



# Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea

By Charles Seife

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## Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea By Charles Seife

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 Kabalists 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.

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## Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea By Charles Seife Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #40984 in Books
- Brand: Penguin Books
- Published on: 2000-09-01
- Released on: 2000-09-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .70" w x 5.10" l, .50 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 248 pages

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

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*

#### From Publishers Weekly

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.

#### From Library Journal

This is a very light treatment of big ideas. In the first chapters, Seife, a correspondent for *New Scientist*, skims over the historical and intellectual development of zero, covered more thoughtfully in Robert Kaplan's *The Nothing That Is: A Natural History of Zero* (LJ 10/1/99). Seife then stresses the connections between zero and infinity and explains calculus, quantum mechanics, relativity, the Big Bang, and string theory to show that they depend on zero and infinity. This is much too much ground to cover when the reader is assumed not to know basic algebra, and the book's central claim becomes very weak, not saying much more than that string theory requires the system of modern mathematics. The prose style reflects Seife's occupation as a science journalist: fast-paced and colorful but repetitious, oversimplified, and exaggerated ("Not only does zero hold the secret to our existence, it will also be responsible for the end of the universe").

Recommended for larger public libraries, while smaller libraries on a budget should acquire Kaplan's book. [BOMC selection.]--Kristine Fowler, Mathematics Lib., Univ. of Minnesota, Minneapolis  
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