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Oppenheimer In Book and Video

The new film entitled “Oppenheimer” premiered on July 11 of this year at Le Grand Rex in Paris. With the strong PR push accompanying its public arrival everywhere, its story is suddenly “in,” with producer ambitions to make the film a long-running tour de force on the public stage of entertainment.

Let me start by saying that I am always skeptical of the popular film genre relative to the deeply researched and well referenced non-fiction resource book. Unadorned adherence to fact is often the distinguishing issue for the book. I do not know whether my skepticism is deserved in this case, but I want to tell you about two outstanding and important books on the subject, and a 56-minute-long documentary video from 1995 done by Arthur McCaig.

The eponymous Robert Oppenheimer led the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos, New Mexico, during World War II, a town of little account before the coming of the Manhattan Project. I have actually been there. His charge was to lead a large team of distinguished physicists, some immigrants from Nazi Germany, to develop the atomic bomb. The Manhattan Project involved many thousands of people over about five years officially. It led to the construction of three atomic bombs, all of which worked as planned. There were only three. They all functioned just as intended, but only three.

“Oppenheimer,” the film, is based on Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin’s “American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer” (2005). It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for biography.

Prometheus was the Greek God of Fire. For giving fire to mankind, he suffered a yearslong punishment meted out by Zeus - nailed to Mt. Caucasus, his liver attacked by an eagle every day. J. Robert Oppenheimer, though not alone of course, gave the nuclear “fire” to mankind, and so he afterward reflected deeply and publicly, understandably, and suffered Promethean pain in the spotlight of scrutiny.

The second book is Richard Rhodes, “The Making of the Atomic Bomb” (1986). It won the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, as well as the National Book Critics Circle Award. It is already a tour de force and a great read. From the symbolic introduction of emigrating Leo Szilard, Hungarian theoretical physicist, in Chapter I to the actual first test of a real atomic bomb, wryly coded “Fat Man,” at the Trinity test site in New Mexico on July 16, 1945, and then the drop of “Little Boy” from pilot Paul Tibbets’ Enola Gay on Hiroshima on August 6, this is a story for the ages.

The McCaig documentary video that I mentioned above is a NSF product entitled “I Am Become Death: They Made the Bomb.” The original scientists, long gone now, including Oppenheimer, speak from an eerie past for themselves. The story of the documentary’s limited distribution is for another time, but you can ask about access to it at your public Library.

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See the “Oppenheimer” film of course, but I encourage that you ask, too, for this documentary and read these two important books as well. And finally, let me say this: Know that there is no single Prometheus after all. What happened, and is so well recounted for the historical record, belongs to all of mankind, not just Robert Oppenheimer.

Charles B. Greenberg,
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation