



## Physicists

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, James Kirkup (Translation)

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The Physicists is a provocative and darkly comic satire about life in modern times, by one of Europe's foremost dramatists and author of the internationally celebrated *The Visit*.

The world's greatest physicist, Johann Wilhelm Möbius, is in a madhouse, haunted by recurring visions of King Solomon. He is kept company by two other equally deluded scientists: one who thinks he is Einstein, another who believes he is Newton. It soon becomes evident, however, that these three are not as harmlessly lunatic as they appear. Are they, in fact, really mad? Or are they playing some murderous game, with the world as the stake? For Möbius has uncovered the mystery of the universe—and therefore the key to its destruction—and Einstein and Newton are vying for this secret that would enable them to rule the earth.

Added to this treacherous combination is the world-renowned psychiatrist in charge, the hunchbacked Mathilde von Zahnd, who has some diabolical plans on her own. . . . With wry, penetrating humor, *The Physicists* probes beneath the surface of modern existence and, like Marat/Sade, questions whether it is the mad who are the truly insane.

## Physicists Details

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Author : Friedrich Dürrenmatt , James Kirkup (Translation)

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## From Reader Review Physicists for online ebook

### Greg Brozeit says

I consider *The Physicists*, together with *The Visit*, to be one of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's undisputed masterpieces. A police inspector investigates the murder of a nurse who has been found strangled at a sanatorium. The murderer is known, he is one of three patients at the institution who all believe themselves to be great physicists. In his case, he thinks he is Einstein. It is the second murder of a nurse in three months, the first having been committed by the patient who thinks himself to be Newton. The third of the group, Möbius, soon after is visited by his ex-wife and their three sons—none of whom he has met before—as he is informed she has remarried a pastor and they will soon leave to do missionary work in the Marianas Islands. His visions of King Solomon will lead him toward committing a similar act as his “colleagues.”

A further exposition of the plot would consist of one spoiler alert after the other. But for those familiar with Dürrenmatt, he revisits many of his eternal themes using the framework of his plot to expose them in thoroughly unexpected ways. He intertwines his life-long contemplation of justice, his fascination with science, and his fears and concerns about Cold War macro politics to create a small universe to amplify the social and logical inconsistencies of the real world. The questions he poses lead both to a resolution of the plot and to lingering impressions for the reader. What is insanity? Can it be sane? What is justice? Can it be self-imposed? Are the risks we take worth the ultimate prices we have to pay? Can those who shape or are responsible to uphold societal norms violate them with impunity? Who holds them accountable? What happens when those we consider insane are actually the most sane and vice versa?

If those questions intrigue you, then so will *The Physicists*.

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### bookishfirefly says

Reread in April 2017

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### Siti says

Nel salotto di una villa che ospita un sanatorio privato per malati mentali, in un luogo ameno a riflettere l'agiatezza economica e della proprietaria, unica erede di un'immensa fortuna, e dei suoi illustri ospiti, c'è la polizia. A distanza di tre mesi è stato compiuto l'ennesimo omicidio, ancora una volta vittima è una giovane infermiera e assassino un paziente, uno dei tre che ancora vivono nell'ala vecchia del manicomio, sapientemente fatti convivere per comunanza di professione: sono fisici. Colui che ha appena ammazzato si crede Einstein, lo ha preceduto poco tempo prima chi reputa se stesso Newton e che ora, impunito in virtù della sua pazzia, è in scena col commissario; lo intrattiene argomentando sulla sua sanità mentale e asserendo di essere in realtà lui il vero Einstein e di fingersi Newton per non recare dispiacere al compagno.

Infine appare Möbius, entra in scena per ricevere la visita dell'ex moglie che con i suoi tre figli, ormai adolescenti, essendosi risposata con un missionario e volendo seguirlo in missione, è lì per far conoscere il padre ai figli. Ciò è pretesto per svelare anche la storia di questo giovane fisico che era ritenuto geniale e molto promettente nel suo campo fino a quando non iniziò a riferire di essere in contatto col re Salomone, di parlarci e di seguire i suoi consigli. Inizialmente appare come molto assennato e capace di comprendere le

intenzioni della ex moglie ma al momento del congedo usa le sue eccezionali doti di fingersi pazzo- quelle che gli hanno permesso sì lunga dimora in manicomio- e ritorna nelle sue vesti permettendo con lo strappo generato dal comportamento pazzoide, un congedo più facile ai suoi. A questo punto tutto si fa molto interessante: realtà e finzione, pazzia e sanità mentale, scienza e coscienza e un terzo omicidio.

Dürrenmatt gestisce così le tematiche a lui più care: l'impossibilità della giustizia di essere funzionale a se stessa, riflettendo il caos insito nella Natura, l'ordine sovertito -qui ben rappresentato dal sottile confine tra pazzia e "normalità- per volontà di un potere che ambisce al potere, in stretta contrapposizione al necessario rigore logico della fisica, infine il dissidio dell'uomo contro le sovrastrutture che lo inquadrono, lo inglobano e lo sfruttano minando la sua libertà.

Testo godibilissimo di cui non si può svelare di più, attenderai al filone giallo/ poliziesco che gli sta alla base e che vorrei avere la fortuna di vedere rappresentato perché è giocato su una serie di disvelamenti che lo rendono molto dinamico allontanandolo da quell'aura tragica che ne rappresenta invece l'essenza.

Il testo è inoltre supportato da 21 punti su "I fisici" che chiariscono in modo sintetico e brillante i capisaldi di un linguaggio drammaturgico giocato sul grottesco e il paradossale in un sovertimento della realtà, necessario per rivelarla allo spettatore senza perciò obbligarlo ad affrontarla e tanto meno a risolverla.

Pirandelliano, quasi...

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### **Anna says**

?να εκπληκτικ? θεατρικ? για τις ηθικ?ς υποχρε?σεις του επιστ?μονα, τις στ?σεις και τις πρ?ξεις του, και κατ? π?σο το ?ργο του αν?κει τον ?διο ? στην ανθρωπ?τητα, καθ?ς και τι μπορε? να κ?νει για να το προστατε?σει...

Εκπληκτικ? ?κδοση, με εισαγωγ? και επ?μετρο απ? τη Μ?ρθα Κουτσιο?μπα - Παιον?δη που ανεβ?ζει το θεατρικ? ?ργο επ?πεδο με τις παρατηρ?σεις της. Στα συν του βιβλ?ου οι φωτογραφ?ες απ? τη θεατρικ? παρ?σταση του 1962. Μακ?ρι με αφορμ? την ?κδοση αυτ? το θεατρικ? να ξανανεβε? σε κ?ποια θεατρικ? σκην?, καθ?ς ο χαρακτ?ρας του ε?ναι ?κρως διαχρονικ?ς!

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### **Moriartyandherbooks says**

This was extremely clever! The plot twists were awesome, and I was NOT expecting any of them! Good, and crazy, fun!

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### **Lisa says**

Imagine an insane person with an abnormal need to dominate others at any cost. Imagine that person having access to nuclear power.

Imagine the feeble resistance of scientists, thinking that they can escape from true insanity (and responsibility for creating weapons of total destruction) by hiding in an institution for the mentally ill. Imagine the despair when they realise that they are trapped in a system running like a fine-tuned machine to the tune of the Pied Piper, relying on human rats to follow the powerful psychopath and to turn the notions of good and evil, sane and insane, right and wrong, true and false, knowledge and belief into their complete

opposites.

Dürrenmatt wrote an inventive masterpiece of universal impact, signalling to the world that civilisation is but a thin layer of polish, and that the bullying power of ruthless narcissists will almost always be a step ahead of reflective thinking and responsible behaviour. If we needed proof that brutal ego-centrism is more successful than the much-cited values of "common sense" and "solidarity", The Physicists offers it in an uncomfortably accurate drama.

But it also shows us that art and sciences have an ethical core, a message to deliver to those living under the spell of an insanely needy personality. We might not be able to stop those who are violent enough to disregard all of humanity, but as long as art and science exist, we can speak up in the name of reason. Historical mistakes can't be undone, so we have a universal duty to keep thinking creatively to deal with them.

This timeless classic is probably my favourite Dürrenmatt - an absolute must-read!

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### **Lina says**

21 points about Dürrenmatt:

1.

Dürrenmatt was a genius.

2.

Dürrenmatt was absolutely nuts.

3.

This is nuts.

4.

This is genius.

5.

I don't think I'll ever get this.

6.

No one can ever get Dürrenmatt.

7.

My name is Kepler.

8.

No, wait, I'm Marie Curie.

9.

But I know I am Kepler!

10.

I know even more that I am Marie Curie!

11.

I must be Marie Curie.

12.

Correction: I am James Bond.

13.

Fuck, I'm nuts.

14.

Fuck, this is nuts.

15.

Fuck, I need to read more of Dürrenmatt.

16.

42.

17.

I am still Kepler.

