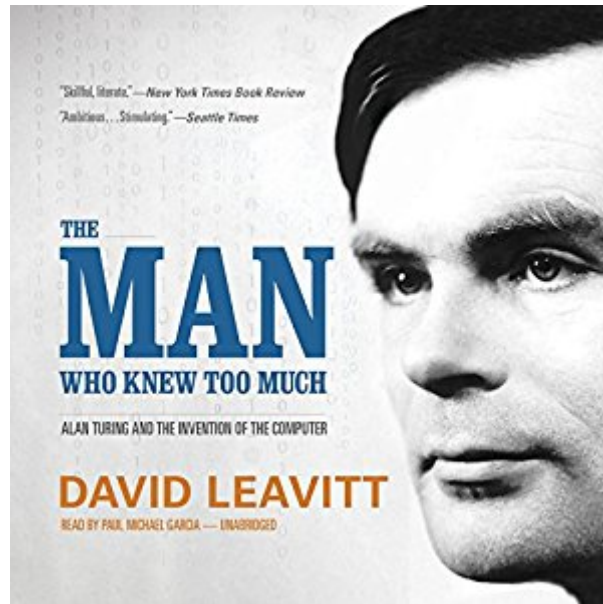# The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing And The Invention Of The Computer

Synopsis

A '"skillful, literate'" (New York Times Book Review) biography of the persecuted genius who helped create the modern computer. 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To describe someone as "ahead of his time" is an over-used clichÃ©. However, in Turing's case, it is appropriate in two ways. Firstly, his ideas took years to work out, and his contemporise did not realise the significance of his research. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, if he had lived in a later era, his complicated personal life would not have attracted the attention of the police, and brought about the early curtailing of the dream.David Leavitt has written an overdue appraisal of Turing that gives him credit for his successes, rather than ascribe the kudos to others because it was safer to do so. This continues the re-acclimatisation of this pioneer into a place of prominence in two fields - the research background surrounding origins of computing, and the code breaking activities that took place in Bletchley Park during World War II.It would be untrue to intimate that

Turing and his colleagues at Bletchley Park "won the war", but their efforts were nevertheless of huge significance. Leavitt gives a broad overview of the activities, and points the reader to further sources. The account is perhaps romanticised, with the place of pure luck glossed over somewhat, but the scale of the code-breaking operation is realised.The description of the `Turing machine' is well presented, although not for the faint-hearted as it is necessarily very abstract thinking (again, Turing was ahead of his time). Leavitt successfully weaves Turing into a position both as a man ahead of his time, and as a man of his time (influenced by the Hilbert program in mathematics, and Kurt GÃ¶del's revolution in logical consistency or otherwise).

I knew someone who worked in Bletchley Park during World War II, though he steadfastly refused to talk about it. He got a first class degree in mathematics in Cambridge and there was no way that they were going to waste his brain in the forces.There are other accounts of Turing's life, for example the 1983 biography after secret documents were released did they not give him his due. They ignore his sexuality or see it as a tragic blot on his careerTuring was a literalist - what we know label as Aspergers Syndrome. His ID card was left unsigned as he hadn't been told to write on it. He couldn't read between the lines.The world owes much, probably its very survival, to him and to other `mad' men. Godel was convinced that someone was tying to poison him as in Snow White. Blackboard erasing took an extra ten minutes of silence waiting for it `to dry'.Wittgenstein's inspiriting, off-the-cuff lectures demanded a regular attendance commitment and you weren't to treat common sense like an umbrella left outside.Turing was absent-minded, naÃ¯Â ve, oblivious to the forces that threatened him. Was his suicide like Snow White - or an experiment gone wrong? Homosexuality and belief in computer intelligence were both seen as threats to religion. He saw nothing wrong with his homosexuality. He was an outsider so he saw things that others didn't but also missed things e.g. a rival thesis published before his. As a child he invented words e.g. quockling = seagulls fighting over food, greasicle = candle guttering. He knew underlying principles, not just how to do sums. Watching school sport, he was thinking intellectually on the sidelines. His body and brain were like a machine according to a science book. At school, his form master complained about his scruffy work.

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