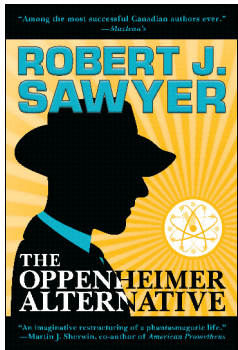


THE OPPENHEIMER ALTERNATIVE

ROBERT J. SAWYER



J. Robert Oppenheimer and his Manhattan Project team stay together after the end of World War II in hopes of saving the world ... and maybe their souls, too. If they succeed they'll be able to flip Oppie's famous remark "Now I am become Death, Destroyer of worlds" to "Now we are become Life, the saviors of our world."

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The following questions should stimulate an interesting group discussion. Please note that they reveal much of the novel's plot; to preserve your reading pleasure, please don't look at these

1. How familiar were you with the historical figures Sawyer portrays before reading *The Oppenheimer Alternative*? Did Sawyer's portrayals ring true?
2. Besides Oppenheimer, who was your favorite character? Jean Tatlock? Kitty Oppenheimer? Leo Szilard? Richard Feynman? I.I. Rabi? Albert Einstein? General Groves? Haakon Chevalier? Someone else?
3. The novel doesn't clearly indicate which events really happened and which ones Sawyer made up. Did that bother you? The book has been described as both an "alternate history" and a "secret history." What do you think the difference between the two is — and which term best describes *The Oppenheimer Alternative*?

4. Sawyer has said the hardest part of writing the book was finding a way to do justice to the women, given that reality had denied them significant roles in the Manhattan Project. Did it bother you that this was such a male-dominated book?

5. On a related note, what did you think of Oppenheimer's treatment of Kitty and Jean Tatlock? Despite knowing that "the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world," Oppie violated security and went to see Jean Tatlock when she was in distress. Should he have done that?

6. Oppie really did offer up his own daughter, Tyke, for adoption. How did this make you feel?

7. Most of the figures in the novel wrote autobiographies — but not Oppie. What did you think of Sawyer's portrayal of him? Assuming it's accurate, was Oppie a good man or a bad one? A likable person or an unlikable one?

8. General Leslie R. Groves makes the case that an impending world-threatening disaster must be kept secret from the public, lest mass panic ensue. Do you agree with him?

9. What did you think of the way Oppie treated Haakon Chevalier? Did Chevalier bring his own misfortune on himself by broaching the idea of sharing secret information with the Russians in the first place? Or was he horribly betrayed by Oppie?

10. Historians have not been kind to Edward Teller, who is often cited as the chief inspiration for the title character in the movie *Dr. Strangelove*. Did you feel any sympathy for him?

11. The United States really did ignore the Nazi pasts of Wernher von Braun and many others they considered useful. Without von Braun at NASA, the Soviets would have won the race to the moon. Was

the real-life "Operation Paperclip" a good thing or was it an amoral act of opportunism?

12. Had you been aware that Japan had been making back-channel overtures to surrender for over a year prior to the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Given what we know now, should the bomb have been used on civilian targets? Was Leo Szilard right that a demonstration of the bomb in a remote location would have sufficed?

13. The Institute for Advanced Study still exists. Does an intellectual refuge like that appeal to you?

14. Leo Szilard and others fought hard for a world government, feeling it was the only viable option in the nuclear age. Do you think we'll ever have a united planet? Will we ever put the fear of nuclear war behind us? Should we abolish nuclear weapons worldwide?

15. The novel is in part about a quest for redemption. Did Oppie achieve that for himself in the end? Or was Edward Teller right when he said, "The things we are working on are so terrible that no amount of protesting or fiddling with politics will save our souls"?

16. Although it's his 24th novel, this is Sawyer's first book set in the historical past. Did you spot any anachronisms? If you've read other works by this author, how do you feel this one fits in with them? Is it typical Sawyer — or something uniquely different? What makes "a Sawyer book"?

*Robert J. Sawyer is one of eight people ever (and the only Canadian) to win all three of the science-fiction field's top awards for Best Novel of the Year: the Hugo, the Nebula, and the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. The ABC television series **Flashforward** was based on his novel of the same name.*



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