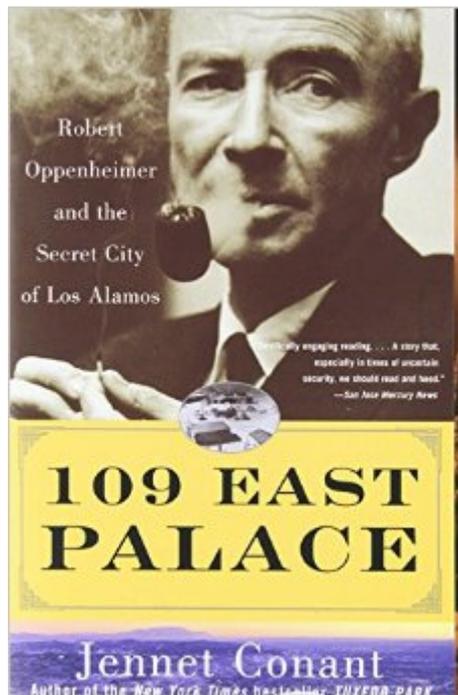


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109 East Palace: Robert Oppenheimer And The Secret City Of Los Alamos



Synopsis

In 1943, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant, charismatic head of the Manhattan Project, recruited scientists to live as virtual prisoners of the US government at Los Alamos, a barren mesa thirty-five miles outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1943, J. Robert Oppenheimer, the brilliant, charismatic head of the Manhattan Project, recruited scientists to live as virtual prisoners of the U.S. government at Los Alamos, a barren mesa thirty-five miles outside Santa Fe, New Mexico. Thousands of men, women, and children spent the war years sequestered in this top-secret military facility. They lied to friends and family about where they were going and what they were doing, and then disappeared into the desert. Through the eyes of a young Santa Fe widow who was one of Oppenheimer's first recruits, we see how, for all his flaws, he developed into an inspiring leader and motivated all those involved in the Los Alamos project to make a supreme effort and achieve the unthinkable.

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Customer Reviews

Everybody knows J. Robert Oppenheimer, Edward Teller and many of the military minds that directed the effort to develop the atomic bomb. Nobody outside of Los Alamos knew Dorothy McKibben. McKibben who ran 109 East Palace was like the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of this war time "Hamlet"-like drama; she viewed the action not from the heart of the research but from the outside at the gateway where she issued security passes, helped new personnel settle in, dealt with complaints about water pressure, food supplies, etc. She knew everything and nothing about the community she helped as she wasn't privy to the secret goal of the Los Alamos community. While author Jennet Conant doesn't ignore the work they were trying to accomplish, she focuses on the

human element that made it possible for the work to occur. Conant provides a detailed and intimate look into the insular community that labored to build the ultimate bomb to finish the "ultimate war". One of the most fascinating sections of the book called "Summer Lightning" deals with Klaus Fuchs who arrived at Los Alamos after doing research for the Manhattan Project on gaseous diffusion. He came to help figure out the implosion problem at the request of Peierls a German physicist working in the US. McKibben never had a suspicion that Fuchs might be betraying the secret work at Los Alamos to the Soviets until it was too late. Conant who it is noted is the granddaughter of James B. Conant (the chief administrator on the Manhattan Project) has a unique insider's perspective. Conant doesn't shy away from the issue about Oppenheimer's loyalty; she reports that Captain Peer de Silva took an immediate dislike to Oppenheimer and believed, based on his file, that Oppenheimer would betray the United States in a hot second.

Ten years ago, I taught part-time at the University of New Mexico's small Los Alamos campus. One day a huge thunderstorm marooned me in the lobby of the building along with a cheerful elderly woman who, I soon learned, had come to Los Alamos as a WAC to work on the Manhattan Project. For the next half-hour, I heard her fascinating stories about the laboratory and the community during the early years. When the rain finally stopped and we parted, I reflected that, although the scientific aspects of the project had been amply documented, there was another human story still waiting to be written. I'm glad that Jennet Conant has written that story. Besides having an "inside track" through her grandfather's involvement in the Manhattan Project, she was able to access Dorothy McKibbin's memoirs, and she also makes good use of other unpublished materials as well as interviewing the people involved. This isn't a scientific account of the project, it's the story of the people behind it: from the unlikely team of Oppenheimer and Gen. Groves, to the locals who worked as maids and construction workers in the secret community on the hill -- and Dorothy, who held it all together, and whose story is used to structure the book. Bringing together a motley collection of physicists, engineers, and military experts to construct "the Gadget" was impressive enough -- but the project didn't exist in a vacuum. The technical staff were people who had to be housed, fed, and clothed, and many of them brought families and children whose needs had to be accommodated too. As director, Oppenheimer had to deal with both the scientific and the personal aspects of the project, and this book well describes the human dynamics that he contended with on both fronts.

109 East Palace presents a surprisingly engaging story about the members of the atomic bomb project in Los Alamos. The author, Jennet Conant, states early on that she is focusing on the

human side of project's history: the technical aspects have been well covered elsewhere. The brilliant and colorful denizens of Los Alamos threw wild parties, worked long hours, and chafed under mandates of government secrecy. In the midst of World War II, an undertaking this monumental had to remain strictly secret. The community was built atop a small school in the middle of the desert. The only link to civilization was across a long, unreliable road and an inadequate bridge. Naturally, logistics were strained. An entire town was built from scratch, and it was in constant construction for years. Scientists, engineers, their families, and soldiers streamed into Los Alamos. They crammed into small apartments with thin walls, and all housing for miles around was filled. Electricity was usually unavailable, and cooking took hours using ancient stoves. Rules limited their ability to leave town or communicate with the outside world. Although these conditions caused some conflict, the citizens responded amazingly well. The insular community became very intimate. They worked at an exhausting pace, anxious to develop the bomb that could end the war and save American lives, and then released their tension by engaging in wild parties. Entranced with their beautiful environment, they went on long hikes and skied in the winter. Los Alamos became a wonderful and sociable place to live. Although Conant describes many people, she focuses mainly on Robert Oppenheimer and Dorothy McKibbin. Oppenheimer was the intensely charismatic director of Los Alamos.

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