

Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea

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A "biography" of the most vexing and troublesome number in human history reveals how the Babylonians invented it, why the Greeks were afraid of it and the Hindus worshipped, the role it played in hunting down heretics in the Middle Ages, and its current place in the Y2K issue. Original.

The seemingly impossible Zen task--writing a book about nothing--has a loophole: people have been chatting, learning, and even fighting about nothing for millennia. *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*, by noted science writer Charles Seife, starts with the story of a modern battleship stopped dead in the water by a loose zero, then rewinds back to several hundred years BCE. Some empty-headed genius improved the traditional Eastern counting methods immeasurably by adding zero as a placeholder, which allowed the genesis of our still-used decimal system. It's all been uphill from there, but Seife is enthusiastic about his subject; his synthesis of math, history, and anthropology seduces the reader into a new fascination with the most troubling number.

Why did the Church reject the use of zero? How did mystics of all stripes get bent out of shape over it? Is it true that science as we know it depends on this mysterious round digit? *Zero* opens up these questions and lets us explore the answers and their ramifications for our oh-so-modern lives. Seife has fun with his format, too, starting with chapter 0 and finishing with an appendix titled "Make Your Own Wormhole Time Machine." (Warning: don't get your hopes up too much.) There are enough graphs and equations to scare off serious numerophobes, but the real story is in the interactions between artists, scientists, mathematicians, religious and political leaders, and the rest of us--it seems we really do have nothing in common. --Rob Lightner

Charles Seife is the author of five previous books, including *Proofiness* and *Zero*, which won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for first nonfiction and was a New York Times notable book. He has written for a wide variety of publications, including *The New York Times*, *Wired*, *New Scientist*, *Science*, *Scientific American*, and *The Economist*. He is a professor of journalism at New York University and lives in New York City.

Other Books

Zéro. À coup sûr, le zéro n'est pas un chiffre comme un autre. Aussi a-t-il tout naturellement suscité tant les interrogations des mathématiciens que les spéculations des théologiens et des philosophes. Le zéro est puissant parce qu'il triomphe des autres chiffres, rend folles les divisions et est le frère jumeau de l'infini. Les plus vertigineuses questions de la science et de la religion touchent au rien et l'éternité, au vide et à l'infinité. Des débats passionnés et souvent violents autour du zéro ébranlèrent les fondations de la philosophie, de la science et de la religion. De Pythagore à Aristote qui renièrent son existence, des chrétiens qui le craignirent aux musulmans qui le réintroduisirent en Occident, Charles Seife raconte avec clarté l'histoire extraordinairement mouvementée de ce concept, qui est aujourd'hui une des clefs de la physique quantique, de la compréhension des trous noirs et de la naissance de l'univers.

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