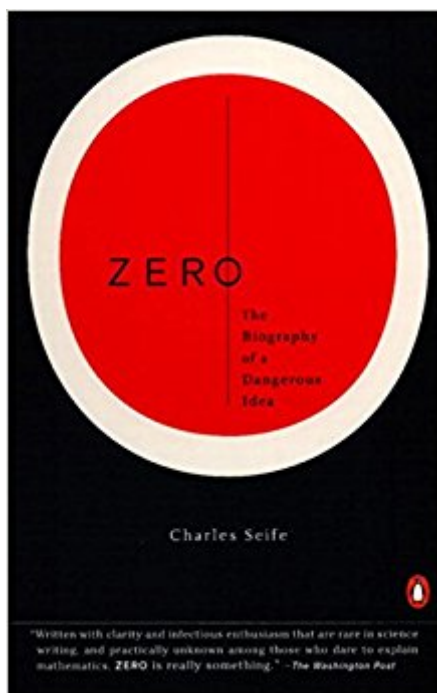


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Zero: The Biography Of A Dangerous Idea



Synopsis

Popular math at its most entertaining and enlightening. "Zero is really something"-Washington Post
A New York Times Notable Book. The Babylonians invented it, the Greeks banned it, the Hindus worshiped it, and the Church used it to fend off heretics. Now it threatens the foundations of modern physics. For centuries the power of zero savored of the demonic; once harnessed, it became the most important tool in mathematics. For zero, infinity's twin, is not like other numbers. It is both nothing and everything. In *Zero*, Science Journalist Charles Seife follows this innocent-looking number from its birth as an Eastern philosophical concept to its struggle for acceptance in Europe, its rise and transcendence in the West, and its ever-present threat to modern physics. Here are the legendary thinkers—from Pythagoras to Newton to Heisenberg, from the Kabbalists to today's astrophysicists—who have tried to understand it and whose clashes shook the foundations of philosophy, science, mathematics, and religion. Zero has pitted East against West and faith against reason, and its intransigence persists in the dark core of a black hole and the brilliant flash of the Big Bang. Today, zero lies at the heart of one of the biggest scientific controversies of all time: the quest for a theory of everything.

Book Information

Paperback: 248 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (September 1, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0140296476

ISBN-13: 978-0140296471

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.7 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 256 customer reviews

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Mathematics > Popular & Elementary > Arithmetic #51 in Books > Science & Math >

Mathematics > History #163 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > History &

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Customer Reviews

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 --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In a lively and literate first book, science journalist Seife takes readers on a historical, mathematical and scientific journey from the infinitesimal to the infinite. With clever devices such as humorously titled and subtitled chapters numbered from zero to infinity, Seife keeps the tone as light as his subject matter is deep. By book's end, no reader will dispute Seife's claim that zero is among the most fertile--and therefore most dangerous--ideas that humanity has devised. Equally powerful and dangerous is its inseparable counterpart, infinity, for both it and zero invoke to many the divine power that created an infinite universe from the void. The power of zero lies in such a contradiction, and civilization has struggled with it, alternatively seeking to ban and to embrace zero and infinity. The clash has led to holy wars and persecutions, philosophical disputes and profound scientific discoveries. In addition to offering fascinating historical perspectives, Seife's prose provides readers who struggled through math and science courses a clear window for seeing both the powerful techniques of calculus and the conundrums of modern physics: general relativity, quantum mechanics and their marriage in string theory. In doing so, Seife, this entertaining and enlightening book reveals one of the roots of humanity's deepest uncertainties and greatest insights. BOMC selection. (Feb.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I would give this book a 4 or 5 star review - it really is quite good - but for the lack of readability on

my Nexus 7 tablet using the kindle app. Don't buy the kindle version. Pony up the extra few buck and wait a couple of days for the print copy because the kindle version is deeply flawed. Basically, there are two issues. First, all of the images are low-res. Those used to fill in for, say, Babylonian or Hebrew letters in-line with the text are almost unreadable - far too small compared to the surrounding text, and blurry. Most of the larger images suffer from the same problem, particularly bad for the tables of letter/number equivalencies. Second, pretty much all mathematical symbols are represented as a "?". Integrals, summation (capital sigma), infinity symbols ... All question marks. If you're not already reasonably knowledgeable about the subject matter, this will make many of the explanations nearly impossible to follow. To the developer team and to the eBook publishers - come on guys, this isn't that hard to get right. As it is, it's an ongoing problem that makes the kindle platform unusable for technical books.

