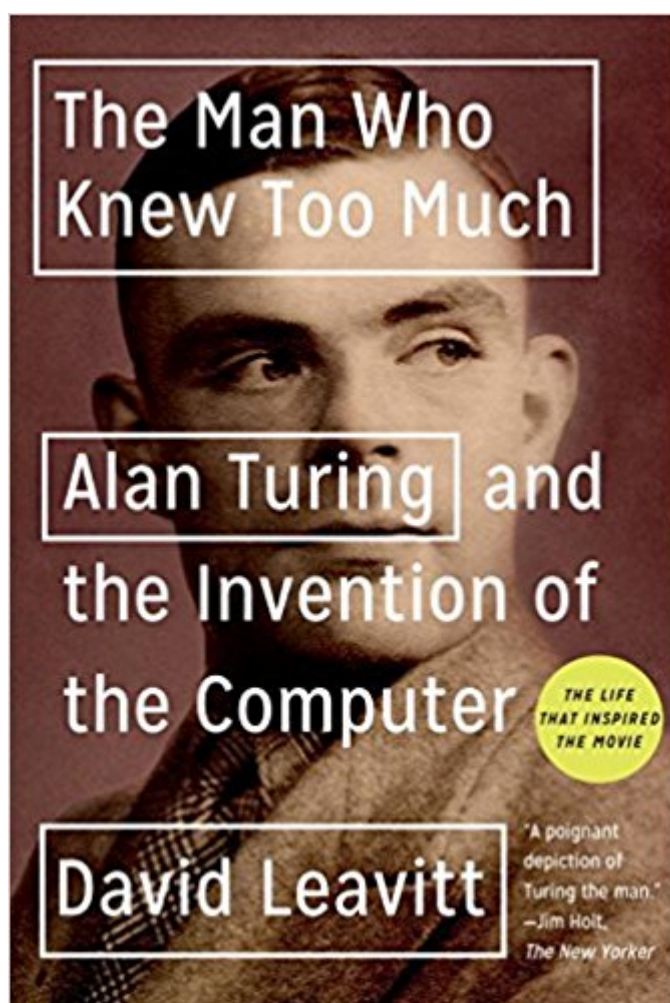


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The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing And The Invention Of The Computer



Synopsis

A "skillful and 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.

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Customer Reviews

Hounded by authorities and peers alike, British mathematician Alan Turing committed suicide in 1954 by biting into a cyanide-laced apple. A groundbreaking thinker in the field of pure math, a man principally responsible for breaking the Enigma code used by the Germans during WWII and the originator of the ideas that led to the invention of the computer, Turing was also an avowed homosexual at a time when such behavior flew in the face of both convention and the law. Leavitt (The Body of Jonah Boyd) writes that the unfailingly logical Turing was so literal minded, he "neither glorified nor anthologized" his homosexuality. Educated at King's College, Cambridge, and

Princeton, Turing produced the landmark paper "On Computable Numbers" in 1937, where he proposed the radical idea that machines would and could "think" for themselves. Despite his Enigma code-breaking prowess during the war, which gave the Allies a crucial advantage, Turing was arrested in 1952 and charged with committing acts of gross indecency with another man. With lyrical prose and great compassion, Leavitt has produced a simple book about a complex man involved in an almost unfathomable task that is accessible to any reader. Illus. (Nov. 28) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Twenty-five years ago the word "Turing" tingled with mystery for the few who knew it. Readers of Douglas Hofstadter learned that Alan Turing belonged with Gödel in exploring minds and logic and knew also of "the Turing test" for artificial intelligence. But others were aware of Turing as a British figure, a Cambridge mathematician, emerging in connection with the huge World War II operation to break the Enigma ciphers. His crucial importance in the battle of the Atlantic was still shrouded by state secrecy. In fact, it was only after this secrecy was lifted that he began to be acknowledged for another great contribution; his role in the origin of the computer. The conspicuously missing feature was the testimony of Alan Turing himself. He had died at age 41 in 1954, apparently killing himself with cyanide; and leaving a jagged hole in history. By 1980 rumor told of the prosecution and punishment that he had undergone as a homosexual in 1952. But even then, such a story could no longer serve as a simple explanation of suicide. Turing's friends had known him as unashamed and contemptuous of convention. A different suspicion struck those who knew the dark side of the 1950s. The victorious Allies must have been appalled by this revelation of the man who knew their secrets: How could Turing's private desires be reconciled with the public demands of state security? But on this question, total silence reigned. Since then, the situation has completely changed. A number of events have made Turing's life better known to the public than that of probably any other mathematician. A notable actor, Derek Jacobi, has played Turing's drama to millions of viewers in Hugh Whitmore's 1986 play *Breaking the Code*. Little is secret from Google, and computer science students may find themselves expected to assess his life and death. Massive U.S. government releases in the 1990s have made World War II code breaking the subject of detailed scholarship, and conferences and books celebrate Turing's continuing influence. Complexity theory and quantum computing build on his analysis of computation, and since the 1980s Roger Penrose has given new life to Turing's deepest questions. Above all, Turing's reputation is now solidly underpinned

