



Nothing: From Absolute Zero to Cosmic Oblivion - Amazing Insights into Nothingness

Jeremy Webb (Editor)

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Zero, zip, nada, zilch. It's all too easy to ignore the fascinating possibilities of emptiness and non-existence, and we may well wonder what there is to say about nothing. But scientists have known for centuries that nothing is the key to understanding absolutely everything, from why particles have mass to the expansion of the universe - so without nothing we'd be precisely nowhere. Absolute zero (the coldest cold that can exist) and the astonishing power of placebos, light bulbs, superconductors, vacuums, dark energy, 'bed rest' and the birth of time - all are different aspects of the concept of nothing. The closer we look, the bigger the subject gets. Why do some animals spend all day doing nothing? What happens in our brains when we try to think about nothing? With chapters by 20 science writers, including top names such as Ian Stewart, Marcus Chown, Nigel Henbest, Michael Brooks, Paul Davies and David Fisher, this fascinating and intriguing book revels in a subject that has tantalised the finest minds for centuries, and shows there's more to nothing than meets the eye.

Nothing: From Absolute Zero to Cosmic Oblivion - Amazing Insights into Nothingness Details

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M.G. Mason says

This is a book about nothing - quite literally. It makes something of nothing, quite literally about that too. You will find nothing in this book, lots and lots of nothing and you will find it quite frankly one of the most interesting books you will ever read. Even though it is about nothing, featuring nothing, there is a lot of nothing. Ok, the bad puns have already run out but I hope you get the picture here.

This is a New Scientist volume about nothing. I can't really put it more plainly than that. It's about the nothings that inhabit our world, the spaces of nothing and the zero state of nothing. The subtitle is From Absolute Nothing to Cosmic Oblivion. It's a history of the number zero, how medieval Europe struggled with the existential crisis that such a number would create. It's about zero as a mathematical concept and a physical number, its importance to astronomy, to physics and to science in general.

It's also about the various zero states that make up arbitrary things such as temperature. We all know that the celsius scale goes from 0-100 with 0 being the point at which water freezes and 100 being at the point it turns to water. But what about Fahrenheit, why is that set the way it is? Why do we need and use so many temperature scales? What exists between the stars? Can we actually create a vacuum? What existed before the Big Bang? While the answer to that question is "nothing", it's not quite the "nothing" that you perceive it to be - thereby challenging one of the concepts and strawman arguments that creationists pose against Big Bang Theory.

It also goes off on a tangent into loosely themed "nothing" related subjects. From homeopathy (which is quite literally nothing) to the placebo effect which helps feel better while using nothing, this makes you think about the physical world around you. It presents nothing as a concept, as a philosophy, as a mathematical certainty and as the absence of something - it will show you ways of thinking about nothing in ways you'd never previously considered.

I particularly liked the studies of the number 0 and how it provided so much angst for some societies throughout history. Also of interest is what comes next for the universe, the various theories for where the universe is heading billions of years from now. This may change your worldview, it may go above your head or it may teach you nothing you do not already know.

The only real complaint I have about this book is that it feels a real mish-mash. That's kind of understandable when you're creating a book from edited articles that once featured in New Scientist but it feels that the editors haven't quite thought as much about its structure. You will find your attention drift at times too as seemingly unrelated sections get shunted together.

They explain the general idea of working it the way they did, but it didn't quite work for me. It's confusing and seemingly unrelated in places - a shame because they had the chance to structure it in a way that feels organic and natural with nothing being a natural state of the universe.

Dee Eisel says

Some essays were fantastic. Some were meh. Honestly, I was surprised by the ones that hooked me! The essay on watching paint dry, for instance, was engaging. The one on superconductors, which I expected to be great, was only so-so. Because of that, I'm giving it three stars. But others' mileage may vary, so it's worth at least looking!

Standout essays:

- The Big Bang
 - Placebo Power
 - Zero, Zip, Zilch
 - Vacuum packed
 - Boring-ology
 - Pathways to Cosmic Oblivion
-

Odette Knappers says

This could have been an interesting read. This book has all kinds of fields in it, math, medicine, cosmology.. I really like that. It is a collection of articles about the subject of nothing. Yes, you can write a lot about nothing.

