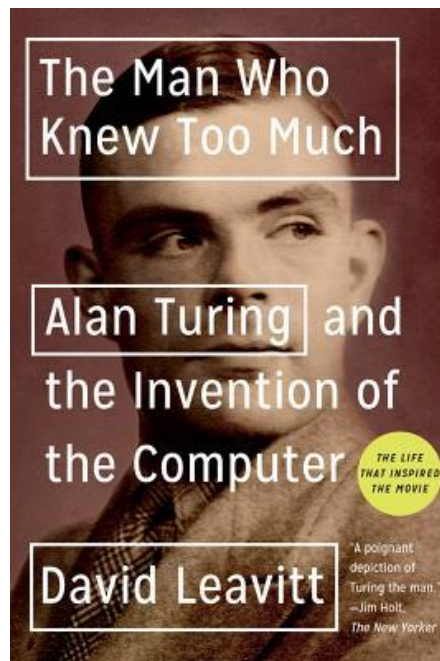




The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer

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To solve one of the great mathematical problems of his day, Alan Turing proposed an imaginary computer. Then, attempting to break a Nazi code during World War II, he successfully designed and built one, thus ensuring the Allied victory. Turing became a champion of artificial intelligence, but his work was cut short. As an openly gay man at a time when homosexuality was illegal in England, he was convicted and forced to undergo a humiliating "treatment" that may have led to his suicide.

With a novelist's sensitivity, David Leavitt portrays Turing in all his humanity—his eccentricities, his brilliance, his fatal candor—and elegantly explains his work and its implications.

The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer Details

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From Reader Review The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer for online ebook

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

Alan is five years old and taking a bite out of an apple for the first time. Human life is rich with such firsts, as we well know and make known with our various rituals and markings, preservations and engravings. First tooth. First step. First word. First day of school. First kiss. But many firsts go uncelebrated, unmarked, fail to be photographed or scrapbooked, and countless sums pass by human sensors unknown, even to those who personally bear them. No one—neither parents nor Alan or otherwise—could’ve realized the somber significance of this as he happily tore the meat of the commonly blossomed fruit away from its seed-laden axis, his jaw working the tart mouthful into a swallowable sweetness and repeated in between the beaming smiles and clear dancing eyes of satisfaction.

The verdant freshness of childhood innocence harmoniously converges with the surrounding organic hustle and bustle of firsts smattering the flora and fauna. The bite’s unknowable meaning radiates silently amid the pastoral scene of the Turing family picnic. The not all too frequently unclouded light of the Scottish sun warmly contributes to the gorgeous weather and blankets the feelings of time-halting serenity and familial love that mingle and gently swirl about this moment, in this clime, in this fraction of a fraction of the world.

Palpable glimmers of Alan’s remarkable intelligence perched upon the early signposts. His mind grasped the landscape of the idyllic family picnic as not merely a series of pleasant impressions bleeding into one another and lapping at his mind-as-center-of-it-all, but as composed of distinct pathways and trajectories, not exactly upon an actual visualized grid—as might some cartoonish version of a mathematics genius as a child—but as things that adhere to deeper principles of space and movement.

Urged by an offhand remark about how nice it would be to have some honey with their biscuits, he traced the flight patterns of the nearby bees and intuitively calculated them into a hunch that, if followed, could bring their sweet secretions into the already plentiful spread that his family’d been enjoying. Within minutes he’d scampered to the central hub of the hive, exhilarated not as much by the possibility of snatching up a syrupy comb or two, but by the series of gratifying clicks within the mind of being able to anticipate and accurately predict the workings of the world—a complex feeling of exerting power and mastery, tempered by the simultaneously humbling sense that his own workings as a person could likewise be anticipated, predicted and uncovered, and as such fall into place with their own satisfying clicks. He both looked out upon the world and felt himself to be its kin, all of course in ways that a child, and most people beyond childhood, could not articulate.

Alan had a conductor car toy that he rolled around so regularly that, within a year since the Christmas he’d received it, the model vessel and even the miniature conductor himself had worn away significantly—human hands and entropy. When a wheel had fallen off, his impulse was to dig a shallow grave for the toy in the backyard. His parents discovered this and thought that he’d tried to hide the evidence of misusing their gift, but in fact his unusual manner of thinking had given him the idea that a proper burial would allow for some sort of magical rejuvenation of the object, causing it to rise from the soil, Phoenixlike, reborn anew. In general, children are prone to magical thinking, yes, but his particular form of it was unique—a vision of causality quite fenced off from others—a self-contained logic churning within the young boy’s mind that was perhaps a sign of revolutionary leaps to come.