by the vindication of his vision. Although John von Neumann led by a few months in creating a computer plan, it was Turing who explained in 1946 how "every known process" could be turned into computer software. Turing had seen this prospect in the simple but revolutionary principle of his Universal Turing Machine, laid out in a paper in 1936, and had thus created an amazing link between the purest mathematics and the most productive industrial applications. But there are always more secrets to unravel and always room for yet another introduction. A series of "great discoveries," such as the current undertaking from W. W. Norton, cannot ignore Turing, and it is interesting to see the story of his contributions attempted by an American novelist, David Leavitt. The story is not simply a question of dates and facts. To use one of Turing's own images, it is like the skin of an onion. It calls for a writer who can unpeel it with care and who is unafraid of tears. Intensely private, yet relishing popular writing and broadcasts, fiercely proud and yet absurdly self-effacing, Turing led a strange life intertwined with characteristically odd British puzzles of class and lifestyle. A central paradox is that he asserted the "heretical theory" that the human mind could be rivaled by a computer, whereas his own personality so little resembled the output of a machine. It was willful, individualistic, unpredictable. His struggle to incorporate initiative and creativity in his artificial-intelligence theory is therefore a personal drama. This is a puzzle that goes to the heart of science and yet is also fine material for a novelist of insight. Leavitt's focus is elsewhere, however. It is on Turing as the gay outsider, driven to his death. No opportunity is lost to highlight this subtext. When Turing quips about the principle of "fair play for machines," Leavitt sees a plea for homosexual equality. It is quite right to convey his profound alienation and to bring out the consistency of his English liberalism. It is valuable to show human diversity lying at the center of scientific inquiry. But Leavitt's laborious decoding understates the constant dialogue between subjective individual vision and the collective work of mathematics and science, with its ideal of objectivity, to which Turing gave his life. Scientific content is not neglected; Leavitt's discussion of Turing's 1936 paper has perhaps excessive technical detail. But the vision is partial: he fails to give any discussion of what Turing's proof implies for the question of artificial intelligence. A general problem is that, being the prisoner of secondary sources, the author finds himself the outsider. He quotes from another writer on statistical methods in 19th-century code breaking but omits the primary fact that Turing's central scientific contribution at Bletchley Park, the British wartime cryptanalytic center, was his statistical theory of weighing evidence. The book's subtitle is "Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer," but on the critical question of Turing's relationship with von Neumann it must rely on quoting Martin Davis's *Engines of Logic*. This is no groundbreaking book, nor does it do much hoeing or weeding. It is a

