driven by an ambition to overcome his status as an outsider and penetrate the heart of political and social life. As a young scientist, his talent and drive allowed him to enter a community peopled by the great names of twentieth-century physics - men such as Niels Bohr, Max Born, Paul Dirac, and Albert Einstein - and to play a role in the laboratories and classrooms where the world was being changed forever, where the secrets of the universe, whether within atomic nuclei or collapsing stars, revealed themselves. But Oppenheimer's path went beyond one of assimilation, scientific success, and world fame. The implications of the discoveries at Los Alamos weighed heavily upon this fragile and complicated man. In the 1930s, in a climate already thick with paranoia and espionage, he made suspicious connections, and in the wake of the Allied victory, his attempts to resist the escalation of the Cold War arms race led many to question his loyalties. Through compassionate investigation and with towering scholarship, Ray Monk's *Robert Oppenheimer* tells an unforgettable story of discovery, secrecy, impossible choices, and unimaginable destruction.

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Customer Reviews

It can be argued that after Einstein, Robert Oppenheimer was the most important physicist in twentieth century America. While many very good biographies of Oppenheimer have been written, What separates 'A life inside the Center' from others is this- Ray Monk looks at Oppenheimer as a Physicist. Science is at the core of this book- as it was at the core of Oppenheimer's life. The emphasis on science makes the biography ring more true as a picture of the public and private man. Not that Monk dodges the controversies that surrounded Oppenheimer's life. He is frank about Oppenheimer's political associations, his lack of candor with the US government on many occasions, and, his willingness to sometimes sacrifice others on the alter of his fame. Nonetheless, the biography is balanced. Monk also looks at Oppenheimer's brilliance as a scientist, his determination to make American Physics relevant and his service as the Director of the Atomic Bomb project. Monk marvels at how this life long introvert became a manager, a confessor and a motivator to a group of disparate scientists from all over the world. He rose to the task, Monk contends, because he deeply wanted the United States, not Germany, to have access to the super weapon that could win the war. Another interesting attitude that Monk adapts is a lack of pity for Oppenheimer after his security clearance was pulled in 1953. Many other biographers have treated this as a seminal tragedy in Oppenheimer's existence. While Monk deals with the public fallout, he contends that Oppenheimer still had important academic work to do after losing his clearance, and that his life was not over. Having read several other biographies of Robert Oppenheimer, it is easy to say that this is the one to be read if a reader is only going to read one.

I was not interested in yet another biography on a physicist or a mathematician or a scientist, so I thought I would quickly jump to the chapter "Los Alamos." But I then saw "In On The Secret" and knew I would have to go back one chapter. And, yes, then I saw "Harvard." And that's where I finally started. Though I had to peek back at some earlier chapters to identify some personalities. I thought this would be a dry book on Oppenheimer: wow, was I surprised. Ray Monk spends three pages on George Eliot's "Middlemarch" and how that may have affected Oppenheimer. And who ever would have thought a biography on Oppenheimer would include a reference to Garsington, a literary salon

across town from London's Bloomsbury? Outside of a few tourist books in New England, I never thought I would see a reference to Cape Ann, a rocky peninsula north of Boston. Yes, I was quite surprised. I think folks who enjoy literature would enjoy this book more than they might imagine. Best of all: written with absolute clarity. Fine, fine writing.

Ray Monk is a great biographer whose passion for his subjects is manifest in his books. At the same time he is clear-eyed about their failings. Add to this, in the case of Oppenheimer, that Monk, himself a philosopher, is able to explain the physics behind the bomb, and the particle physics that O and his mostly Nobel-level colleagues were struggling with in the 30s and beyond, in terms that a layperson can (mostly) understand. The book is several books really. It's about how O was shaped by his wealthy New York Jewish origins and the "Ethical Culture" movement, for good and ill. It's about O the theoretical physicist -- a contributor at the highest levels but not, like Bohr or Feynman, a groundbreaking genius. It's about the Manhattan Project and especially O's prodigious talents as a project manager, which "came out of nowhere," as it were. It's about where the great scientists behind the bomb stood generally on the morality of its use and of the use of the "Super" -- the H-bomb. And of course it's about the public humiliation of O during the McCarthy era and his later public rehabilitation. It is with respect to his political activities and his own testimony to the government that O is revealed to be deeply flawed. One gets the sense that his moral failings in this context weighed upon him in later years more heavily than did his role in making Hiroshima and Nagasaki possible. It's not a criticism of the book, but after reading it, I searched for and watched an Edward R. Morrow interview of O when he was director of the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton, which interview is readily available on-line. I have to say that I found him to be in manner smarmy, effete and elusive -- not, on the face of it, someone readily to be trusted. But in most quarters, and among his colleagues, he inspired reverence.

The best part of this book is not only a well-written biography but a skillful incorporation of excellent discussion of Oppenheimer's various physics projects and papers. Sorry to say he leaves out the math but his discussions have made me look up the papers. I highly recommend it.

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