Devero says

Una gran biografia, molto scorrevole. Del resto Leavitt è per lo più un romanziere, ma qui si basa su fonti ben precise e non romanza nulla anche quando potrebbe. Buona parte del libro tiene conto dello stato della "filosofia" e della "matematica" dell'epoca, essenziale per comprendere quanto fosse rivoluzionario l'approccio di Turing alla risoluzione di problemi.

Nonostante questo Leavitt riesce a esplicitare bene quanto fosse frustrato il geniale Alan dall'ipocrisia della società inglese, e le difficoltà che incontrò verso la fine della vita. Difficoltà che, se non fosse stato così restio a rendere pubblico il suo contributo alla Guerra, sarebbero state di certo minori.

Attenzione, il cap. 3 è decisamente impegnativo se lo volete capire, perché riprende per filo e per segno l'articolo forse più importante scritto da Alan.

Surreysmum says

I found this a fascinating book, even though the mathematical concepts in the middle chapters were a bit of a hard slog. Still, even if I didn't fully follow the explanations, it was entirely helpful to get a sense of the territories in which Turing's mind was working. And the bit about the Enigma machines was utterly absorbing.

I raised an eyebrow when I saw David Leavitt as the author of the book, wondering whether an author mostly known (or at least mostly known to me) as a writer of gay-centred novels would tip the balance of the whole thing, making it a "poor abused gay hero" biography. Possibly there are readers out there who are disappointed he didn't do just that. I thought he maintained the balance between the intellectual and the emotional quite admirably. His analysis of a short story fragment Turing wrote towards the end of his life is, as one would expect, full of insight.

Turing died by biting into a cyanide-poisoned apple, suicide being the generally accepted explanation, though his family steadfastly maintained it was an accident. Leavitt is quite scientific in presenting all the evidence for the two theories.

This book is part of a series, "Great Discoveries", and I suspect it had an upper word limit imposed by the publisher. That may in fact have been to its advantage. Turing was not a man who would be easily understood even with thousands of pages of description and analysis - but I came away from this feeling I had at least gained some sense of the man.

Melissa says

Excellent book! Some parts might be challenging if you don't have a working knowledge of imaginary numbers, math proofs and theoretical math. But if you don't understand that part just skim it and get back to the story. Don't let it stop you from enjoying the book. Must read!

Megan says

Halfway done and totally disappointed in this book. It skips between being an overblown gay biography of

Alan Turing (being gay does define one's existence, but does it have to define EVERY MOVE YOU MAKE, too?) and a hopelessly confusing history of how math become computer science. I'm still slogging through, but my hopes are dashed.

^ says

I lost interest and gave up on page 26. So early! Feeble really; but I've just not been able to get back into it, despite trying.

The author's narrative reads too much like a first draft, a rough, barely-ordered laying out of sources without the subsequent necessary review, re-review, and knitting-together into a text that engages its reader as it flows. Was the sub-editor asleep at the time?

I am disappointed. After several deeply engrossing visits to the Bletchley Park site, and The National Museum Of Computing, I'd really looked forward to reading this book; especially as I borrowed it from Hampshire (public) Library Services, whose staff are normally superb at selecting books.

Lil says

A fascinating perspective into the life of an eccentric genius. I probably should not have looked at other reviews first, because it's disheartening to see so many of them complaining "too gay." What I found so striking about this book was that Leavitt evidences how Turing's identity as a gay man was an essential part of his life, not just in the act of sexuality but in his thinking. There's the view of the outsider, the partition of "other" that coloured so much of his thinking about machines, there's the idea of "imitating a man" and trying to fool others that Turing proposed as a test of a computer's intelligence... the book is full of these foundational ideas that can't be separated from Turing's thought process, no matter how much a privileged heteronormative culture wants them to whitewash them out. Turing is an especially good candidate to show the importance of identity on thought in that he was never just a pure mathematician. In his lectures, debates, letters, even the short story he was writing before he died, he is constantly making reference to it; these passing remarks could be just ignored, leaving Turing probably looking like someone who just went off on tangents, but Leavitt does an amazing job in teasing them out and putting them into context. And in that context, it's obvious that the question of who he was, of what machines were, of what made computers and human brains different and the same, was a question that was constantly on Turing's mind.

Mark says

I expected more of a biography. Instead, it's an awkward combination of sketchy biography and layman's explanation of Turing's technical contributions. It's not bad, just not very good.

