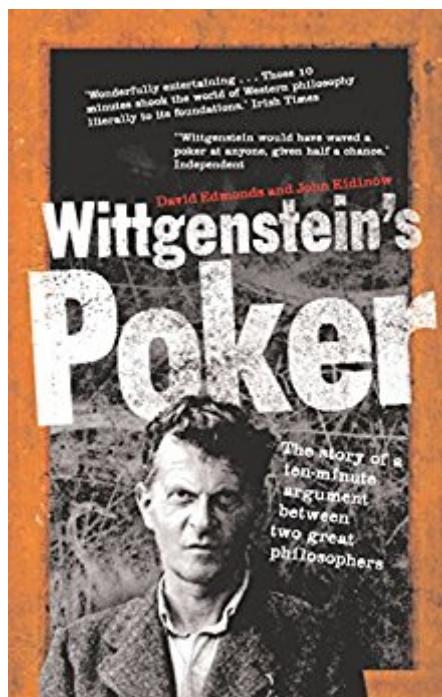


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# Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story Of A Ten Minute Argument Between Two Great Philosophers



## **Synopsis**

On 25 October 1946, in a crowded room in Cambridge, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper came face to face for the first and only time. The encounter lasted only ten minutes, and did not go well. Almost immediately, rumours started to spread around the world that the two philosophers had come to blows, armed with red-hot pokers . . .

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## **Customer Reviews**

I'm quite familiar with both Wittgenstein's and Popper's work and I found the discussion of their Austria-Jewish roots quite interesting. Nevertheless, I felt the authors were creating a false controversy between the two philosophers. The more interesting personal issue was Popper's obsession with Wittgenstein who was essentially oblivious to Popper's existence. The authors admitted as much, but still set the book up as a kind of "high noon" shoot out. Wittgenstein had much bigger fish to fry than Popper, notwithstanding how the authors tried to equate the importance of the two philosophers. The authors erroneously talked about how Popper dealt with the big problems while Wittgenstein dealt with puzzles. Indeed, Wittgenstein dealt elegantly with some of

the more profound issues in epistemology such as skepticism, the limits of language/thought etc. Wittgenstein is *sui generis*, one of the most original thinkers of the 20th century. His work has hardly any progenitors (save perhaps Frege) while Popper, although making some interesting contributions to the sociology of science, built his work directly from/reacting to his predecessors. (not a bad thing, but not in the same league as Wittgenstein). I would also have liked to have seen, as mentioned in other reviews more explication of the philosophy of Popper and Wittgenstein, similar to what Monk has done in his excellent biographies of Russell and Wittgenstein. Further, the discussion on how Popper's idea of a free society has actually come into existence is simple minded, triumphalist clap trap that takes away from the good things in this book.

Karl Popper, the distinguished philosopher of science, and Ludwig Wittgenstein met only once, for perhaps ten minutes, in a tense confrontation over their diametrically-opposed views of what philosophy was for. Always excitable, Wittgenstein brandished a poker, then put it down. Soon he left the room. Did he threaten Popper with the poker? Did he storm out of the room in response to a clever quip of Popper's? Eyewitness accounts vary. "There was a delightful irony in the conflicting testimonies. They had arisen between people all professionally concerned with theories of epistemology..., understanding, and truth. Yet they concerned a sequence of events where those who disagreed were eyewitnesses on crucial questions of fact." (p4) The authors use this rather well-known (to academic philosophers) but murky incident as a focus for a book that takes us back to the Vienna of the Hapsburgs, where the extremely wealthy Wittgensteins moved in the highest echelons of culture and social life, and the more modest Poppers also enjoyed the wide and deep intellectual life of this city of coffeehouses and tolerance. Later (but before the storm) there was the Vienna Circle, which courted Wittgenstein and excluded Popper. (Or did he exclude himself?) This is a book about two great men who were both Viennese, intense, egotistical, brilliant, and contentious to a degree rarely seen. To each, every discussion bearing on philosophy became a contest that each had to win, and almost invariably did. Ironically, they never met until that night in 1946, in Cambridge, England, of all places. So it is also a book about philosophy in the 20th century that brings in G.E.

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