18.

I am also Marie Curie.

19.

I am the Big Sister and I rule the world.

20.

Fuck, I'm so nuts.

21.

We are all nuts.

(No, I don't get my review either.)

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### **Lea (drumsofautumn) says**

I've read this book in school, not expecting much of it - but i was totally surprised.

The story of "Die Physiker" deals with three physicists, who live in a sanatorium for the mentally ill. One of them did a groundbreaking discovery, who could influence the whole world... "Die Physiker" is a play, which teaches us a lesson about the responsibility of science.

I do have to mention that I am really not a fan of reading plays. You read them with such a emotionless

thought, not really thinking about the setting, the look of the characters etc. Of course there is a lot to imagine by yourself then but it's just not really my thing. I like to be lead by the author and I miss this in plays. But this just is my very personal opinion, which shouldn't hold you off from reading the story. Because in spite of that I really liked the book. The story captivated me from the beginning and I think it was very suspenseful. It definitely is confusing.. who is who, who is crazy, who only pretends to be crazy. But it creates a very *funny* atmosphere.

The ending is very surprising, in my opinion, and might be disappointing for some people. But as a whole I think the book was convincing and absolutely enjoyable. I really want to see the play one day.

**Update:** I saw the play in 2014 in Vienna and thought it was a little bit boring. Maybe I was too detached from the story or I just couldn't get into the way this production was done.

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## Semjon says

Drei Physiker in einer Irrenanstalt, offensichtlich schizophren, begehen Morde an ihren Krankenschwestern, und die Polizei lässt sich von der resoluten Anstaltsleiterin einreden, dass die armen Patienten nicht für diese Unglücksfälle verantwortlich gemacht werden können. Dürrenmatt hat sein Stück als Komödie deklariert, aber es will einem nach dem ersten Akt voller Drama gar nicht einleuchten, was daran komödiantisch sein soll. Vielmehr sind die Szenen sehr grotesk, und man begibt sich recht verwirrt in die Pause. Worauf wird es wohl hinauslaufen? Die drei Physiker wirken weltentrückt und verrückt, so dass man sich gar nicht vorstellen mag, wie das absurde Theater endet. Doch der zweite Akt überrascht und letztlich zeigen fast alle wesentlichen Personen ihr wahres Gesicht. Nichts ist so, wie es ursprünglich scheint.

Das Stück entstand im Zeichen des Kalten Kriegs und noch unter dem Eindruck des erstmaligen Einsatz einer Atombombe 16 Jahre zuvor. Welche Rolle hat in diesem Zusammenhang die Wissenschaft? Wie weit darf man denken und forschen? Wie verändert sich die Rolle der Wissenschaft in den letzten 200 Jahren? Das Stück hat nichts an Aktualität verloren und mich sehr begeistert. Parallel zur Lektüre schaute ich mir den Film aus dem Jahr 1964 an mit Therese Giehse als Anstaltsleiterin und anderen namhaften Schauspielern (Kieling, Knuth, Lowitz). Es ist einfach eine Augenweide, wie Schauspieler es schaffen, so ein Stück mit Leben zu füllen. Ich denke, wenn ich das Stück nicht auch noch gesehen hätte, wäre ich vom reinen Lesen nur halb so begeistert gewesen.

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## Warwick says

*The fact is, there's nothing more scandalous than a miracle in the realm of science.*

Three of history's greatest physicists meet in a drawing-room: Newton, Einstein and Möbius. Newton has a bottle of cognac hidden in the fireplace. Einstein has just strangled a woman to death. And Möbius is being visited by the ghost of King Solomon, who is telling him the secrets of a Unified Field Theory.

Except the drawing-room belongs to a Swiss insane asylum, and the three men are patients.

What follows is a playful mash-up of a country-house murder-mystery with a scientific drama-of-ideas. At first the execution reminded me of Tom Stoppard – high praise round my way, because I think Stoppard's one of the greatest writers alive. But while Stoppard's work is always discursive, and never tries to convince you of a particular position, Dürrenmatt takes a more polemic approach here – especially in the second act, where the characters are increasingly fixated on the dangers of scientific discoveries falling into the wrong hands.

She considered me an unrecognized genius. She didn't realize that today it is the duty of a genius to remain unrecognized.

Great line. Of course when this was first performed in 1962, the Cold War was still on and this felt more of a live issue. It was less than 20 years since the real Einstein had famously said that if he'd known what the results of nuclear research would be, he would have become a watchmaker. (He also said, 'The discovery of nuclear chain reactions need not bring about the destruction of mankind any more than did the discovery of matches,' but no one remembers that one.)

