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Photograph above: Engineer-writer John Burnett (left) works with engineers John H. Haughwout (right) and Donald King to compile handbook information.

## BOOKS

### THE ACCIDENT

by Dexter Masters

Alfred A. Knopf, 1955

\$4

*Reviewed by R. F. Christy,  
Professor of Theoretical Physics*

THIS BOOK, although it is a novel, is based on a radiation accident at Los Alamos in 1946, which resulted in the death of Louis Slotin. The book is perhaps particularly pertinent at this time because of the recent revelations on the radiation fall-out from hydrogen bombs. No one can read it without some sober reflection on the catastrophic consequences of the current nuclear arms race.

The story starts with the accident, in which seven persons, including the ultimate victim—here called Louis Saxl—who receives by far the largest dose, are irradiated because of a slip in the assembly of a critical mass of fissionable material. The slip brings the assembly over critical and a burst of nuclear radiation follows, which is stopped only by Saxl's immediate reaction of tearing the structure apart. The story then follows the inexorable course of his sickness, which terminates in his death a week later. Many aspects of this part of the book are written in a very powerful and moving way.

Woven through the accident story is an account of Saxl's life as a boy, a student, a physicist, and a man. The blending of these two principal parts of the book is not always too skillful, and at times it seems to the reader that he is reading two books at once.

In the course of the story of the accident and of Saxl's life, there appear many long discussions of a more or less philosophical nature. Although many sound arguments and interesting points of view are to be found in these, on the whole they are somewhat overwhelming and tend to alienate the reader because of their unnecessary verbosity.

The character who emerges from the book as the most real person—one of great depth and presented in a sympathetic fashion—is David Thiel, a friend of Saxl's who attends him throughout his sickness. In contrast, no other character in the book appears in any very real light as a person.

In conclusion, the author has attempted a monumental task—and has succeeded surprisingly well.

*Dr. Christy spent three years—1943 through 1945—at Los Alamos, working on the Manhattan Project.*

ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE