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Have you ever met a child who talked like an adult? Who knew big words and how to use them? Was he a charmer or an insufferable smart aleck—or maybe both? Mark Oppenheimer was just such a boy, his talent for language a curse as much as a blessing. But when he got to junior high, Oppenheimer discovered an outlet for his loquaciousness: the debate team. Frank and comical, *Wisenheimer* chronicles the travails of a hyperarticulate child who finds salvation in the heady world of competitive oratory.

In stirring prose, Oppenheimer describes what it was like to have a gift with no useful application. Unlike math or music prodigies, he had no way to showcase his unique skill, except to speak like a miniature adult—a trick some found impressive but others found irritating. Frustrated and isolated, Oppenheimer used his powers for ill—he became a wisenheimer, pushing his peers and teachers away. Then, in junior high, he discovered the world he was meant for: the debate club. His skill with language was finally being channeled, refined, and honed into something beautiful.

As Oppenheimer blossomed as a person, he also became a world-champion high school and college debater. His journey from loneliness to fulfillment affords a fascinating inside look at the extraordinary subculture of world-class high school debate and at the power of language to change one's life.

Oppenheimer writes movingly about the art of rhetoric, of his passion for it, and of the inspiration he derived from debating and watching others do it. This smart, funny memoir not only reveals a strange, compelling subculture, it also offers a broader discussion of the splendor and power of language and of the social and developmental hazards of being a gifted child. Finally, it looks with hope at our present age, in which oratory is once again an important force in American culture.

Revealing, touching, and entertaining, *Wisenheimer* offers a brilliant portrait of the rarefied world of high school and college debate—and of what it's like to grow up talkative in America.

Wisenheimer: A Childhood Subject to Debate Details

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Carla says

The author, a neighbor of mine, was a high school debater. The thesis for this book is that an awkward kid who is fascinated by words, excited by verbally communicating ideas and unable to stop talking can find community and success in formal debate and impromptu speaking at Forensics Tournaments. It's a memoir about the early life, mostly middle and high school and college years of Mark Oppenheimer. The background about and history of high school and college debate is interesting and I gather he saw it all. I struggled, though, with the self-revealing details of his high school and college romances and the debauchery of late high school and college. I felt personally offended when he wrote critically about some of the rival schools and their debate coaches, all independent high school teachers (those are my people). I also cringed when he wrote so honestly about friends and debate teammates (most names were not changed in this memoir). Overall, though, his story and the sense he made of his experiences kept me reading. I imagine this book would be even more appealing to someone who actually participated in high school or college debate. Oppenheimer's writing, though, was engaging enough for me to add another of his books to my "to read" list (Thirteen and a Day: The Bar and Bat Mitzvah Across America).

Sabine says

Mark Oppenheimer is human. He is not some glorified billionaire, or a war hero. He isn't a genius, or an artistic savant. His only talent lies in speech. Nonfiction is fairly new concept to me, so this was only the second biography I have ever picked up in my life. Yet I never felt like this was not a biography, rather a book filled with dabbles on debate and Mr. Oppenheimer's life. The book describes his journey through the world of debate, one known to produce articulate politicians and lawyers, however it also depicts Mark's life and what his love for debate has done for it. The story follows Mark as a kid who was too smart for his own good, to becoming a champion debater in high school and losing his passion for it in college. It has a unique topic; words have been devalued over time, though Mr. Oppenheimer's delivery is faulty. His remarks sometimes come off as offensive though his intentions are never sadistic. He is a true debater, a master of words, a skill that got him into trouble many times over. I have avoided biographies because I felt judging the book, or disliking it, would directly insult the subjects' life. Yet Mr. Oppenheimer has had an interesting life, as do all people. It is not how many mountains a person has climbed that make their biography interesting; it is the way they take you through their life, their experience. Mr. Oppenheimer lacked this skill, as even though some parts of his biography were well written and filled with thoughtful contemplation others contained details and stories that were just not relevant. His description of debate is fresh and exciting; he takes the reader in and allows them to participate with him in his debate conditions. However the story lacks spark towards the end, when his passion for debate eventually decreases so does the readers enthusiasm for the story. In conclusion, this is a nice book for those interested in debate and words but contains several unnecessary details thus making it a less pleasurable read. But I still recommend it as it is a topic that I do not hear much of.