These are still crucial questions, but I think the sophistication of the debate has slightly overtaken the moral of this play. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount of fun and intellectual enjoyment to be had here, with jokes and theories and interesting dramatic ideas on every page. I'd love to see it staged – but if waiting for your local theatre to get on board seems daunting, the ideas involved make this well worth reading in the meantime.

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### **David Schaafsma says**

This is powerful, always contemporary. I was in a production of it at Calvin College in Fall of 1975, with the amazing Thomas Bloom as the The Physicist. I was a Freshman, first play on the big stage, and was the Second Policeman, I think, no lines, just stand on stage for twenty minutes talking to Tim Talen... I was overwhelmed by the play, the production, moved to tears every night. I thought this was an important message to the world, I thought theater was a terrific vehicle for saying it. Still do.

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### **Laura says**

*From BBC Radio 3 - Drama on 3:*

*Samantha Bond stars as a psychiatrist in this classic European farce by Friedrich Dürrenmatt about three theoretical physicists who believe they are Einstein, Newton and Möbius. They are locked in a lunatic asylum and each gets tangled in vicious murders. Amidst all the jokes is a real relationship between a scientist who may or may not be mad and his nurse who wants to save him. The Physicists was first performed in 1962 at the height of the Cold War.*

*The serious subject behind the farce is what to do with the knowledge of weapons of mass destruction once let out of the genie's bottle. Who controls that knowledge? Can scientists remain free, even in the free world?*

*The music soundtrack is from Bernard Herrmann's less well known score to Fahrenheit 451.*

### Ahmad Sharabiani says

#### **Die Physiker;** eine Komödie in zwei Akten = The Physicists, c 1966, Friedrich Dürrenmatt

The Physicists (German: *Die Physiker*) is a satiric drama written in 1961 by Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Informed by the Second World War and the many recent advances in science and nuclear technology, the play deals with questions of scientific ethics and humanity's ability to handle its intellectual responsibilities. It is often recognized as his most impressive yet most easily understood work.

**Characters:** Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, Johann Wilhelm Möbius, Herbert Georg Beutler, Ernst Heinrich Ernesti, Mathilde von Zahnd, Richard Voß, Monika Stettler

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### \* Pixelflocke \* says

Wir haben "Die Physiker" damals im Deutschunterricht lang und breit diskutiert. Ich habe das Stück damals schon geliebt und werde es wohl immer wieder mit Vergnügen lesen.

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### BlackOxford says

#### Macavity's Not There

In T.S. Eliot's poem, *Macavity: The Mystery Cat*, the protagonist is an accomplished feline criminal who causes havoc and confusion but is always out of sight when the sheriff arrives: "... *when a crime's discovered, Macavity's not there.*" In Durrenmatt's play, Macavity is there, in a Swiss asylum, but he disappears into a psychotic mind, or rather three such minds, of the men identified as Newton, Einstein, and Möbius. Three nurses have been strangled - by those who apparently love them - with only the delusional husks of the perpetrators left behind. Like Macavity, these are "outwardly respectable" but really quite dangerous.

While all are mad, each is mad in a different way. Newton only pretends to be Newton; he is really, he believes, Einstein. The pretence is a courtesy to the one who believes he's Einstein. Or perhaps the pretence is a pretence and he really believes he is Newton, or someone else. Möbius has visions and conversations with King Solomon. Einstein is a homicidal maniac. But *Fraulein Doktor* is in charge of everything, including identity: "*It is I who decide who my patients think they are.*"

A bit like Chesterton's *A Man Called Thursday*, things are not what they seem. As an intimate and devotee

of Carl Jung, *Fraulein Doktor*, is part of a symbolic subterfuge. The name of the place, *Les Cerisiers*, points to Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard* as an inspiration. High intrigue, depth psychology, and murder mystery, all in the space of a theatrical hour. A piece hard to better for complex simplicity. To echo Eliot, "There never was a Cat of such deceitfulness and suavity."

Postscript: *The Physicists* addresses a similar ethical theme to Julien Benda's classic, *The Treason of the Intellectuals* but with a rather different twist. It also might be considered a sort of riposte to Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* regarding the desirability of a 'disengaged' *intelligentsia*.

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### **Czarny Pies says**

This classic on the great ethical debate that followed the American bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in 1945 is tremendous fun. The question examined is what is the proper course for a scientist who has learned something that is highly dangerous for life on this planet.