survey of a field long cultivated by other hands, devoid of new witnesses. The title, also secondhand, suggests new light on his death, but there are no new facts. Leavitt claims a "sad descent into grief and madness" induced by the prosecution; he ignores the heap of manuscripts from Turing's last prolific year of research and misrepresents his renewed interest in physics as ravings. No new revelation about Turing's code breaking is offered. Leavitt describes his visit to Bletchley Park; now a museum; but only as a tourist, to report the embarrassment of a tour guide in describing Turing's fate. In this book, Leavitt offers his own tour. It is one that many will find congenial and that will at least introduce new readers to the still tingling enigma of Alan Turing. Andrew Hodges, a mathematician at the University of Oxford, is author of *Alan Turing: The Enigma* (1983). --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The acceptance of the man Alan Turing , and fully acknowledging his contribution to the world is barely understood as the general knowledge of The value of what he had done is so difficult to grasp. Considering the battles that had hinged upon the intelligence provided by Ultra, an analyst can reasonably conclude that this was the biggest story of the war, Without having won Stalingrad, the landings of Normandy and the battle of the Ardennes, the war could easily have been lost !!! Few persons have accurately been able to convey what it would have been like to have had the Allies lose World War 2 !!! The fact that he was a homosexual , and was so wrongly persecuted should factor into our modern thinking where "Don't ask...don't tell " was the best policy for any and all sexual preferences. Between Alan Turing , breaking the Enigma codes, and Werner Heisenberg , who purposefully sabotaged the German atom bomb effort, they are the two big heroes of the war . The world owes both a tremendous debt of gratitude. It should also be noted that the military edge in the Cold War, was owed more to our grasp of computer technology and coordinated systems that his intelligence and further development of his ideas, had provided the West with, was also a contribution that is underrated. .

I have only finished about half of this book and having read two other books on Turing, can say that this book is the most readable. In many ways it is an interesting book, but also a sad book in recounting the rotten treatment of a genius who contributed so much to the invention of the computer, but also his work on code breaking during WWII. It is a sad ending to anyone's life when it involves suicide. The self-righteous stand of the elected British government is deplorable. I would heartily recommend this book to anyone who has even the slightest interest in the modern world and how it got this way. So much emphasis is given to the rappers and actors that men like Turing

are lost to modern history. Ask anyone of your acquaintance who Turing was and get mostly a blank stare. There are several (well 3 anyway) books on Turing but this is the most readable. Highly recommend.

I found I wanted to learn more about Alan Turing and the work he did to solve the Enigma Code along with his research and work in general after seeing the excellent movie. This book will help fill in and flesh out the man and his work.

If the title "The Man Who Saved England" were to be applied to anyone of the World War II period, Alan Turing and Winston Churchill would be the most likely candidates. But whereas Churchill operated in the public eye and was a bigger than life character, either revered or reviled by the public and his colleagues in government, the very nature of Turing's most important work, arcane, esoteric and shrouded by the Official Secrets Act, plus his low-key personal style, combined to condemn him to virtual anonymity. Turing's best-known accomplishments, his work in code breaking and in developing the computer, were not as dramatically presented in this book as I would have liked. I was hoping for the book to promote Turing; to bring him forward and upward into the limelight. Instead it leads the reader down into the minutiae of Turing's mathematics and his homosexuality. Consequently the co-tragedies of his persecution and suicide, the ultimate irony of a society killing the man who saved it, were not as strongly or as dramatically presented as they might have been. In fairness to the author, Mr. Leavitt probably told Alan Turing's story as Mr. Turing would have told it, himself. Rather than writing the promotional piece for Turing that I expected and wanted, Mr. Leavitt emphasized the mathematical challenges, achievements and social forces that shaped this brilliant man. Someone picking up this book to read about a mathematician and his work should find great interest in the details, the very details that for me were more of a distraction.

The first part of the book is a real mathematic challenge. But gives some insight as to the genius of the man. His society was more interested in protecting their own reputations rather than engaging his mind. At least the Queen has expunged his record and Alan has recouped his historical right. Seems to me that Britain doesn't encourage good minds.

This is a fantastic book about one of the most under-rated geniuses that worked in the field of mathematics, he basically invented the algorithm for computer science. Plus he helped win the war for the Allies.

I've read other books by David Leavitt and enjoyed them. I recently viewed the movie, The Imitation Game, and enjoyed it. So, I went searching for more about Turing. This book is a bait and switch. Leavitt purports to be a literary writer. This book is not a literary work about Turing, it is about Mathematics and Turing's "Machine." Don't waste your money like I did, don't purchase this book!

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