Nikki says

The chapters that covered Mark's childhood were well written and informative. I was motivated to read this

as my son is one of those hyper-verbal kids that hasn't stop talking since he started, although I think he is of an entirely different temperament to the author.

As he covered his final high school years and university years, the author's tone changed to one of an adolescent trying to impress other adolescents . By impress, I mean competing for most immature, vulgar and crude anecdotes he could dredge up. They were completely irrelevant to the narrative and the sudden bombardment of these comments came as if he expected the 'polite company' to have given up on the book long before, or that the grown ups had left the room. It became a book more about the hedonistic character of university life than the life journey of a person with a unique skill set.

While I felt this book added to my understanding of what motivates the verbally gifted child I just couldn't recommend this book to anyone on the basis of its crudity.

Michelle says

Oppenheimer was a verbally precocious child who had a a serious mean streak (in fact he went so far as to cause a friend's father to be investigated by police after a false accusation)and few friends as a result of that combo. In junior high he found the debate club to be his saving grace in allowing an outlet for his argumentative ways and an opportunity to make friends. Through high school and college being on a debate team was a major part of his life. Oppenheimer obviously has a great facility with words but for a fellow so willing to let us know about his prowess as a debater he never persuaded me to care very much about his story or demonstrate that beyond the debating arena he ever learned to apply the lessons his mentors sought to impart. He just comes across as a privileged brat who can't get his head out of his own ass. A solid "Meh."

Amanda says

I liked this book at first. A million years ago, I was also a champion debater (though in policy debate and in a public school, so according to Mr. Oppenheimer that's two strikes against me), and like Oppenheimer, my facility with words got me in a lot of trouble as a kid. So the first couple of chapters resonated with me - I, too, got picked on by my peers, had teachers who hated me, corrected the grammar and spelling of my elders. And the writing is pretty funny - he really is good with words.

The problem is that Mark Oppenheimer, by all appearances, is a tremendous jerk. This is not unusual among male debaters. Many of them have spent years being rejected by women, and as a result have serious issues with the ladies. I always enjoyed annihilating those teams that, upon seeing two women walk into the room, exchanged high fives and stared at our chests. However, Oppenheimer's years of crap luck with women don't excuse the undercurrent of misogyny that, for me, overwhelmed whatever might have been worthwhile about this memoir.

A significant portion of the text is taken up by his catty comments about people he hasn't seen in decades. Whatever. More annoying: he'll often list every debater from a given team or tournament. The male debaters are described as "great debaters," "brilliant but intense," "clean-cut." The girls, however, are described as "big-breasted," "a sex kitten," "prissy," "pixieish" and "pouty-lipped." Sometimes they're only described as having dated (or been lusted after by) someone Oppenheimer knew. One of his high school teammates, though apparently a good debater, only got a few sentences devoted to her. What are they about? Why, her sex life. Of course. What else could be interesting about a woman?

He also describes a number of debate rounds - one on prostitution, another on feminism - in which I suspect most women in the audience would have been very seriously uncomfortable, if not offended. Oppenheimer

perceives this discomfort as the kind of shy, nervous titillation you might expect from a spinster librarian watching a porno. According to Oppenheimer, these girls were shocked by what the (male) debaters were saying, not because they were horrified, but because they were just a little turned on.

He doesn't seem to view all women as sex toys. He writes with genuine affection about a high school girlfriend, though other than the fact that they don't fight, her appeal is never made entirely clear. Still, she's the only woman in this book (other than Oppenheimer's mother) who doesn't have to play either saint or slut in Oppenheimer's anecdotes.

