



The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World

By Amir D. Aczel

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The story of the compass is shrouded in mystery and myth, yet most will agree it begins around the time of the birth of Christ in ancient China. A mysterious lodestone whose powers affected metal was known to the Chinese emperor. When this piece of metal was suspended in water, it always pointed north. This unexplainable occurrence led to the stone's use in feng shui, the Chinese art of finding the right location. However, it was the Italians, more than a thousand years later, who discovered the ultimate destiny of the lodestone and unleashed its formidable powers. In Amalfi sometime in the twelfth century, the compass was born, crowning the Italians as the new rulers of the seas and heralding the onset of the modern world. Retracing the roots of the compass and sharing the fascinating story of navigation through the ages, *The Riddle of the Compass* is Aczel at his most entertaining and insightful.

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Adult/High School-Prior to the invention of the compass, a merchant or sailor who wished to cross a large body of water was forced to navigate by studying the winds and stars or by never sailing out of the sight of land. Long ocean voyages were impossible and even sailing the Mediterranean could be a lengthy and hazardous voyage. The compass changed all of this. Mariners could now strike out on an azimuth and have a reasonable chance of arriving at their destination. This led to the Age of Exploration and the expansion of the European kingdoms into economic empires. Yet as important as the compass is, its origins are shrouded in mystery. The small town of Amalfi, Italy, claims to be the birthplace of the inventor of the compass, but China has an even stronger case. Aczel examines the myths, legends, and facts behind the dispute and provides a logical, although not indisputable, conclusion on which nation can claim the compass as its own. He also provides a layman's overview of the development of navigation from the earliest days to the 15th century. Although the author is primarily known for his scientific books, *Riddle of the Compass* contains little or no jargon and a minimum of scientific terminology. A worthwhile and interesting addition.

Robert Burnham, R. E. Lee High School, Springfield, VA

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From Library Journal

Despite its brevity, this book covers its topic completely. In this detailed history, Aczel (*God's Equation; Bentley Coll.*) takes us back in time to Amalfi, Italy, where between 1295 and 1302 the compass as we know it was developed. Aczel points out, however, that the actual discovery of materials that followed magnetic lines, or at least consistently pointed in a specific direction (south), is attributed to the Chinese in 1040. The story of the compass is also the story of navigation, which the author admirably combines. Debunking the myth that sailors followed the coastlines of countries until they met their desired location, the author describes how they navigated the open seas using the sun, stars, wind, and even the migration of birds. While this book is not a page-turner, it is an accurate account of the important historical events that lead to the compass's development. Tellingly, Aczel grew up on a ship and was navigating straits in the Mediterranean long before he could drive a car. Recommended for public as well as academic libraries whose readers want to go beyond the account generally given in an encyclopedia.

- James Olson, Northeastern Illinois Univ., Chicago

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From Scientific American

The compass, Aczel says, was "the most important technological invention since the wheel" because its contribution to navigation "allowed goods to be transported efficiently and reliably across the seas and opened up the world to maritime exploration." Inspired by that thought, Aczel (associate professor of mathematics at Bentley College) set out to trace the history of the device. "The compass," he found, "was invented in antiquity in China, where it did not immediately improve navigation but was used in feng shui." It was the mariners of Amalfi, then a maritime city-state in Italy, who around 1300 transformed the instrument into the compass we know today. Citing it and other devices that only gradually found their technological niche, Aczel concludes that it "seems to be a law of nature that a technology is developed and then waits a long time for people to discover their need for it, rather than the other way around."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Dorothy Marsh:

Why don't make it to become your habit? Right now, try to ready your time to do the important take action, like looking for your favorite reserve and reading a e-book. Beside you can solve your condition; you can add your knowledge by the book entitled *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World*. Try to the actual book *The Riddle of the Compass: The Invention that Changed the World* as your good friend. It means that it can being your friend when you sense alone and beside regarding course make you smarter than before. Yeah, it is very fortunated for you. The book makes you far more confidence because you can know every little thing by the book. So , let us make new experience and also knowledge with this book.

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Frank Keating:

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Fern Rodriquez:

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