As an intellectual issue we have become somewhat tired of the dangers of nuclear physics. Thanks to Kim Jong Un however we cannot forget that in mundane terms the matter is still quite serious.

Fortunately Durrenmatt's contribution to the debate is light-hearted and quite funny on paper. If I get a chance to see it performed I fully intend to.

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### **Caro Ja says**

3.5

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### **David Schaafsma says**

"The content of physics is the concern of physicists; its effect the concern of all men"  
--Friedrich Dürrenmatt

"If one assumes a story, it must be thought through to the end"--Friedrich Dürrenmatt

*The Physicists* is a 1961 (cold war) tragic farce or black comedy by German playwright Dürrenmatt based on the 1945 bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. How did the rational and supposedly apolitical discipline of science get us to the point of slaughtering millions of humans? It's an absurd comedy, until it is no longer funny, of course, with a very moving conclusion, addressing the ethical dilemma that arises when politicians gain access to scientific knowledge that has the potential to destroy the world.

Kim Jong Un and 45 will surely help us recall the relevance of this play. But it's not just about the bomb; it's about rapacious greed and the future of the planet.

Three physicists (or three men who claim to be physicists) are locked up in a madhouse, Newton, Einstein, and Möbius. Sounds like the beginning of a joke? Three physicists walk into an insane asylum? Yup, it's a grim joke, which asks about the appropriation or misappropriation or ignorance of science, but also, as does

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, who is the real madman, or who are the real madmen?

Möbius's final speech:

"I am Solomon. I am poor King Solomon. Once I was immeasurably rich, wise, and God-fearing. The mighty trembled at my word. I was a Prince of Peace, a Prince of Justice. But my wisdom destroyed the fear of God. . . Now the cities over which I ruled are dead, the Kingdom that was given over into my keeping is deserted, only a blue shimmering wilderness. And somewhere round a small, yellow, nameless star there circles pointlessly, everlasting, the radioactive earth. I am Solomon. I am Solomon. I am poor King Solomon."

So Möbius admits that it was mistaking scientific knowledge for wisdom that ultimately destroyed his kingdom.

I was in a production of The Physicists at Calvin College in Fall of 1971, when I was a freshman Thespian, with the amazing Thomas Bloom as Herr Möbius. It was my first play on the big stage, and I was the Second Policeman, I think, with no lines, just standing on stage for twenty minutes and taking dead bodies off the stage. I was overwhelmed by the play, the production, moved to tears every single night. I thought this was an important message to the world, and I thought theater was a terrific vehicle for saying it. Still do.

You can listen to a full dramatic production, and read along with it, as I did, and here is an intro to it:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQYdO...>

which is followed by a thoughtful interview with Richard Rhodes who wrote a Pulitzer-Prize-winning study of the development of the bomb:

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1...>

Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, the phone conversation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL8VI...>

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## **Luscinnia says**

Ein herrlicher "Imbiss" für zwischendrin. Manchmal mag ich es, wenn mich Bücher verwirren. Und ich liebe Dürrenmatts herrlichen Humor.

"Nur im Irrenhaus sind wir noch frei. Nur im Irrenhaus dürfen wir noch denken."

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## **Sarah Monreau says**

Ein unglaublich tolles Werk, das mich sehr überrascht hat. Nicht unbedingt dachte ich, es würde mir gefallen, aber schnell war klar: Dieses Drama ist etwas Besonderes. 'Die Physiker' ist eine Komödie mit

einigen Konflikten, einigen Wendungen, die sehr überraschten und die ich ganz, ganz toll fand. Ich habe zusätzlich das Hörbuch auf Youtube gehört, das von jemandem privat eingesprochen wurde, indem er jedem Charakter eine eigene Stimme verlieh, was unglaublich professionell und ansprechend gemacht war. Das Hörbuch machte somit unglaublich viel Spaß und ich kam mir zeitweise beinahe vor wie im Theater. Eine schöne Erfahrung mit einem Werk der Dramatik. Es hat zwar nicht dafür gesorgt, dass ich sofort mehr Dramen lesen möchte, doch in diesem Fall bin ich froh, es getan zu haben und empfehle dieses Buch gerne weiter.

Im Kurzen geht es darum, dass Newton, Einstein und Möbius in einem Sanatorium sitzen und zum Ersten ein Mord geschieht, womit die Geschichte einsteigt.

Die Auflösung am Ende ist spannend und ganz anders, als man erwartet hätte. Super Geschichte, toll umgesetzt, mit viel Charakter und Können!

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