Aside from his issues with women, he also pulls a few stunts that are just really, really cruel, regardless of the bullying that (in some cases) preceded them. It's hard to imagine how his parents were so indulgent with a kid who messed up so very badly so very often. Even in this memoir, as Oppenheimer describes these "pranks" and lies, he doesn't quite sound repentant. He acknowledges that he ought to be repentant, but he still can't help taking pride in the cleverness of his tricks. After all, he always won in the end.

Finally, Oppenheimer makes some comment about how the privileged make the most noise about not having privilege. Funny thing. He talks, early on, about not being part of the same social class as his high school classmates. Heads up: if your parents can afford to pay \$10,000 a year in tuition (this is in the '80s and '90s, mind you), you're from that class - even if your parents are intellectual-socialist elite, rather than investment-banker elite. He goes on to Yale, and then to become a professor at Yale. Welcome to the elite. It may remind you of the milieu in which you've spent your entire life.

(And don't miss his description of being eliminated from a tournament as being "anally raped." Classy.)

So if you'd like to read the memoir of a self-absorbed guy who is mostly interested in praising his friends and railing against people he hated as a younger guy, um...go for it.

Skyqi says

This is a memoir about the coming of age of Mark Oppenheimer who finds an outlet for his love of talking through debate. The book has detailed information about his debates over the years from childhood to his last debates in college.

Unfortunately, it is hard to empathize with him. His anecdotes of events from his early life portray him as sneaky and mean-spirited. He thinks that he didn't have many friends because he was a nerd. However, he used his intelligence to attack people, often on purpose, and felt bad when they retaliated or he faced negative consequences from his actions.

It is admirable for anyone to share their life story with the public in a memoir and I have great respect for that. I would consider this book's strongest aspect the details about debates. The descriptions are very informative and he clearly shows his passion for these competitions.

Meghan says

Wisenheimer is the true story of Mark Oppenheimer, a successful journalist who owes his involvement on the debate team with giving his childhood precociousness and loquaciousness direction and purpose. Oppenheimer was a confident, talkative, and downright argumentative child, never afraid to challenge his

parent's friends or an elementary school teacher. Like many intelligent children, his brilliance makes him an outsider to his peers and even many adults in his life. It becomes easy to justify cruelty or misbehavior because of this isolation. "At first I antagonized her intentionally, but after a certain point, when it was obvious that Lisa would never like me, I decided – though I could not have articulated it at the time – that it was self-esteem suicide to keep trying for her approval."

Throughout his childhood, Oppenheimer uses his verbal acuity to hurt those who slight him, in real or imagined ways. He is honest about some truly terrible behavior as a child, but as he transitions into junior high and high school Oppenheimer skims over much of his experiences outside of debate and, despite getting older and more focused, still remains an outsider because of his intelligence and drive. Oppenheimer posits that debate changed him for the better; there is a lot of telling and not much showing. At certain points, Oppenheimer provides laborious descriptions of his fellow debaters and their coaches. Reading about his incredibly successful high school debate career became a chore. "...Julie Hill, who for a short time was the Exeter coach, was pleasantly plain her first year of coaching and returned the following year with newly frosted hair and a thick layer of makeup." He then goes on to list the remaining female coaches, including critiques of their appearance and diction. Many more coaches and debating peers receive the same treatment, some more scathing than others. If his debating peers found him insufferable, it's not difficult to understand the cause. Oppenheimer, interestingly enough, declares his complete obliviousness to his lack of popularity, and works hard to convince the reader it could only be his intelligence and talent for verbal sparring that keeps him from getting to know his classmates.

Oppenheimer skims through his time at Yale, where he is shocked when he doesn't make the debate team. Again, he is convinced it could not be a testament to his skill as a debater and appeals to the Dean to intercede. His appeal fails, along with his long-distance relationship with his high school girlfriend, and, according to Oppenheimer, he blithely goes on to thoroughly enjoy Yale until he makes the debate team during his sophomore year. Like so many college students, Oppenheimer tries very hard to appear cool and intellectual and, as a result, there are very few anecdotes of interest related to debate. In fact, Yale debate career consisted of the minimum number of debates each year in order to stay on the team. His disinterest is blamed on the "...stupid and corrupt..." debate association.