Yfke says

Though containing a lot of information, this book is a dry mess, making it difficult to read and slightly frustrating to anyone who isn't particularly gifted at mathematics to begin with. What bothered me most

[illegible]

Questa biografia di Alan Turing ha un unico pregio: convincere il lettore a comprarsi quella scritta da Andrew Hodges, <http://www.anobii.com/books/978883391...> . Turing era omosessuale, e la sua omosessualità è stata la causa del suo suicidio, quindi è chiaro che essa è un tema fondamentale. Ma questo non dovrebbe significare leggere **tutta** la vita del matematico inglese in chiave omosessuale, a meno che uno non voglia farsi ridere dietro scrivendo ad esempio che "la strategia attuata da Turing di aprire il suo lavoro riassumendo tutte le rivendicazioni degli oppositori prefigura i manifesti per i diritti dei gay degli anni Cinquanta e Sessanta" (pag.189; ma avrei potuto scegliere tanti altri esempi). Aggiungete che Leavitt, a differenza di Hodges, non è un matematico e quindi non riesce a spiegare chiaramente l'Entscheidungsproblem oltre a prendersi qualche topica sulla zeta di Riemann, e rincarate la dose con i danni di traduzione ed editing che riescono a scrivere la lista dei numeri naturali invece che quelli primi e a non accorgersi che se stai parlando di cifratura di una frase in inglese non puoi tradurla lasciando identica la frase cifrata, senno' l'esempio non ha alcun senso; come potete capire il risultato finale è che dalla lettura di questo libro non guadagnerete nulla.

Antonomasia says

Interesting and usually very readable biog of Turing which concentrates on his identity as a gay man and how this may have influenced aspects of his work. During his time at Cambridge, homosexuality was tacitly accepted and there was a significant, though of course rather underground, community of gay academics - including E.M. Forster - and students. This would of course contrast with the secrecy and shame he was subjected to later.

Naturally there are some pages of equations and mathematical description. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to switch gears into being able to understand them all in the way I could with similar books when I was younger, but the presentation is quite clear and they shouldn't trouble most bright all-rounders.

Bletchley is covered in quite an exciting manner (still kind of suspenseful even though we know how it turned out), and the account includes the contributions of a good number of other people as well as Turing. I enjoyed reading more about them online as well. The American author could improve his grasp of London geography, however.

Not that much space is given to the story of Turing's arrest and demise, but it was still very moving and left me quite angry and sad.

Years ago, I had a copy of a much longer biography, *Alan Turing: The Enigma*. I never got close to finishing it. 700+ pages was probably a bit much for me on this topic, and I was lucky enough to chance upon this book when I was away at Christmas. I would recommend it as an alternative to the other biography for people who aren't CS specialists, especially those with any interest in LGBT issues. (It is a shame to see a number of first-page GR reviews hostile to the gay slant of the book.) I gather from reviews here and elsewhere that the maths is all sound, so those with more technical knowledge should find it satisfactory too.

Holly says

Familiar with and generally admiring of David Leavitt's fiction I was impressed by his attempt to tell this story. Lest I sound equivocal [pun?], I'll say I would have enjoyed this book more by reading it on the page/e-ink screen than by listening to the audiobook as I did - though that's no fault of the reader, Paul Michael Garcia. But every number of every binary string was read: one one one one one one one one zero ellipses (yes, even the word "ellipses" was voiced) and I repeatedly "zoned" out and lost the context. I'm not innumerate, but I was busy this week, and I *am* a visual thinker, and that was too much to absorb. I loved George Dyson's *Turing's Cathedral* and listened to the audiobook in unceasing fascination; I took a lot of enjoyment from Brian Christian's *The Most Human Human*; say the words "Bletchley Park" or "Enigma" and you have my immediate attention. So perhaps it was the equations and also something restrained in Leavitt's handling of the material that kept causing me to lose the thread. I do think this was fine examination of Turing's life, mathematics, milieu, and tragic death (it might have been accidental suicide? Apple denies that their logo is inspired by Turing?). Note: need to read Andrew Hodges on Turing.

Alicja says

[suicide by a poisoned apple (hide spoiler)]

Matt Dean says

I read this in order to lead a book group discussion. The book provided fodder for a long and interesting discussion. (We went overtime by half an hour or so.)

It's worth noting, though, that the book doesn't have quite the emphasis that I was expecting. Many, many, many more pages are spent on the mathematics than on the man. A lengthy explanation of the operation of a series of hypothetical Turing machines runs to 30 pages. On the other hand, it was a shock to learn that Turing was briefly engaged to be married, and even more of a shock that his fiancée was "unfazed" when he revealed that he was gay—and yet all of that happened in a single sentence.

The Man Who Knew Too Much is part of a series (Great Discoveries). As an admirer of Leavitt's other work—including *The Indian Clerk* an excellent novel based on the life of another mathematician and contemporary of Turing's, G.H. Hardy—I have to assume he was somewhat constrained by his charter. That is to say, he was compelled to favor Turing's work over his life. Leavitt does a fine job of it, but I'm no math geek, and I would have preferred that the emphasis be reversed.
