Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists

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An account of the remarkable scientists who discovered that nuclear fission was possible and then became concerned about its implications. Index. Translated by James Cleugh.

Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists Details

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From Reader Review Brighter than a Thousand Suns: A Personal History of the Atomic Scientists for online ebook

Dr. M says

The author wanted to write a novel based on the development of the first atomic bomb. In the course of his research he realized that "facts were stranger than fiction" and decided to write facts instead of fiction. The book is an exciting experience on the beautiful years in Gottingen University where important original mathematical derivations were done on the coffee table in the cafeteria by great minds who discussed in the "rarefied atmosphere at the limits of human understanding". You will see the great birth-pangs of ideas, pettiness of great scientists and the ultimate insensitivity of political leadership to human suffering. I recommend this book to every student and teacher of science and technology.

Chris S says

Utterly terrifying.

'If the radiance of a thousand suns
were to burst into the sky,
that would be like
the splendour of the Mighty One -'

...

'I am become Death, the shatterer of worlds'
- Bhagavad Gita

(uttered by Robert Oppenheimer, creator of the atomic bomb, upon seeing the first ever nuclear mushroom cloud)

Nate Hendrix says

Did not like it and did not finish it.

Trevor says

Though much of this information has undoubtedly been retread and updated many times over since this book was written more than 50 years ago, I imagine that the vast majority of it is still relevant and accurate. Moreover, the (former) timeliness of its subject matter, written in the middle of the great nuclear arms race, lends an immediacy to the writing that still resonates today. It certainly boosted by a significant degree my understanding of the scientific and political environment leading up to the development of the first atomic bomb and its explosive successors.

Shiven Shiven says

One of the best books which i read recently. This not only gives a vivid description of the events that actually changed the world scenario and got us into an arms race but also describes the science events in a story telling fashion which makes episodes like electron discovery as a heart warming event to even the layman. The story line is absolutely mind boggling and portrayal of the human side of some of the world famous scientists was a discovery in itself. I thoroughly enjoyed the book and so earnestly wish that there should have been a part II to this.

Aakif Ahmad says

This is an amazing book. Told in narrative, story-like form, the author recreates the story of how scientific research evolved from one driven by love of knowledge and cross-border collaboration to one that became mired in politics and personal glory. He tells this story within the context of the preeminent scientific pursuit of the late 19th/early 20th century: the discovery of nuclear fission and the construction of the atomic bomb. The characters are so many of the names we know: Ernest Rutherford, Neils Bohr, Enrico Fermi, Heisenberg, Planck, Einstein, Oppenheimer, among many others who are not as well known, but critical (both in the scientific, military and political communities). The writing style is fluid and engaging and the author's extremely detailed research is evident in how easily he moves in simple sentence and paragraphs across complex subject matter and complex interpersonal relationships between the dozens of scientists whose life work merged into the this scientific journey of epic scale. The story telling his humorous at times, poignant, and brings to life the imperfect route, laiden with missteps, imperfect communication, greed; the personal conflicts felt by many of the scientists as they wrestled with the enormity of their work and the implications for humanity; and the underlying motivation of fear that scientsits of the allied forces had to get their first, before the Gernams or Russians. The drama, anxiety and intensity is captured beautifully by the author, leading up to the very difficult moment (for any one reading this book) when in just a few sentences, the bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and one is left to simple reflect and make one's own quite judgement on the enormous loss of life that resulted, and the sharp right turn human history took, when it realized that it had discovered a way to completely annhilate itself. What is unique about this book, is througouth the story, the author keeps his own opinions on the matter visible but not distracting - he is documenting history, but told in the voice and experience of the actors and he does a really magnificent job.

Paul says

In trying to struggle through reading Quantum, I recalled reading this book a fair amount of years ago. (It was much more readable than Quantum.) The story of the discovery of the theories of physics which lay behind the technology of the atomic bomb, the story of reducing the theory to the terrifying reality of the atomic bomb, and the insight to its terrible power, all left an impression on me.

Admiration for the brilliance of those who discovered the theory, wonder at the technology combined with a realization of the terrible power left me schizophrenice. Just like the human condition.

I can remember one vivid scene in which one of the theorists was bragging to his girl friend when they

looked at the sun in the sky that he knew why the sun was the way it was.