Wisenheimer was most enjoyable to read when Oppenheimer shares anecdotes of his favorite verbal sparring matches, but his recounting of debates themselves are mind-numbingly boring. In addition, his recollections of awful and cruel things he did as a child and teen are too neatly explained away by his intelligence and love of words, talking, and arguing. Oppenheimer's premise that debate changed him, made him a better person and student, and gave direction to a brilliant yet misunderstood child and teen don't add up in the end, either as a good memoir or an accurate self-examination of his formative years.

Elise says

I took a creative writing class with Mark Oppenheimer about ten years ago, at a summer nerd camp between my freshman and sophomore years of high school. It was in Mark's class that I truly fell in love with spoken and written language, and where decided (four years early) that I would major in English when I got to college. Mark had us memorize a poem each week (the first week, I chose "One Art," by Elizabeth Bishop, and, seven years later, I wrote my senior thesis on Bishop's poetry and correspondence). When I saw "Wisenheimer" on the table of my neighborhood bookstore one rainy day last summer, I picked it up and read the first two chapters while waiting for the rain to pass. I recognized Mark's energy and humor in those first couple of chapters, and was not surprised to learn that the man who had made us recite a poem from memory each week was a former world champion debater, a man obsessed with oratory.

Because I already had too many books piled up on my nightstand, I decided against purchasing "Wisnheimer" that rainy afternoon, but was reminded of Mark yet again this past weekend when a piece of his ran in the New York Times Magazine. That afternoon, I went to the library and checked out "Wisnheimer," and finished it in three days. The earliest chapters are my favorites, where Mark describes his family's eccentric obsession with language, and his precociousness as a child - he found great joy in arguing with adults, and found kids his age too inarticulate and dull. When Mark enters junior and senior high school, he discovers debate, and can finally put his oratorical skills to use. I learned a lot about the systems of high school debate, as well as the ins and outs of the New England prep school world, from these middle chapters. Mark brings the reader back, with much ease and precision, to the awkward teenage years, but because of his great success in debate, he learns to take pride in his nerdiness, and discovers a community of fellow nerds.

Why only three stars? The parts of the book that I found rather slow are when Mark recounts success after success in his many debate tournaments - definitely details that are important to his story, not to mention things to be proud of. Maybe I just found these moments slow because, as somebody who did not debate in school, I could not identify or completely understand what was going on. I would have liked to see Mark break up these sections of the text with snippets about the rest of his life, to contextualize his life as a debater (we barely hear about his family after he enters high school). Overall, though, a recommended read. I'd love to know what former debaters take away from Mark's book.

Aziff says

I have mixed feelings about *Wisnheimer*. I understand that it's a memoir to M. Oppenheimer's debating years. I too, was once a debater and I found the feeling nostalgic for his experiences speak out to plenty of those who have forayed into the debating circle. He begins with his childhood, a smug young boy who's not difficult to hate. Fact is, the first few chapters had me feeling a sense of disdain towards one who was intelligent but used it for the wrong reasons.

I suppose the saving grace was that he grew up and the tone of the book moved along with it - But never really moving himself from a sort of higher ground he always seems to be on throughout the rest of the book. So really, what is *Wisnheimer*? Was it a glimpse into the debating community? Or was it a coming-of-age story? I found the tone and structure of Oppenheimer difficult to follow at times, if not dreary.

He writes with a strong sense of nostalgia. Structure-wise, I found it problematic. He spends plenty of time talking about his golden age, during his high school debating years where he won plenty of tournaments. This is detailed in several long chapters. It is towards the end (his varsity years, where he also spends on debating) is where you feel the rush, the sudden desire to get the story done and over with and it reflects strongly in Oppenheimer's writing. Not a good way to get about it, if you ask me. Especially if it's a memoir.

