



The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus

By Owen Gingerich

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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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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus, astronomer and "Catholic canon at the Frauenburg [Poland] cathedral," published *De revolutionibus* (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres), one of the world's greatest and most revolutionary scientific works, explaining that the Earth revolves around the Sun rather than the reverse. Yet many have wondered if this dense and very technical book was actually read by the author's contemporaries. Arthur Koestler, in his bestselling history of astronomy, *The Sleepwalkers*, called it "the book that nobody read." Gingerich, a Harvard astrophysicist and historian of science, proves Koestler wrong. Gingerich went on a quest to track down every extant copy of the original work, and he does a fabulous job of documenting virtually everything there is to know about its first and second (1566) editions, conclusively demonstrating the impact it had on early astronomical thought. As thoroughly engaging as a good detective story, the book recreates the excitement Gingerich himself felt as he traveled the world examining and making sense of centuries-old manuscripts. There is a rich discussion of techniques for assessing treasures of this sort. Handwriting analysis of marginalia, for example, enabled Gingerich to determine who owned many of the copies and to document how critical new ideas spread across Europe and beyond, while an examination of watermarks and glue helps demonstrate whether books have been altered. Providing great insight into 16th-century science, the book should be equally enjoyed by readers interested in the history of science and in bibliophilia. 8 color, 35 b&w illus.

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From Scientific American

In a 1959 best-selling history of astronomy, Arthur Koestler called Copernicus's *De revolutionibus* (which set forth the controversial view that the sun rather than the earth is at the center of the universe) "the book that nobody read." Gingerich, then an astrophysicist at Harvard University, happened on a first edition from 1543 richly annotated by a well-known 16th-century astronomer. At least one person had read the book! His fascination with this find turned Gingerich into a full-time historian of science and, to prove Koestler wrong, sent him on a 30-year odyssey to examine every first edition he could track down. This is the story of that quest, in which Gingerich covered hundreds of thousands of miles, uncovered 276 first editions and showed that Koestler was, indeed, wrong. The marginal notes, especially in copies that had belonged to other astronomers, reveal how much Copernicus's thesis was being debated by his contemporaries. Part detective thriller, part vivid historical biography, it's all fun.

Editors of Scientific American

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Little did Harvard astrophysicist Gingerich know that the day he happened upon a heavily annotated first edition of Nicolaus Copernicus' seminal work, *De Revolutionibus*, or *On the Revolutions*, a 30-year obsession was born. Although dubbed "the book nobody read" by Arthur Koestler, clearly this copy of the tome that placed the sun, rather than the earth, at the center of our spot in the cosmos, was read with singular avidity. Were other copies as full of marginalia? And if so, who was writing what on these highly technical pages? As cogent and companionable as he is erudite, Gingerich renders even the most esoteric details clear and compelling as he vividly chronicles a quest that took him all over Europe, what was then the Soviet Union, Egypt, China, and Australia in pursuit of 600 original copies of this world-altering book. Ultimately, he uncloaked the "invisible college," a coterie of scientific pioneers including Tycho Brahe, Kepler, and Galileo, who carefully annotated Copernicus' text. Gingerich also clarifies exactly what

Copernicus got right and wrong and why, and offers fascinating insights into sixteenth-century book production, the religious reception of heliocentrism, and the dark side of the rare-book world in an unprecedented and enlivening tale of scholarly sleuthing, scientific revolution, and purposeful bibliomania.

Donna Seaman

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Anna Wright:

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