Nadine says

The thing I remember most about this book was the sense of Greek tragedy unfolding, as the Americans raced to finish the bomb, fearful that the Nazis would get there first. Meanwhile the scientists who were working for the Nazis dragged their feet as much as they could. As a reader you can see both sides but they could not see each other, and there is no hope that the ending will be different than what you know; you continue reading but with a strong sense of fatalism, more than any book I read I think.

Leah G says

The history of the scientists who built the atomic bomb. Lots of personal, close up stories of the Manhattan Project and its people. Pretty good and accurate and detailed especially considering how close to the time it was written, before stuff got declassified, so it was hard to cover all aspects of the story- yet he had the advantage of things still being relatively current and fresh and all the people still being around...just be aware of the pros and cons when reading it. Good read though, for sure.

Dennis Cahillane says

Written in 1956 while the central players were still alive but after the "Atoms for Peace" conference and associated thawing of secrecy, the best non-fiction account I've read of the people behind the atomic and hydrogen bombs.

Jim Razinha says

One of the New Scientist Top 25 Most Influential Popular Science Books (all of which I plan to read eventually), and mentioned in a recent read by Martin Gardner.

Fascinating. Part history, part biography, part political commentary, part social commentary, and part melodrama ("But Teller was not made to march with the rank and file.") unkind to Oppenheimer, but then the times and history were unkind...an unkindness that unfortunately passed to his children, or at least his daughter.

Jungk seemed at times in this English translation full of adoration for these scientists and at other times condemning. I wonder if the German (Jungk was Austrian) original was as lyrical, poetic, or dramatic as the translation. Though I took German in high school, I remember near none and have no intention of reading this in its original language, so must be content with this. Again, fascinating...and as a young man, I might have read it with less of a skeptical eye. Still, an enjoyable read.

Shweta Ramdas says

How accountable are scientists to be for the future consequences of their inventions? Should they remain within their domains of technical expertise, or should they step out to participate in political decisions? This is the primary question that "Brighter than a Thousand Suns" deals with. It is more an account of the minds behind the invention of the atomic bomb and less about the actual science.

It is also about the many accidents of fate that brought about the development of the bomb. These certainly made me wonder if the bomb would have developed in an age of Wikileaks, when there is considerably less left to guesswork!

It's not like the issues in the book aren't relevant today. There still is a moratorium on genetic editing of human embryos; eugenics is the elephant in the golden shiny room that CRISPR has unlocked. This is an important book for scientists: our inventions/discoveries can take paths we could never guess. The sooner we start thinking about these questions, the better.

Maggie says

I really enjoyed this book. It's beautifully written and reads like a novel. The book was published in 1956 so it has an urgency to it that most books on atomic history today lack. The drawback is that I feel it is overly hard on Oppenheimer. It boiled him down too much, and I feel misrepresents his relationships with Teller and Chevalier. It is interesting to read how people felt about him at the time though!

Glglgl says

Robert Jungk beleuchtet in seinem Buch die Entwicklung der ersten Kernwaffen und dabei die Rolle der Wissenschaftler in den westlichen Ländern, besonders der USA, sowie die Verhältnisse in Nazideutschland. Der Untertitel des Buches lautet "das Schicksal der Atomforscher", doch glücklicherweise reduziert der Autor die Verstrickungen der Beteiligten nicht aufs Schicksalhafte, noch nimmt er allzu einfache Schuldzuweisungen vor. Das Buch zielt nicht auf die Klärung der moralische Frage, sondern liefert einen Bericht der Zeit zwischen den frühen Göttinger Tagen und dem Beginn des Wettrüstens nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg. Natürlich wirft sich die moralische Frage bei diesem Thema von selbst auf, doch der Autor hat der Verlockung widerstanden, sie moralisierend zu beantworten. Dafür danke ich ihm. Sein Stil ist klar und lesenswert. Obwohl das Buch aus den 60ern stammt, halte ich es immer noch für sehr lesenswert und spannend.

Arun Tejasvi says

The book presents vivid descriptions of what happened behind the scenes during the development of the atomic bomb and presents an amazing story of how the scientific community first lobbied the U.S. government to build the bomb and then struggled to prevent them from using it. I haven't read a better account of the moral quandaries that scientists at that time faced. As with all good historical accounts, it remains incredibly relevant today.