

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor Bruce Hevly
to discuss the novel:

Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist
by Russell McCormach

Monday, May 17

12:30 – 2:20

Smith 306

Please RSVP, (206) 543-5691

The book is widely available at most bookstores and on-line from Amazon or Barnes and Noble. The University Bookstore may have used copies in the textbook section (look under HIST 313, spring quarter).

Introduction and study questions on the reverse.

Russell McCormach is the co-author of an award-winning two-volume history of German theoretical physics from Ohm to Einstein. His short novel, *Night Thoughts of a Classical Physicist*, written while he was in the midst of this major work, is quite different in character from the more formal historical work. While based on real events in the lives of a number of German physicists around the turn of the century, McCormach's protagonist, Victor Jakob, is a composite character at a fictional physics institute in the midst of a dual cultural crisis: the rise of modern physics and the collapse of Germany at the end of World War I.

Here are a few questions to consider while reading the book:

1. For Jakob, how did classical physics relate to the emergence of the modern German state, and, in turn, to the best of German culture? How was the new physics to be a threat to this?
2. What was the meaning of "Professor Jakob's space" on the blackboard, and how did it epitomize Jakob's relationship with the *privatdocent* (a junior academic who functioned as an instructor at the institute)? In turn, how did this relationship contrast with the one between Jakob and the institute director?
3. How did the structure of Jakob's institute compare to that of a University department in the United States? How did it relate to the administrative machinery of the state? How did antisemitism affect Jakob's role within German physics?
4. Was Jakob against modern technology?
5. Is this good history? That is, can you assemble a historical interpretation of the times from McCormach's novel? Is it a defensible idea for a historian to write fiction in order to teach history?
6. What happens to Jakob at the end of the book?