



Wisnheimer: A Childhood Subject to Debate

Mark Oppenheimer

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Have you ever met a child who talked like an adult? Who knew big words and how to use them? Was he a charmer or an insufferable smart aleck—or maybe both? Mark Oppenheimer was just such a boy, his talent for language a curse as much as a blessing. But when he got to junior high, Oppenheimer discovered an outlet for his loquaciousness: the debate team. Frank and comical, *Wisnheimer* chronicles the travails of a hyperarticulate child who finds salvation in the heady world of competitive oratory.

In stirring prose, Oppenheimer describes what it was like to have a gift with no useful application. Unlike math or music prodigies, he had no way to showcase his unique skill, except to speak like a miniature adult—a trick some found impressive but others found irritating. Frustrated and isolated, Oppenheimer used his powers for ill—he became a wisnheimer, pushing his peers and teachers away. Then, in junior high, he discovered the world he was meant for: the debate club. His skill with language was finally being channeled, refined, and honed into something beautiful.

As Oppenheimer blossomed as a person, he also became a world-champion high school and college debater. His journey from loneliness to fulfillment affords a fascinating inside look at the extraordinary subculture of world-class high school debate and at the power of language to change one's life.

Oppenheimer writes movingly about the art of rhetoric, of his passion for it, and of the inspiration he derived from debating and watching others do it. This smart, funny memoir not only reveals a strange, compelling subculture, it also offers a broader discussion of the splendor and power of language and of the social and developmental hazards of being a gifted child. Finally, it looks with hope at our present age, in which oratory is once again an important force in American culture.

Revealing, touching, and entertaining, *Wisnheimer* offers a brilliant portrait of the rarefied world of high school and college debate—and of what it's like to grow up talkative in America.

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