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Oppenheimer: Portrait Of An Enigma



Synopsis

J. Robert Oppenheimer was a puzzle to everyone. The nuclear physicist most responsible for the creation of the atomic bomb, he was a genius both scientifically and otherwise. His standards were impossibly high. He read widely in many languages, wrote poetry, and did superb science. Yet in Jeremy Bernstein's intensely interesting biographical memoir, Oppenheimer emerges as a man unsure of his identity and captive to an element of self-destructiveness in his makeup. Oppenheimer is the long-awaited book that many people feel Mr. Bernstein was almost born to write. As a former colleague of Oppenheimer's, he has composed a book that is both personal and historical, bringing the reader close to the life and workings of an extraordinary and controversial man. Oppenheimer once told the author that during the now-famous hearing in which he lost his security clearance—a one of the most spectacular attacks of the McCarthy era—he felt it was happening to someone else. His lawyer at the hearing, after being with Oppenheimer day in and day out for several months, said he did not know him in any real sense at all. Yet everyone in the scientific community and in government agreed that without Oppenheimer's totally remarkable leadership at Los Alamos, the atomic bomb would not have happened, and the Second World War would have ended very differently. Filled with revealing insights and details that set the historical record straight, Oppenheimer is that rare quantity: a vastly entertaining study of one of the most important and enigmatic scientists of the atomic age. Illustrated with black-and-white photographs.

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Customer Reviews

Jeremy Bernstein obviously admires J. Robert Oppenheimer. This is not surprising. Almost everyone who came in contact with his sparkling intellect idolised him. In the 1930s, as a Professor at Berkeley, his students were so awestruck by him, that they could frequently be seen imitating his mannerisms. There were a few who loathed him for his high brow attitude and sharp tongue. In fact, people who met him could roughly be divided into the above two categories. However, the latter formed an exception. The result is that he is generally considered by everyone who had known him, whether it was the janitor at Los Alamos, or Nobel Laureates, as an exceptionally brilliant intellect, and one who also had acute insight into human nature and the consequences of the atomic age. Now in this new biography, Bernstein brings his well known skills at chronicling famous scientists to bear upon this remarkable man. There have been a few biographies of him so far. Probably the one by Peter Michelmore is most compelling. (The Swift Years: The Robert Oppenheimer Story) The closest that one can get to knowing him well is through his touching and insightful collection of letters, chronicled by Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner. (Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections) But almost forty years after his death in 1967, what made him tick still seems a mystery. Was it his innate charisma and the blue, innocent, harrowing glare of his eyes, or his lightning fast mind? Was it his incredible knowledge about all things intellectual, from physics to Dante to the Bhagavad Gita? Was it his mesmerising command over the English language, a mixture of spell binding and obscure words, that drew hundreds to his lectures? Or was it his role as the Hamlet and conscience of the atomic age?

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