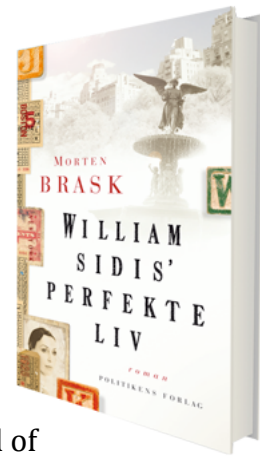


Synopsis:

The Perfect Life of William Sidis

By Morten Brask



On a winter morning in 1910, Harvard University's Conant Hall is packed with leading professors in mathematics and physics from all of New England's colleges. William Sidis stands at the podium. The subject of his lecture is his own theories about the fourth dimension. William is eleven-years-old.

The next morning William appears on the front page of every newspaper. He is crowned the great hope in American research—and is compared to such minds as Newton, Euclid and Gauss. No one doubts that he is the most amazing child prodigy the world has seen.

William Sidis is born on April 1, 1898, in a modest apartment on Central Park West. His parents are refugees from the Czar's pogroms in Ukraine. His father, Boris Sidis, comes from a family in which legend claims that one specially gifted individual has been born into each generation for the last 400 years. When Boris is admitted to Harvard, his professors are duly impressed; he completes his university studies in only a few years. Soon, the world-renowned philosopher and founder of American psychology, William James, becomes aware of the talented student. Together they develop the theory that all people possess a larger brain capacity than they use. With the proper upbringing, children can learn to use their untapped mental resources. Boris Sidis takes work as a psycho-pathologist in New York; his fame grows quickly and he is soon compared to Sigmund Freud in Vienna. Yet even Boris's talents pale in comparison to his son's. Barely six months after his birth, little William reaches for the moon over Central Park and speaks his first word: "Moon."

Boris sets out to realize his theories about the brain's hidden energies. Instead of letting his son play freely, he tries to get the boy to learn and understand and reason. Using alphabet blocks, he teaches the boy to read—by the time William is 18 months, he can already read aloud from the New York Times. Some months later his mother, Sarah, a doctor, hears the sound of a typewriter coming from Boris's office. When she goes in, she finds her son in the act of writing a wish list to the department store Macy's. In every way, William wants his father to be proud of him. When he is three years old, William's birthday gift to his father is to show him that—without any help—he has taught himself how to translate Caesar's The Gallic Wars from Latin.

Sarah Sidis takes little William to the elegant home of Ida and Isidor Straus (Straus was one of the co-owners of Macy's—the couple would die on the Titanic). Here she presents William to such families as the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts and Mellons. In their presence, he is asked to “perform” by looking at a page in a book and then reciting it from memory, figuring out the day of the week for any given date, and stating the time for all trains in the US—which he has learned by studying schedules.

William excels in many subjects. When he is four, he composes an English grammar. Books on anatomy and astronomy soon follow, and he also develops a complete artificial language, Vendergood, with a matching 12-number system. When a mathematics professor is at dinner at the Sidis home, William is given permission to read the manuscript for the professor's new book while the adults eat. William points out a number of mistakes in the manuscript.

At the age of seven, William starts school—but his teachers have nothing to teach the little boy. After only a few days he is bumped up to 5th grade. Still, he finds it difficult to endure the slowness with which everything occurs at school. He supplies his teachers with a grammatical system, so that they can teach three major languages simultaneously—thus saving the students time. Although he is intellectually superior to everyone, school is the first place where William actually encounters other children. He cannot participate when they play, although he wants to. And when he speaks to them about his fascination for nebular theory, they can only shake their heads at the strange boy. Boys his own age kick him and call him a social-climbing Jew.

After only a few months, his parents move him into high school. The school authorities oppose letting an eight-year-old attend high school with sixteen-year-olds—but his parents show up with William and five other leading professors from Harvard to convince the authorities to accept William. After a few months William passes his entrance exam to MIT, along with a full examination in anatomy. His parents want him to go to Harvard—but the university insists that he cannot enroll until he is 11. When he begins, he initiates his studies by giving a talk in Conant Hall. At this point William is known throughout America. In a book his father presents the psychological experiment that he contends has led William to the intellectual stage he has reached. Boris claims that his son is a typical child, not a genius. It is purely the proper upbringing that had made him what he is—William is merely the prototype for what all American children can become. His time at Harvard is a nightmare for William. Laughed at for attending lectures in his knickers, he becomes a victim of envy and anti-Semitism. Fortunately, he makes one friend, another brilliant talent, Nathaniel Sharfman, with whom he remains friends until William's death.

After he completes his studies, William works as a teacher in Euclidian and non-Euclidian geometry. As no textbooks exist for the subject, William writes his

own—and just like Euclid, he writes his in Greek. The students refuse to accept it, however, and he soon finds his text used as toilet paper. Since childhood, William is vehemently engaged by politics: he is affected by the poverty he sees in the streets, especially in the time following World War I. He finds himself drawn to the socialist cause, and as he speaks between 50 and 100 languages fluently, he functions as a translator at socialist party meetings. Here, he meets Martha Foley, one of the speakers. For the first time, he falls in love; he spends months together with Martha convinced that this is the woman with whom he wants to spend his life. It lasts until the May Day demonstration in 1919, which turns into violent riots. William is arrested and appears on front pages everywhere. He is accused and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Thanks to their high-level contacts, his parents are able to get him out of jail. However, doing so requires that, as doctors, they declare him mentally incompetent and incapable of managing his own affairs. For the next few years he is a prisoner in his parents' sanitarium, first in Boston and then in San Diego. He has no way to communicate with Martha. After some years he finally manages to escape. He never sees his parents again.

William hides out in New York, where he once again meets Martha in Central Park. But it is too late: she has met another man. He asks for a photograph of her. When he dies—25 years later—that photograph is still in his wallet. William spends his adult life in New York and Boston. He lives off occasional jobs. Every time his employers discover his abilities (for example, he handles one day's responsibilities as an accountant in 13 minutes), they want to promote him—but each time he decides to flee to another job.

At night he writes books and articles on such subjects as the origin of the universe, in which he traces the big bang theory and dark matter in the universe many years before its discovery; American Indians since the Neanderthal Age; how people can avoid traffic accidents; train tickets; the history of Boston; American slang.

In 1944, William dies in a hospital in Boston. His few but close friends gather around him, among them Sharfman, now an academic dropout making a living as a taxi driver. His mother is also at the hospital, but she dares not see her son after so many years of separation.

William Sidis's IQ is estimated at 250-300. Einstein's was 160.

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