For casual readers, stay away. Only debaters (or former ones like myself) would find interest in this memoir. Perhaps only for the small debating tips he peppers in the book. Otherwise, the memoir wasn't a memorable one, neither was it engaging.

Caroline says

Eh. Wanted to read it b/c the hubs is a champion debater from high school. Pretty much right on from stories he told me. But who needs to hear another someone yapping about himself.

Jonathan says

Wisenheimer chronicles the life of world champion debater Mark Oppenheimer from childhood through adolescence and into this young adult life at Yale University. I enjoyed the book overall; Oppenheimer presents a unique and interesting perspective on growing up, however, for someone who is so good with words, the book seemed to get a bit bland at times. Also, there are times when he seemed to be going off on tangents unrelated to debate; I wish he had kept it a bit more focused, however overall, I liked it.

Jeff Raymond says

You remember that guy who was always the smartest dude in the room? I'm not talking about the people you know as adults, but the know-it-all kid that's the stereotypical dweeb you knew as a child? Do you want to read about that?

This is a book about two things - it's a great book about someone who spent his high school years on debate team, and it's a terrible memoir of someone growing up thinking he's the kid who's so much better than his peers. So much of the latter feels like the lament of the child who cannot associate with people his own age and knows too much for his own good, as well as the trouble he got himself into as a result. The reader is forced to slog through that in order to get to the meat - life as a debate club member. My high school didn't have a debate team when I went there, but the way it's presented here I would have *loved* it. It makes one of the nerdiest school-sponsored endeavors available seem cool, and that takes something.

I wish this was less memoir and more debate. Unfortunately, it's the other way around, and I'm not at all sure anyone would be picking this book up intending to read someone's high school memoirs. I know I didn't. All I want now is a book about debate club, and perhaps mostly/only about debate team.

Steve says

An autobiography, sometimes critical and reflective, about the author's debating life in college and how it influenced him, how it provided central experiences to his life, and what it was like to debate in the 1990s in the US Parliamentary debate circuit. It's a book that I'm surprised is not being mentioned much these days, since Oppenheimer debating in the same style, same circuit, and same time as U.S. Senator Ted Cruz. This will give you insight into what Cruz's debate experience might have been like, assuming they had similar goals for their debate experiences.

This one is less technical about debating, but does give a lot of interesting personal insight into the world of APDA debating as well as BP debating - types of parliamentary competitive debate that are much more European in style than American. Great book, very touching and compelling, and super interesting for those who want an inside peek into the world of college debate at the IV Leagues.

Storey Clayton says

One strike for his hatred of APDA (that frankly smacks of a lot of sour grapes) and one strike for how he talks about women (like he's a 14-year-old boy). It's a book about debate, but unfortunately, like so many debaters, this guy is kind of a jerk. And was a bigger jerk when he was debating, which is all too common a tale. I like the memoir bits and the emotional resonance of a journey through debating, its discovery, and the shape of a tournament, which just doesn't make it into that many books. But I'm still left feeling a bit cold, both by his unceremonious drifting off from debate in college and his overall attitude. Put it this way: debate deserves a better spokesmemoir.

Robin says

Thank goodness this is a good read! How awkward it would have been to be someone who loves words & then writes a bad book. I'm impressed with how candidly he discusses his very bad behavior without glorifying it at all. (Note: Now that I've finished the book, I know he loves TALKING, not WORDS.)

Every kid needs something that will save him or her from the misdirected self.

Well, it started out well. But there's a richness missing. Oppenheimer still seems like his childhood self: almost mean, a bit of a braggart, and not an engrossing storyteller. He went to Yale! Where's the appreciation for being in a place of fabulous higher learning, full of smart and wonderfully wordy people he could learn from and with?

A little crass, a little too focused on the typical trials of every late adolescence. It would have been nice if there had been more really interesting *words*.
