



The Book Nobody Read: Chasing the Revolutions of Nicolaus Copernicus

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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