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Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary

Simon Winchester

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Simon Winchester : Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary:

4 of 5 people found the following review helpful. A Highly Readable Tale Well ToldBy James G. Bruen Jr. Winchester's a gifted story teller who writes elegantly. The Professor and the Madman complements the mechanical details of the decades-long construction of the Oxford English Dictionary and the etymology of words with a captivating and sorrowful tale of murder, lunacy, and genteel English manners, mannerisms, and eccentricities to create a highly readable tale. Winchester mixes legend, fact, speculation, inference, and insight in his account of Dr. William Minor, a Yale-educated American Civil War surgeon, who, tormented by mental illness, uses his service weapon to kill a hapless brewery worker in England. Remitted to an asylum for the criminally insane, Dr. Minor has a gentlemanly life by day and a tortured and tormented existence at night. He becomes an invaluable volunteer contributor to the OED, while those responsible for the OED are unaware of his confinement. With its twists, turns, and surprises, the book could have been a mystery novel. Parts of the book drag and seem padded, especially near the end. Though the book includes some charming illustrations, it would have benefited from inclusion of photos,

particularly those Winchester describes in the text. Also, Winchester goes overboard with some speculations: If as an early teen Minor had masturbated or fornicated he "might have turned out very differently;" while in the asylum, did Minor have sex with the widow of the man he had killed? But all in all, a highly readable tale well told. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating Facet of History By J. Vilches The Professor and the Madman contains a small, fascinating facet of history. It explores the 70 year effort to create the Oxford English Dictionary, but focuses on the story of two men in particular. Dr. Murray, the first editor to make any significant progress on the OED, and Dr. Minor, a prolific contributor to the effort. The drama comes from the fact that Dr. Minor was a murderer and long-term inmate in a mental institution. The OED is not a dictionary like the one you will find on your shelf. Each letter has its own volume and each word entry has several supporting quotations to demonstrate the proper usage. Dr. Murray broadcast a wide plea for volunteers to supply appropriate quotations from literature. Dr. Minor provided a consistent stream of high quality contributions. The stories behind these two men humanize what could otherwise be a dry recital of facts and figures. The author delves into the tragic events that unfold in Dr. Minor's life as well as detailing the struggles of Dr. Murray to organize such an immense undertaking. There is enough history to satisfy history buffs, but also enough side stories to entertain the casual reader. The writing style is somewhat formal, but not so stilted as to be difficult to read. Simon Winchester now has another book out about the Oxford English Dictionary: The Meaning of Everything. If you are interested in a broader view of the history of the OED instead of focusing on the story of Dr. Murray and Minor, then that might be a better choice. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. We know a lot by simply reading the cover and ... By Spencer Reppe We know a lot by simply reading the cover and the jacket. This is nonfiction and it's about the writing of the Oxford English Dictionary, and there is also a murder, and some insanity. You'll have to read the book to find out the who, what, why, when and how. It's fair to reveal that you find out most of this within the first to pages. The balance of the book fleshes out the details in a way that kept my attention from beginning to end. The author paints an interesting picture of the British intellectual mind, the personalities that were involved with this gigantic endeavor, and also its significance today in a world that is increasingly paperless. Winchester has very thoughtfully and compassionately given us insights into modern thought on insanity, psychiatry, and treatment. The story could have been entirely different if we knew then what we know now maybe.

The Professor and the Madman, masterfully researched and eloquently written, is an extraordinary tale of madness, genius, and the incredible obsessions of two remarkable men that led to the making of the Oxford English Dictionary -- and literary history. The compilation of the OED began in 1857, it was one of the most ambitious projects ever undertaken. As definitions were collected, the overseeing committee, led by Professor James Murray, discovered that one man, Dr. W. C. Minor, had submitted more than ten thousand. When the committee insisted on honoring him, a shocking truth came to light: Dr. Minor, an American Civil War veteran, was also an inmate at an asylum for the criminally insane.