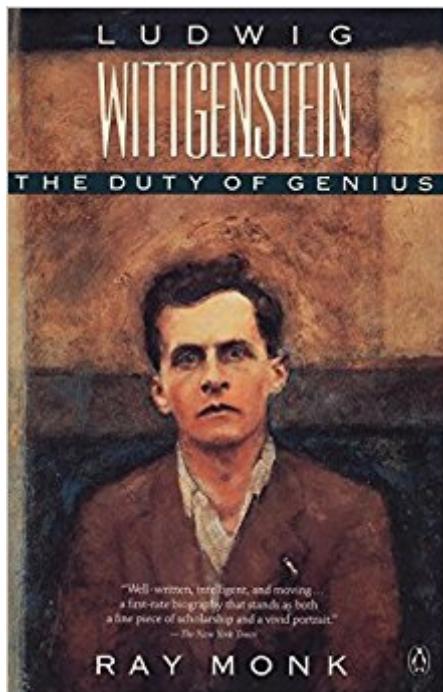


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# Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty Of Genius



## **Synopsis**

"Great philosophical biographies can be counted on one hand. Monk's life of Wittgenstein is such a one."&#151;The Christian Science Monitor.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

According to Monk, philosopher and reluctant Cambridge don Wittgenstein (1889-1951) was driven by spiritual as much by intellectual concerns, exchanged academia for solitude whenever possible and was drawn to brilliant younger men. "Monk has done an excellent job of elucidating the twin journeys of an extraordinary mind and soul," said PW. Photos. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The veritable flood of writings about Wittgenstein--fiction as well as nonfiction--continues unabated, and this is a worthy addition. Monk gives a more balanced account of Wittgenstein's life and personality than does Brian McGuinness ( Wittgenstein: A Life; Young Ludwig, 1889-1921, LJ 9/15/88), insofar as he deals with Wittgenstein's homosexuality and goes into considerable detail about the three main relationships in Wittgenstein's life. Monk has done a great deal of research; what emerges is a portrait of a troubled, restless, creative mind, one destined, it seems, to be forever dissatisfied. Though not the last word on Wittgenstein's life--something on the order of a "psychobiography" must someday be written--this book is highly recommended.- Leon H. Brody, U.S. Office of Personnel Management Lib., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1990 Reed Business

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The book is about 600 pages long, but very readable. It does a decent job of explaining the main tenets of Wittgenstein's philosophy (think very high level) while presenting his biography. My understanding from my university seminar is that compared to other biographies, this book actually talks about his philosophical views and is therefore more helpful for phil majors. I gave the book only 3 stars for two reasons. One, I think it spends too much time on biographical details at the expense of Wittgenstein's phil views. I think that the author could have gone more in depth without losing the layman. I don't think he did a very good job of explaining why some of Wittgenstein's phil views were so novel, or why he became so famous so quickly, or why everyone ended up reading the Tractatus. In contemporary philosophy W is considered one of the greatest modern philosophers, but I think the book does not adequately explain why this is so. All you get from the book is that he was eccentric, refuted the views of his old mentor Russell and argued with some famous profs at Cambridge. At the same time though, he was a recluse and didn't really publish. Interestingly, there is a lot of emphasis on his childhood which gets tedious, but no discussion whatsoever of what mental illness W might have had, or whether there was some other hereditary condition (most of his brothers were geniuses who committed suicide). Was he autistic for example? I would like to know. Second, I think as a literary piece the book is not that well balanced. This is purely an aesthetic point of view, and I appreciate that in a biography it's difficult to balance details with broader sketches. However, I feel like the author often belabored some point, citing many different letters, but then would start on another point and end very abruptly. The author also concludes sections with sweeping statements about how certain events connect up in W's life, without really discussing why he came to that conclusion. Anyway, you have to read it for yourself, but I found bits of the book jarring. It could have been a smoother read. If you are interested in turn of the century Vienna, you might enjoy reading Stefan Zweig's "The World of Yesterday." It is beautifully written and paints a very good picture of what it was like to live in Europe from 1890-1940 or so, in the midst of some of the most famous scientists, philosophers and literati. If you don't know about Zweig, in the 1920s-30s he was considered one of the best writers in Europe. He wrote some excellent novellas and biographies. His book is also interesting because it discusses turn of the century attitudes to intimacy, which is relevant to the Wittgenstein biography - Monk includes a postscript where he discusses Wittgenstein's personal life as particularly influenced by contemporary views on the subject. The World Of Yesterday Finally, I really hate this edition of the book - it's a thick paperback, but printed on very flimsy paper. I treat my books well, but this one

already has dog ears and the cover has started to split in several places. It is easy to tear the pages. I wish a more high quality version, or hardback, were available. Unfortunately the UK seems to sell the same version.

