

The Nothing That Is A Natural History of Zero

Robert Kaplan

Oxford University Press, 1999

THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK IS BEST TOLD IN THE AUTHOR'S OWN WORDS from the first chapter in the book, not unsurprisingly referred to as "Chapter Zero."

"Zero's path through time and thought," he says, "has been as full of intrigue, disguise, and mistaken identity as were the careers of the travelers who first brought it to the West.

"My approach to these adventures will in part be that of a naturalist, collecting the wonderful variety of forms zero takes on—not only as a number but as a metaphor of despair or delight; as a nothing that is an actual something; as the progenitor of us all and as the riddle of riddles. But we, who are more than magpies, feather our nests with bits of time. I will therefore join the naturalist to the historian at the outset, to relish the stories of those who juggled with gigantic numbers as if they were tennis balls ... "

The book contains a great many fascinating facts and speculations about the origin of zero, many of which were new to me. However, the book tends to jump from culture to culture, making it difficult to get a clear sense of the historical timeline. Also, finding the nuggets requires plowing through a considerable amount of florid writing, particularly in the second half of the book. In addition to the second quote above, consider these examples:

"It is tempting to borrow some of this linear imagery and say that, like Goethe's Faust, zero came through its dark struggles by cleaving to the one true way."

"Not only Baucis and Philemon, that pious old couple from Ovid's tale; not only the venerable Abraham and Sarah; but each of us, singly and together, has entertained an angel unawares."

"The ascent to sanctity is hard, but it seems somehow unfitting that so much effort should have to go into reaching zero, for all that it shines like a halo. Either you stumble on the stillness of things, or you walk toward it on a leveler path as in Taoism, for example, or Yoga: calming the inner monkey, damping down the waves of fervor and despair to the steady state in which you can once again hear nature nattering."

On the other hand, in some instances, I believe

the poetry succeeds very well, as in this effort to describe the essence and beauty of mathematical intuition:

"[Intuition] centers the free play of mind, which

browses on the pastures of phenomena and from its ruminations invents objects so beautiful in themselves, relations that work so elegantly, both fitting in so well with our other inventions and clarifying their surroundings, that world and mind stand revealed as each other's invention, conformably with the unique way that Things Are."

The facts in the book are supported by 78 pages of notes and bibliography on the author's Web site at www.oup-usa.org/sc/0195128427/.

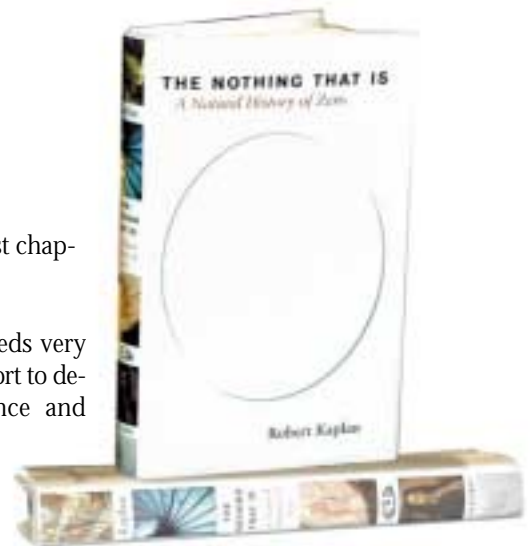
I found reviewing this book very difficult. To paraphrase the opening of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was the best of books, it was the worst of books. For me, the good clearly won out. I'm glad I read it.

—Walter Shur

Also recommended:

Japan's Big Bang : The Deregulation and Revitalization of the Japanese Economy
By Declan Hayes

After a decade in recession, the restructured Japanese economy is slowly beginning to grow again, and its systemic reforms are being put to the test. Hayes examines the fall and rise of Japan's economic infrastructure, starting with the bubble economy that ultimately sapped the country and other Asian neighbors dry. Hayes explores Japan's economic crash and looks at today's Japan, restructuring its economy in accord with American and World Bank dicta, and dealing with the profound social changes necessary to recapture its economic momentum and ensure its continuing dominance as an economic superpower.



Capitalism Russian-Style

By Thane Gustafson

Provides a progress report on one of the most important economic experiments going on in the world today: the building of capitalism in Russia. It describes Russian achievements in building private banks, companies, stock exchanges, new laws, and law courts. It analyzes the role of the mafia, the new financial empires, entrepreneurs, business tycoons, and the shrinking Russian state.

Quiz Show (video)

Written by Paul Attanasio, directed by Robert Redford

Quiz Show is a smart, political exposé about the first generation of television, the corrupting effect of celebrity and success, and the ongoing loss of innocence in American society. Bristling with superior dialogue and energized by an excellent cast including Ralph Fiennes (Charles van Doren), John Turturro (Herbert Stempel), and Paul Scofield (Mark van Doren), *Quiz Show* succeeds as history lesson, intelligent thriller, and morality tale, setting the stage for the countless scandals that would follow in a nation addicted to television.

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