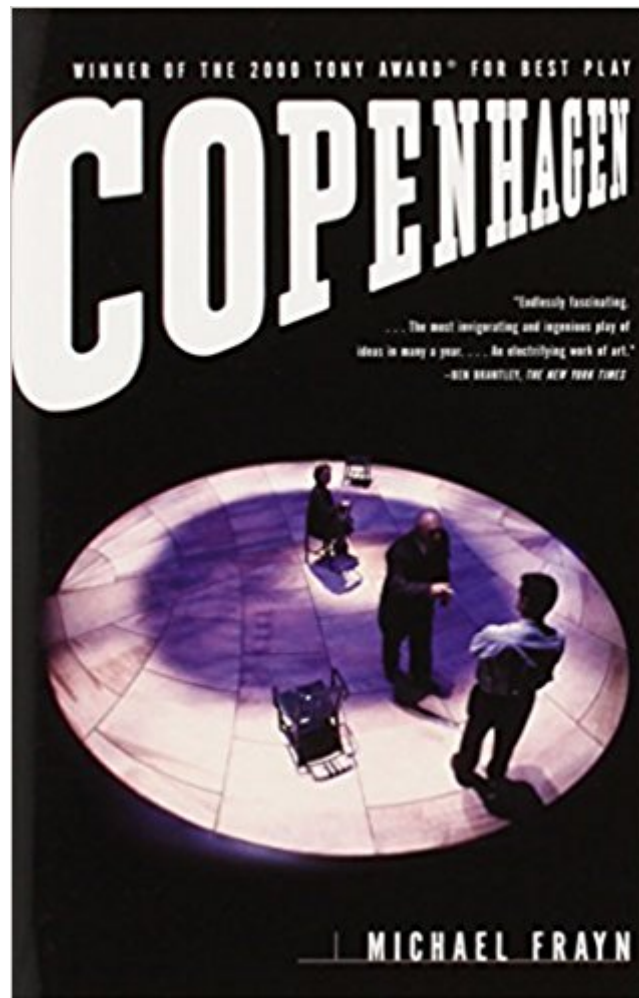


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Copenhagen



Synopsis

The Tony Award-winning play that soars at the intersection of science and art, *Copenhagen* is an explosive re-imagining of the mysterious wartime meeting between two Nobel laureates to discuss the atomic bomb. In 1941 the German physicist Werner Heisenberg made a clandestine trip to Copenhagen to see his Danish counterpart and friend Niels Bohr. Their work together on quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle had revolutionized atomic physics. But now the world had changed and the two men were on opposite sides in a world war. Why Heisenberg went to Copenhagen and what he wanted to say to Bohr are questions that have vexed historians ever since. In Michael Frayn's ambitious, fiercely intelligent, and daring new play Heisenberg and Bohr meet once again to discuss the intricacies of physics and to ponder the metaphysical—the very essence of human motivation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Who would think that a play about two theoretical physicists, Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr would pack such dramatic interest for people with little background in nuclear physics? Yet Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* provides both the human drama of the scientists involved in the nuclear weapons race between Nazi Germany and the Allied Forces, and the ironic parallels between the Principle of Uncertainty in physics developed by these scientists and the unpredictability of outcomes involving human variables in their own lives. My rather "dry" summary of the content of this play, however, does not begin to convey the drama, irony and humour in the play. Three characters, Heisenberg, Bohr and his wife Margrethe met once again after their death to try to

understand Heisenberg's "real " reason for his strange visit to Bohr in 1941 in occupied Copenhagen while Heisenberg was heading the German nuclear reactor program. Through the recollection of each from their points of view about the events of the past, the play reveals the personal and professional relationship between the two scientists and others in the elite scientific community. The dialog is fast moving, sparkles with humor and dazzling description of the mind games of the brilliant and ideosyncratic group of scientists. But in these exchanges between the characters, one understands how important and potentially deadly these "games" and the players can be for humanity. With the three perspectives of the same events provided by the three characters, the play reveals multiple motives and meanings that conclude in the abrupt termination of the meeting between Heisenberg and Bohr in 1941 that might have been the reason that the Nazis failed to develop an atom bomb before the Allied Forces!

The basic story of Copenhagen--and the playwright's leap of imagination to create the conversation of the 3 principles--deserves any accolades that can be awarded: what if, within one fateful day, the leading scientist for the German nuclear development team had received the insight he needed to arm the Nazis? The ramifications are so huge, so mind-boggling, that it's all the more important that Frayn chose to shrink the scale of his dialogue, and make this play as much about the dynamics of how humans understand each other as how we, as a race, could possibly comprehend the worldwide impact of nuclear arms. This is play about the moral ramifications of decisions made within the supposedly "ethical no-man's-land" of scientific discovery. Other reviewers have talked about the life history of the scientists, so I'll just sketch out more details about the piece itself. First of all, what an important and revelatory decision Frayn made in including the character of Margrethe, Bohr's wife. In his play, she is the intellectual equal of the physicists, wryly commenting about how many versions of each position paper she spent time typing. Her character makes this play unlike so many science-based dramas before it, because she is a woman and an outsider. Her humor, her humanity and her anger towards Heisenberg's for his involvement with the Nazis...all these issues keep the play grounded in real life, make it palpable to modern audiences not necessarily schooled in the fundamentals of atomic theory. It also insures that the play isn't just the typical strutting, cocksure junk that movies like "Dr Strangelove" aptly mock.

This book contains the text of Michael Frayn's Tony Award-winning play (94 pages), a fascinating 38-page Postscript, and a two-page word sketch of the scientific and historical background to the play. The play itself is brilliant (see my review of the PBS production directed by Howard Davies,

starring Stephen Rea, Daniel Craig, and Francesca Annis available on DVD) and is the kind of play that can be fully appreciated simply by reading it. There are no stage directions, no mention of props or stage business. There is simply Frayn's extraordinary dialogue. A photo from the cover suggests how the play might be staged on a round table with the three characters, Danish physicist Niels Bohr, his wife Margrethe, and German physicist Werner Heisenberg, going slowly round and round as in an atom. This symbolism is intrinsic to the ideas of the play with Bohr seen as the stolid proton at the center and the younger Heisenberg the flighty electron that "circles." Margrethe who brings both common sense and objectivity to the interactions between the ever circling physicists, might be thought of as a neutron, or perhaps she is the photon that illuminates (and deflects ever so slightly) what it touches. At the center of the play (and at the center of our understanding of the world through quantum mechanics) is a fundamental uncertainty. While Heisenberg and Bohr demonstrated to the world through the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics that there will always be something we cannot in principle know regardless of how fine our measurements, Frayn's play suggests that there will always be some uncertainty about what went on between the two great architects of QM during Heisenberg's celebrated and fateful visit to the Bohr household in occupied Denmark in 1941.

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