

Destroyer of worlds

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Résumé ou extrait : Henry Becquerel's accidental discovery, in Paris in 1896, of a faint smudge on a photographic plate sparked a chain of discoveries which would unleash the atomic age. Destroyer of Worlds is the story of how pursuit of this hidden source of nuclear power, which began innocently and collaboratively, was overwhelmed by the politics of the 1930s, and following devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki opened the way to a still more terrible possibility: a thermonuclear bomb, the so-called "backyard weapon", that could destroy all life on earth – from anywhere. The story spans decades and continents, moving from Becquerel to Ernest Rutherford, the Cambridge-based, New Zealand scientist who first split the atom, expands to include Enrico Fermi in Rome, Otto Hahn and Lise Meitner in Berlin and the Joliot-Curies in Paris, leading to the appearance of Robert Oppenheimer before climaxing with increasingly horrifying developments in the USA and USSR. The roles of three remarkable women – Lise Meitner, Ida Noddack and Irene Curie – are re-evaluated, and there are new insights into the work of Ettore Majorana, Fermi's mercurial but brilliant assistant, who mysteriously disappeared in 1938, possibly after foreseeing the explosive power of nuclear energy. Above all, this is a story of how knowledge is often advanced by personal convictions and relationships, an indeed by chance, in a remarkable way.

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