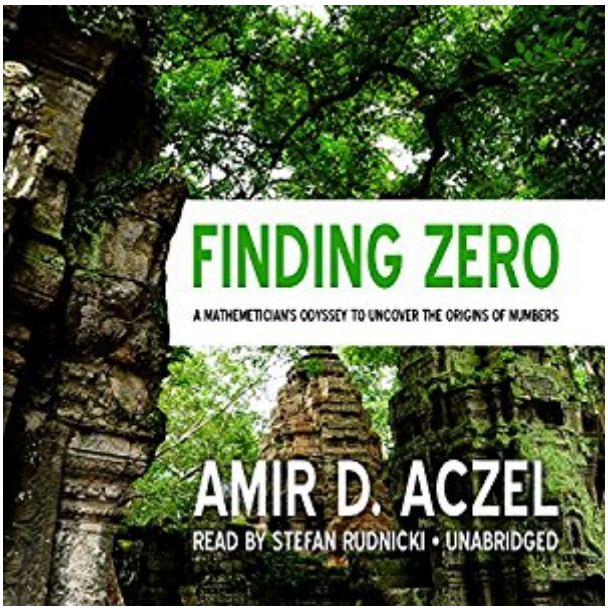
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Finding Zero: A Mathemetician's Odyssey To Uncover The Origins Of Numbers



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Synopsis

The story of how we got our numbers - told through one mathematician’s journey to find zero. The invention of numerals is perhaps the greatest abstraction the human mind has ever created. Virtually everything in our lives is digital, numerical, or quantified. The story of how and where we got these numerals, which we so depend on, has for thousands of years been shrouded in mystery. Finding Zero is an adventure-filled saga of Amir Aczel’s lifelong obsession: to find the original sources of our numerals. Aczel has doggedly crisscrossed the ancient world, scouring dusty, moldy texts, cross examining so-called scholars who offered wildly differing sets of facts, and ultimately penetrating deep into a Cambodian jungle to find a definitive proof. Here, he takes the listener along for the ride. The history begins with the early Babylonian cuneiform numbers, followed by the later Greek and Roman letter numerals. Then Aczel asks the key question: Where do the numbers we use today, the so-called Hindu-Arabic numerals, come from? It is this search that leads him to explore uncharted territory, to go on a grand quest into India, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and ultimately into the wilds of Cambodia. There he is blown away to find the earliest zero - the keystone of our entire system of numbers - on a crumbling, vine-covered wall of a seventh-century temple adorned with eaten-away erotic sculptures. While on this odyssey, Aczel meets a host of fascinating characters: academics in search of truth, jungle trekkers looking for adventure, surprisingly honest politicians, shameless smugglers, and treacherous archaeological thieves - who finally reveal where our numbers come from.

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Customer Reviews

No one who cares about mathematics at all is ignorant of the importance of the invention of zero. (The strains of the Schoolhouse Rock song ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“My Hero, ZeroÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• sound in my head even as I write these words.) I was always taught that the concept of zero was an Indian invention that ultimately made its way into the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“ArabicÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• numerals and, so, to the West. Though Mr. Aczel doesnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t completely upset the apple cart with his new book, Finding Zero, he attempts to tell a story that is deeper and more interesting than the one zero usually gets in histories of mathematics. In some ways, he succeeds.Mr. Aczel does two things of importance in this book. First, he argues that the concept of zero would likely never have been developed in Western Europe. Essentially, he believes that the concept of zero developed out of the different logic that comes from historical Buddhism and Hinduism. Whereas Greek logic, for example, depended highly on an either/or system (exemplified through proof by contradiction), Buddhist and Hindu logic developed from a ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“true, not true, both, neitherÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• logic that laid the groundwork for concepts like zero and infinity.Second, he pushes the development of the concept of zero further to the East than India. In fact, he argues that it comes from Southeast Asia, as his search takes him to Thailand and, ultimately, to Cambodia. He is searching for a seventh-century stele called K-127, which records the earliest known use of a ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“modernÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• zero. Discovered in 1929 by a man named George Coedes, it disappeared during the wars of the sixties and seventies.In fact, it is Mr. AczelÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s search for this stele that drives most of this book and this is one place where the book falls short. Much of it turns out to be a travelogue of his journey to the stele. Unfortunately, his ability to tell a compelling travel story is not nearly as strong as his ability to put mathematical concepts into an historical context. The prose comes across a bit flat. At least until he gets to the end of his journey. And, though it seems that Southeast Asia is the heart of the development of zero, it should be noted that these steles developed from the influence of Buddhism and Hinduism. That is, India.Still, there is much to like about this book. There is something about having this stele, this physical manifestation of the zero, that is compelling, however boring the description of the search might be. And having this extended investigation into the invention of zero is something not to be missed for anyone interested in the history of mathematics.

Maybe I’m partial to books that patiently unfold ideas about the world through a good story. This book does does that, following Professor Aczel from his earliest interest in numbers and mentoring from a wonderful guide through his engaging and thought provoking adventures in pursuit of a

foundational idea. Thanks so much for enriching my experience of math, religion/ philosophy, and the human condition.

I like books that teach me something new in a familiar area. This book does that. What is the origin of the numeral for zero? Aczel leads us on a journey far from the accepted notion of the origin of zero. At times it reads like a detective story with several twists and turns. You may not learn new math here but you will learn about "old math" - the origin of the symbol for zero. Nice read.

Finding Zero is a mixed bag. On the one hand it’s a fascinating trek to find evidence of the first "Arabic" zero; on the other it is very poorly written. If you can set aside the writing style and repetition, you will find an interesting story of the author’s quest to hunt down the beginnings of western and near eastern numerals.

I always like Dr Aczel’s books. They are informative in areas of knowledge that can be above our average understanding, but he puts basic concepts in everyday language. He’s traveled all his life and done amazing things, and recounts them in a way that holds one’s attention. Finding Zero is so important to our mathematical understanding, yet probably not questioned-- why and where did the concept come from? Here is the answer.

The information about zero and numbers was interesting but not enough for a book so there was too much information about the author and his travels which was written more like an assignment. While the author wanted me to think he really cared about this, it didn’t really come across in his style.

I like books that discuss impossible searches. Difficult tasks with great ending s. There are obstacle s and mystery. Good story, great ending with local treasure. Good does win over. History is saved. A little reminiscent of Monuments Men. Thanks for the great true story.

Even the non-mathematically inclined will enjoy it.

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