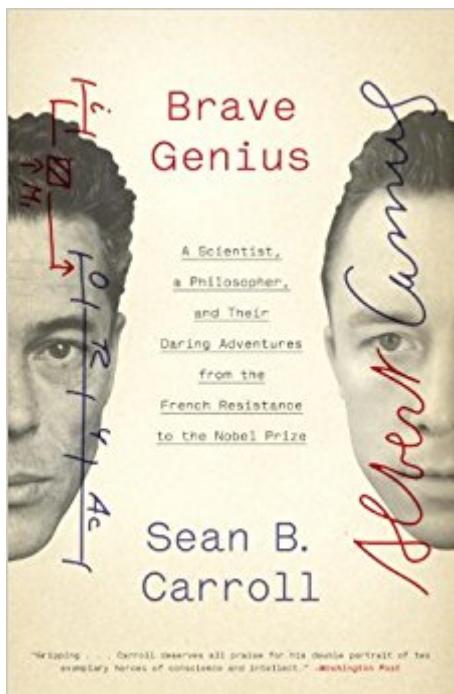


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Brave Genius: A Scientist, A Philosopher, And Their Daring Adventures From The French Resistance To The Nobel Prize



Synopsis

The never-before-told account of the intersection of some of the most insightful minds of the 20th century, and a fascinating look at how war, resistance, and friendship can catalyze genius. In the spring of 1940, the aspiring but unknown writer Albert Camus and budding scientist Jacques Monod were quietly pursuing ordinary, separate lives in Paris. After the German invasion and occupation of France, both men joined the Resistance to help liberate the country from the Nazis, ascended to prominent, dangerous roles, and were very lucky to survive. After the war and through twists of circumstance, they became friends, and through their passionate determination and rare talent they emerged as leading voices of modern literature and biology, each receiving the Nobel Prize in his respective field. Drawing upon a wealth of previously unpublished and unknown material gathered over several years of research, *Brave Genius* tells the story of how Camus and Monod endured the most terrible episode of the twentieth century and then blossomed into remarkably creative and engaged individuals. It is a story of the transformation of ordinary lives into exceptional lives by extraordinary events—“of courage in the face of overwhelming adversity, the flowering of creative genius, deep friendship, and profound concern for and insight into the human condition.

Book Information

Paperback: 592 pages

Publisher: Broadway Books; 1 edition (September 23, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307952347

ISBN-13: 978-0307952349

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 1.2 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 stars (See all reviews) (102 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #333,895 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #55 in Books > History > Military > Weapons & Warfare > Biological & Chemical #199 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Europe > France #440 in Books > Medical Books > History

Customer Reviews

I know Sean B Carroll's work as a molecular biologist and writer on evolution, so I picked up this book due to an interest in Monod and the untold story of his involvement in the French resistance. I was familiar with Camus from reading *Les Justes* in high school French class. Honestly, I wasn't sure where Carroll would take the story, but I was eager to find out. In short, this book was a

fascinating and enjoyable read but not a tightly written book. It was really quite a few stories put into one, including a full history of World War II as written from the French perspective. To be honest, I thought at first it was excessive as I know quite a bit about WWII, but as I read further, I realized I had never quite looked at it the way Carroll presents it. Why were the French defeated so quickly? How did ordinary Frenchmen view the collapse of their government, Vichy France, De Gaulle, etc? I was engrossed in the telling of the war and the confusion and mayhem that commenced as the Germans took Paris. Truly an amazing feat, especially for a writer versed in molecular biology. Of course, the story as told on the cover is about Camus and Monod, and their stories are interspersed with the story of the invasion of France. The author presents a historical arc from the founding of the Pasteur Institute to the work done by Monod. Nothing happens in isolation, and I love how he weaves the history, science, and personalities so seamlessly. As I read this book, I was astounded by how quickly I was turning the pages to find out more, and despite the length, I enjoyed the journey greatly. In a few spots I had to flip back and remember some details.

This is a very ambitious book that attempted to take on multiple major subjects, some more successfully than others. There are at least four separate histories recounted here, any of which could be an entire book in and of itself. First, there is the well-researched and well-written history of the French occupation by the Nazis and the role played by the French resistance movement. This is easily the best part of the book, both in terms of its organization and the ease of reading it. The level of detail was just right. Second, there is the biography of Jacques Monod, the Nobel prize-winning molecular biologist, and his work. This story line is choppy, divided up in various places, and not as easy to follow, although the author does a good job of conveying the excitement of discovery going on at the Pasteur Institute in those days. Third, there is the biography of Albert Camus, the Nobel prize-winning existentialist philosopher and author. As with Monod, this story line is choppy and divided up, making it harder to follow. However, the author does a good job of introducing Camus's major works and the basic ideas of his philosophy. Fourth, there are the stories of the post-World War II revolutions taking place in Hungary, France, and Algeria. These histories are all relatively cursory, with the Hungarian revolution being the best developed among them and the Algerian revolution being almost entirely glossed over. In spite of these shortcomings, I enjoyed the book overall, although I agree with prior reviewers that improving the organization would make it much stronger.

Sean Carroll creates a pastiche of events, science and philosophy that transcends its parts. Just

read, comprehend and let it wash over you. I was thrilled the whole way along by Carroll's writing that is both clear and creative, that lucidly explains the philosophy and science involved and even considerably includes translations the reader might need. I was even more thrilled when I got to the end and felt I had enjoyed a quietly brilliant verbal tapestry, had been led not just to understand an era but also had read a creative masterpiece. It helps, I think, to have a deep interest in biology, especially genetics, and even more specifically, in the mechanism by which viruses take over bacteria. It likewise helps to have interest in the history of our 20th century; to be terminally curious about and open to learning more about what happened under the various totalitarian scourges. But neither intense interest would seem necessary to the understanding of this work, mainly because careful reading of the text provides the tutelage. Carroll's way of writing is both detached reporting of carefully gleaned facts and artistic working of weft into warp. He neither belabors cruel details nor ducks them. We find ourselves with new awareness of Nazi treachery, the French Resistance to it, the Vichy "government", Allied victory, the rise of Stalin upon Hitler's disappearance (a modelling?), and then the horror in Hungary. All this took place within my own lifetime, and as much as I've experienced and read, I absorbed more. Throughout - and largely chronologically - we learn of the work of Albert Camus and Jacques Monod, work that takes both men to Stockholm as Nobel Laureates. We learn of their compatibility, their magnetic friendship.

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