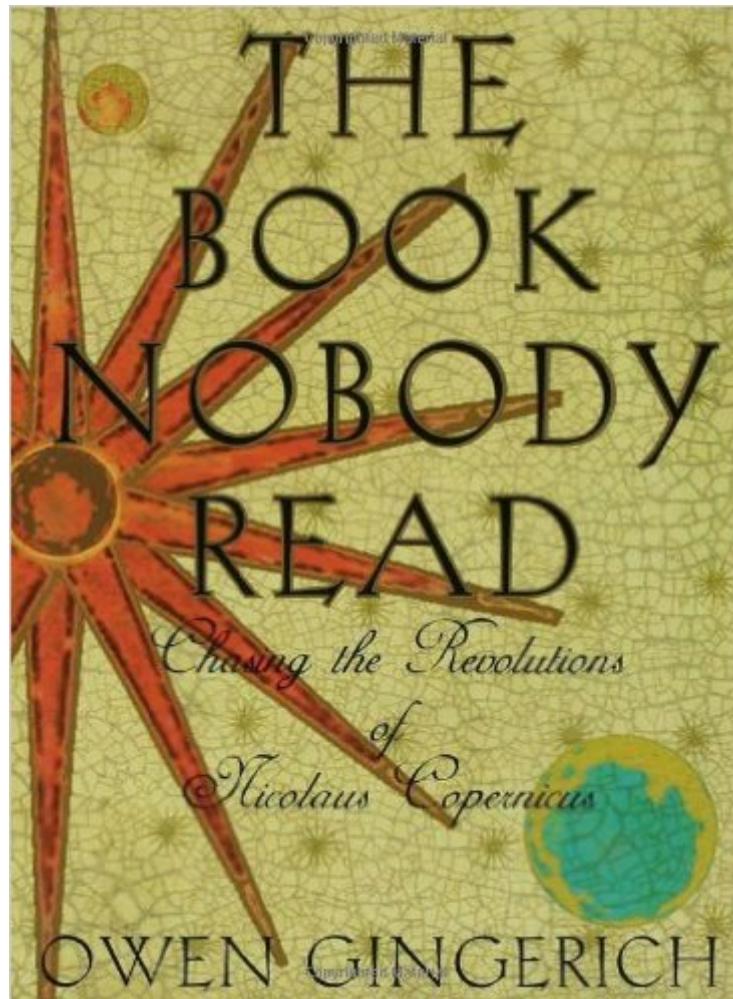


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The Book Nobody Read: Chasing The Revolutions Of Nicolaus Copernicus



Synopsis

In the spring of 1543 as the celebrated astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, lay on his death bed, his fellow clerics brought him a long-awaited package: the final printed pages of the book he had worked on for many years: *De revolutionibus* (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres). Though Copernicus would not live to hear of its extraordinary impact, his book, which first suggested that the Sun, not the Earth, was the center of the universe, is today recognized as one of the most influential scientific works of all time—thanks in part to astrophysicist Owen Gingerich. Four and a half centuries after its initial publication, Gingerich embarked on an epic quest to see in person all extant copies of the first and second editions of *De revolutionibus*. He was inspired by two contradictory pieces of information: Arthur Koestler's claim, in his book *The Sleepwalkers*, that nobody had read Copernicus's book when it was published; and Gingerich's discovery, in Edinburgh, of a first edition richly annotated in the margins by the leading teacher of astronomy in Europe in the 1540s. If one copy had been so quickly appreciated, Gingerich reasoned, perhaps others were as well—and perhaps they could throw new light on a hinge point in the history of astronomy. After three decades of investigation, and after traveling hundreds of thousands of miles across the globe—from Melbourne to Moscow, Boston to Beijing—Gingerich has written an utterly original book built on his experience and the remarkable insights gleaned from examining some 600 copies of *De revolutionibus*. He found the books owned and annotated by Galileo, Kepler and many other lesser-known astronomers whom he brings back to life, which illuminate the long, reluctant process of accepting the Sun-centered cosmos and highlight the historic tensions between science and the Catholic Church. He traced the ownership of individual copies through the hands of saints, heretics, scalawags, and bibliomaniacs. He was called as the expert witness in the theft of one copy, witnessed the dramatic auction of another, and proves conclusively that *De revolutionibus* was as inspirational as it was revolutionary. Part biography of a book, part scientific exploration, part bibliographic detective story, *The Book Nobody Read* recolors the history of cosmology and offers new appreciation of the enduring power of an extraordinary book and its ideas.

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Customer Reviews

The story of Copernicus and his description of the heliocentric universe forms the background of this fascinating book. The scientific revolution began with Copernicus. Owen Gingerich is an astrophysicist and historian of science who began his whimsical quest in 1970 as part of the preparation for the 500th anniversary of Copernicus birth in 1973. International scholarly celebrations were planned and Gingerich was on the committee to prepare them. The question arose whether many owners of the book had actually read all the way through this massive and rather tedious tome. Gingerich happened to be visiting Scotland at the time and decided to look at a copy of "De revolutionibus," known to be in the Royal Observatory in Edinburgh. To his surprise, the copy was heavily annotated all the way through. It had been very carefully read by someone. The reader had even corrected a number of errors in the text. Gingerich searched for evidence of the reader's name. Finally, he discovered the initials ER stamped on the cover. With a shock, he realized that these might be the initials of Erasmus Reinhold, the leading mathematical astronomer of the generation after Copernicus. Gingerich eventually found samples of Reinhold's writing and confirmed his hypothesis. For the next 30 years, he searched for other copies of the great work and recorded the annotations placed in the margins by owners during the Renaissance. He became an expert on Copernicus and the sociology of science in the 15th and following centuries. He also became an expert on paper-making, printing and binding. This resulted in several detective stories as book thieves and forgers were uncovered and prosecuted.

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