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Norman Macrae

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Presents the biography of John von Neumann, one of the greatest scientist of the century after Einstein. This book discusses Von Neumann's work in areas such as game theory, mathematics, physics, and meteorology which formed the building blocks for the most important discoveries of the century: the modern computer, game theory, and the atom bomb.

John Von Neumann Details

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Author : Norman Macrae

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From Reader Review John Von Neumann for online ebook

Luis Martinez says

Man's are from Mars!

Clayton Brannon says

Extraordinary read about a great American scientist. So much of todays technology rest upon the mathematical skills of this one man. Genius. For superior to anyone of his time including Einstein and many others.

Hayden says

A good overview blend of history, science, and mathematics. This book can easily be a springboard into further investigations in any of these areas.

Nick Black says

Amazon 2008-05-31. Ugh...the reviews of this one were rough, but I tried to ignore them. First off, the book has a weird appearance. Let's not count that against it, but the odd shape yielded a much longer read than the 400 pages suggest. Furthermore, I'd have liked to have seen good ol' comforting Computer Modern or CM-Super used in the typesetting of the American Mathematical Society -- the (irritatingly unlisted) typeface was rather tiring on the glazzies. But I digress.

Macrae's editor noticably dropped the ball here, to a point that's distracting. An odd dozen quotes are duplicated -- sometimes several times throughout -- each time with the clear intent to unveil something new. Macrae offers the bewildering conjecture that Fermi might have "advanced an Italian bomb effort...what a change that would have been!" The Duce's industrial base in 1939 had a technological ceiling at about the marble table/epaulette level -- I'm not often moved to an audible "**moron**" while reading, but there you go (some ten pages later, Macrae points out that the British lacked the physical plant for isotope separation -- is the man really that blissfully unaware of relative European industrial power following the Industrial Revolution? Jesus!). On page 62, "nine-tenths" is used, which context on page 63 makes plain to have intended "one-tenth"; c'mon, this is a fucking American Mathematical publication about a mathematician written by a mathematician, get your fractions correct.

There's a very uneven nature to the chapters; the first three are florid and lively, the 11th (regarding economic contributions) fairly excellent, the remainder largely staid. We learn on the final pages that these initial chapters were handed down largely unchanged from Stephen White, the project's initiator, and that Macrae's professional focus included economics. Argh! This seems clearly an example of a noble project placed in the wrong hands. Macrae's Nippophilic ejaculations become uninteresting diversion after the first few dozen instances, turning eventually bewildering and finally pathetic. Johnny was among the greatest

minds of the last century, and deserved better.

Macrae makes it clear in his Foreward that this is a labor of love (actually a commissioned hagiography by the Sloan Foundation, we learn later). Von Neumann's was a hard life to capture in still; Oppenheimer biographies advance unceasingly even after Kay and Bird settled that mysterious old wizard, and a stone can't be thrown at Barnes and Noble without hitting some tiring hundredth investigation of Einstein, yet this is only the third minor biography of Von Neumann. He's a difficult target for the biographer, especially the modern one. But, he's my favorite, and the few new anecdotes I could wring out of this stillborn effort spare it the Ninth Circle of single-starhood.

Simon Morgan says

I've been somewhat fascinated by John von Neumann ever since I heard of him so I was almost certain to get a lot from this book, which I did. However, it isn't without it's flaws.

The amount of time spent recounting names, dates, times etc. seems excessive despite their important place in a biography. The author regularly refers back to people who haven't been mentioned in a long time as if they'd only just been introduced, requiring a constant flitting back and forth between the index which breaks the flow of the book terribly, at least for us pathetic souls without eidetic memories.

The book also has a disjointed feel to it that is no doubt partly due to the book being the result of the author picking up where others had left off, but also seems to be down to the style of writing.

I imagine all of this could have been rectified with a good editor, assuming there was one.

Niggles aside, this a good, well-researched biography on a fascinating individual who is deserving of far more attention and praise than he gets. We miss you, János.

Roger Blakesley says

An extremely informative book on one of the great minds of the last few hundred years. He had a life unfortunately shortened by atomic radiation. But his accomplishments were stupendous and the book reflects that. It defers attacks from von Neumann's enemies. Some of the darker things might have been nice to know; but it was not a whitewash of von Neumann either.

The author refers to von Neumann as "Johnny" throughout, and I found that distracting and disrespectful in such a biography. But the author clearly explains why he did so.

The writing style is very kludgy. It could good use a good rewrite and some polish. But I think it gets the facts straight.

Øystein Sjølie says

Good biography on a mathematical genius, embodying world history in the first half of the 20th century.

From a privileged upbringing in an intellectual Jewish family in Budapest, von Neumann studied simultaneously in Berlin and Zurich. In the late 1920s, he fled Europe for the US, anticipating the worst from the aspiring Nazis. He contributed to revolutionize physics and nuclear research, and played an invaluable part in the development of modern computers. He also made ground-breaking research in game theory, and advised the economics profession to invent a new type of math better suited its particular characteristics.

Zdravko says

the writing could have been better, but i enjoyed reading this book immensely. i felt a bit like the kid i was when i read the chapter on syd barrett in a book on pink floyd. :)

Bria says

It was so dryly written, making it almost impossible to read, which is too bad, because I wanted to get excited about math geniuses.

Alexander Polsky says

John von Neumann is a subject deserving a great biography, one of the most important minds of the 20th century. This isn't that biography, sadly.

Norman Macrae was a well respected economist and editor at the Economist in London, and should have been in the position to write something excellent. Instead this reads like a phone-it-in work of lazy scholarship, relying on the superlatives associated with the subject rather than actually doing the work required to produce a biography commensurate with the importance of the subject.

John von Neumann still awaits an adequate biography.

Tim Holme says

von Neumann was an important and charismatic genius who left an imprint across a wide array of fields. It was interesting to hear about his childhood development, where he was raised among the world elites at the time in Budapest (who knew?). His life also is a lens into some of the important trends of the 20th century: the uprooting of the entire Physics community from Europe to America due to Nazism, and trends of the cold war and Atomic Age like computing, game theory, and deterrence.

Unfortunately, the author isn't enough of a scientist or mathematician to be able to explain von Neumann's work, which would have made the book truly fascinating -- but probably inaccessible to laymen.

Still, a decent read.

Don says

An interesting portrait of one of the geniuses of the 20th century, important contributor to Allied success in WWII, and to the emerging computer age. The author portrays Von Neumann's whirlwind of brilliance affecting all with whom he came into contact in a myriad of fields. I was struck, as well, by the characterization of the culture of early 20th-century Budapest and its continuing influence on Von Neumann's work. I followed this book with a biography of Von Neumann collaborator, competitor, fellow prodigy and mathematician extraordinaire, Norbert Wiener (Conway and Siegelman, Dark Hero of the Information Age) and found this coupling particularly interesting in the contrasting personalities and styles of these two seminal thinkers and creators!

Gregor says

Johnny worked till the last day of his life, thinking and inventing all the time. This book fascinatingly shows his role in the development of the computer and many other things. Surprising how involved with the military he was, and certain concepts made me reconsider my pacifist philosophy. A life with so strong a statement: to be alive and curious.