I chose to read this because I wanted an easy and gentle introduction to Wittgenstein, and because I thought that Wittgenstein might have something useful to say to Psychotherapy and Psychiatry. Reading it as a Psychiatrist I was intrigued and pleased to learn that Wittgenstein encouraged many of his students to give up Philosophy for a career in Medicine or Psychiatry, and he himself contemplated this course of action at one point. As a Psychiatrist I was also drawn into thinking about Wittgenstein's own quality of mental health. Wittgenstein was a self-declared follower of Freud and drew parallels between his project and psychoanalysis. In this regard what come to mind is Freud's definition of mental health in terms of 'lieben und arbeiten' (to love and to work). In these terms, was Wittgenstein an example of mental health? He comes across as having been unhappy for much of his life, tormented by feelings of guilt and inadequacy which seemed to alternate with narcissistic contempt for the world and people around him. But beyond this, was he capable of work and love? A good life isn't of necessity a happy life. Other than *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, and an Austrian primary school dictionary, he seems to have not completed any single piece of work in his lifetime. Much of what was published in his lifetime are fragments which were collated by his students and friends, and which were subject to continuous revision and amendment. His major work, *Philosophical Investigations*, was published after his death and the second half, it seems, was essentially still a work-in-progress, a collection of notes which he intended to return to and refine. He was never happy with his own work, and frequently stated that he believed he had produced little or nothing of value in his lifetime. On the other hand, perhaps this shifting, unfinished quality of his work is in keeping with his message: that truth cannot be pinned down, and that philosophy (and language) has meaning only as part of the 'flow of life'. What comes to mind here is the Buddhist assertion that the dharma is 'neither deficient nor complete, neither defiled nor immaculate' (from 'The Heart Sutra'). His work might never have been completed, but his impact has been huge, so perhaps we can take it that he met the 'work' criterion of mental health. What about his capacity to love? It is clear that Wittgenstein was chronically unhappy in love, falling in love with several younger men (and one woman) but apparently unable to bring himself to, or allow himself, real intimacy. It seems he battled against his homosexuality and this was a major part of his anguish and self-recrimination. Not only was he apparently incapable of mutual love, he was capable of real hurtful behaviour which was almost sadistic at times, such as his abusive treatment of his pupils

when he was a primary school teacher. It seems that as his life progressed he developed some awareness of these aspects of his personality and expressed deep remorse about his actions, to the extent of going back to apologise to the children he had hurt. But was he capable of real empathy? I am inclined to agree with those who have speculated that he had Asperger's syndrome: he just 'didn't get' other people, and to the extent that he understood the people around him it seems that this was due to his ability to bring his huge analytical intelligence to bear on the problem, rather than any intuitive capacity for empathy. Despite this, Wittgenstein had some deep and enduring life-long friendships, with people who could tolerate his emotional intensity and egocentricity, and furthermore he was deeply loved by some, for example Frances Skinner (whose love it seems he deliberately chose to spurn). Wittgenstein was clearly connected into a web of relationships and so I would concede that he met the 'love' criterion of mental health, in his own very odd way. Did he have a good life? His dying words were, apparently, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life." (p 579) And where does this book take me in my own intellectual 'flow of life'? I've decided I have to read some Tolstoy and some Dostoyevsky, two authors who seemed to have had a significant formative impact on Wittgenstein and who are referred to repeatedly in his biography. Oh and -- by the way, it's a great book! Read it!

This is far and away the best book on Ludwig Wittgenstein available. Monk deserve a lot credit for the research and his accurate interpretation and representation of the evolution of Wittgenstein's life and thought. Every really talented thinker like Wittgenstein should be so lucky as to have a biographer like Monk.

This amazingly written biography is compelling and engrossing. I find everything the author says easy to believe (I know I shouldn't, but he does a great job providing quotes from close companions of Wittgenstein and other good evidence).

Reading this has helped me understand the Tractatus A lot better. I don't like bios for the most part but this one was very interesting. A weird but brilliant man with a weird life. If you have an interest in his philosophy or him this is where you need to start. More than one of my professors say this is the best bio of him

It has often been noted that Wittgenstein was not particularly good at expressing himself. He is a man in need of an interpreter, and there have been philosophers who have acted as interpreter for

him, beginning with Russell, Schlick, Carnap, and on to countless others. Now we can add another important interpreter to the list: Monk. Of course, what Monk has done is not as important to academic philosophy as the others, but in another way what Monk has done is more important because he interprets not only the philosophical positions, but the man himself. I have been taking a great deal of intellectual pleasure in reading this book. Granted, philosophers and those interested in philosophy will always be a minority, but for a few special types this is the perfect book. It is the best biography I've read since Morris' volumes on Theodore Roosevelt. I'm VERY GLAD to have found it.

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