The first one in our family to read the book all the way through was a 13-year-old grand-daughter. She gave the book back with eyes wide open: "I had no IDEA of the history - and violent, unreasoned history at that - of this number that we all take for granted as just another numeral". Mission accomplished. As soon as I finish plowing through three other books (two of them on math for rocket scientists) I'll finish reading it myself.

The book starts with the history of zero and ends with some of the complex physics that came to be because of the number 0. Part philosophical but all math, I couldn't wait to get to the next page because of all the drama that is 0. For those not so mathematically inclined, the first half of the book will be nice history with philosophers and scientists that we all learned about in school from the perspective of zero. It explains well how math was created and how the classes we took in school came to be. The second half demonstrates how zero has been used to explain the laws of physics.

One of the things that frustrated me was hearing folks telling me that any number divided by zero is undefined. I always thought that answer was slap-dash. I even wrote to the Math Department at MIT for a better answer to no avail. I don't remember how, but someone turned me on to this book. I thought it would be dry and would instantly put me to sleep as many non-fiction books do, but this one grabbed me and kept me interested. One of my faults is that I have almost no confidence in my math skills, but I didn't need to know the math in this because the concepts were explained so well. I've seen many reviews about this book that complain about it having too many hyperbole. If you're lousy at any math higher than algebra, but you can follow some of the concepts about cosmology

on the Science Channel, this book is not only perfect, but the hyperbole help you understand the concepts. Best of all, the book helped me better understand what actually happens when you divide by zero, not through mathematical equations that I can't translate, but in lay terms.

What a fun read and listen. While the book would more correctly be called Zero and Infinity since it's much about $1/0$ as it is about zero itself and even delves into the Cantor Continuum and the Hilbert Hotel, I must say it's a fun survey of the evolution of numbers from the first Cuneiform null placeholder to the power of zero to the power of infinity in defining the set of all Integers and the bigger infinity of the Reals. All in all, a thoroughly fun read!

great little book. dont have to be a mathematician to read it but id doesn't hurt.

I bought this as a gift for my daughter the teacher, but when it arrived I had to read it before I wrapped it. I found it totally fascinating! No, it's not exactly a math book, but it is exactly what the title says it is. I have some math background, but I don't think it's necessary to enjoy this book.

"Zero" falls into a very narrow category of books that can be considered a work of art. From the cover to the interesting last name of the author (near to that of Cypher) to the chapter titles to the way that each consecutive chapter integrates with its predecessors. Do not be fooled by the deceptive size of this book, as the thoughts it inspires may fill your notebooks and empty the ink from your pens. The book centers on the twins--Zero and Infinity. These two heretics are abhorred by nature, yet have been sirens to many of the greatest minds this world has ever known. It begins with the chapter "Null and Void", where the implosive power of Zero disables the USS Yorktown. Once the book has opened with such a display of power, it immediately travels backwards in time to when mortals first discovered these two forces. It then follows a trail paved with lunatics who dared seek the twins. Even the non-numerically oriented should find inspiration and insight buried between the lines and diagrams of this book. The admixture of mathematics, physics and philosophy--even alchemy--leaves open this book's audience to varied membership. On a closing note, I've worked with high school drop-outs who are trying to get their GED but have difficulty with the math. I've used this book on multiple occasions to get them interested and burning for math so that they want to gobble up every number. It really is an amazing turnaround for an unnecessarily dry subject.

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