The order of the chapters is a bit confusing at first. I expected a chapter per field, but they explain at the beginning of the book that they have chosen to do it a different way. The first chapter is about beginnings, and it has something about the big bang and about brainresearch.

If you read a whole chapter in this book in one sitting, it is a bit chaos. But if you read it an article at the time, the order makes this book easier to read than if they had devoted a whole chapter to on field of research. In that case, I would sooner be tempted to skip something, because I've read enough about brain research already, for example. That is not the case now. So I do see the perks of this, but I'm not a fan of it because the feeling of chaos overrules the surprises you get because you've read something you wouldn't have read otherwise.

And then I have an issue with the writing. Most of the articles are interesting, but sometimes I lost what I was reading about. It is a bit all over the place. Sometimes I was even wondering what I've just read. It is in a particular way good because there is interesting stuff in it, but it didn't feel like an amazingly read I've learned a lot from, somehow. It doesn't endure.

It just feels badly written and thus it is hard to read. Maybe this is because of the translation, I don't know, so I do recommend if you want to read this, to read the original English version. I think that is better because it are articles from New Scientist and that is usually very well written!

It's not that I notice that the translation is bad, but it feels like something is off with the writing. Very hard to pinpoint what it is that makes me feel like this is not a good book, while it has all the potential and subject to be one. I just had to drag myself through every single page of it..

Paul Perry says

A very nice collection of longer articles from New Scientist on the theme of Nothing in various forms. I particularly like the cosmology (of course), and all there pieces are interesting in informative, although I have issues with the several that centre on the placebo (and nocebo) effects. These do highlight what can sometimes be a weakness of this type of article, that while explaining an apparent phenomenon it is presented in far too uncritical a fashion, which can lead the less informed reader to place too great a weight on the effect., a particular problem when it is picked up by the general media and further amplified or warped.

Colin forrest says

Amazingly interesting

Tim says

"It's time to make much ado about nothing" says the back of the book. From the origin of the number zero, and the search for the perfect vacuum and the coldest temperature, to doing nothing and the affect on living things.

Being a collection of essays from New Scientist first published 2013, some of the material is dating fast, especially in the quantum world and the search for new sub-atomic particles. At least the introduction is aware of this so new editions can be popped out every 10 years or so with relevant updates.

My favourite chapters concerned biology, making vacuums, and the search for absolute zero temperature. Bed rest experiments have shown it is bad for human circulatory health, while for other animals the cost of moving versus the energy available after digesting food leans towards sedentary lifestyles. Vacuums are best measured in particles per cubic area instead of the usual bar, kilo pascals or millimetres of mercury.

The chapter I found most lacking was about the number zero itself. The potted history seemed to miss how an empty circle came to represent zero for most Europeans. What did ordinary people make of it while philosophers and clerics were debating the meaning of dividing by zero?

Peter Mcloughlin says

Was a bit disappointed. This book was published by new scientist a premier science magazine yet I found the book a bit glib and superficial. It didn't go into topics very deeply and seemed to underestimate the readers attention span. meh.

Amanda says

An engaging grab bag of essays on versions of "nothing" in various fields of science: dark matter, the pre-Big Bang universe, the placebo effect, "useless" organs, zero, and empty sets. I found the organization a bit confusing, but it is a quick weekend read that is sure to teach you something new.

Svetos Laugh says

science, bitch!

Lionkhan-sama says

What a superb book!

A very abstract layout, with an abstract range of topics split between chapters.

All topics revolve on the concept of "nothing", and the deeper you get into the book, the more that word seems to mean.

A brilliant array of fully scientific articles, from authorities around the world.

Ranging between physical and metaphysical realms, the arguments and ideas brought forth within the book are a delicious variety of flavours for your mind to munch on.

Another great point worth mentioning, is that the language used is not particularly difficult to understand. Very high level scientific subjects are brought forth in semi-layman terms.

Excellent book for just reading on the sideline. Highly recommended.

Ami Iida says

nothing

Librariasaurus says

More of a three and a half star review for me. This one took me almost three times as long to read as an ordinary fiction or biography book would, but that's not to say it wasn't VERY good reading and a very valuable educational experience.

I'd have to say though, this book is very heavy on quantum vacuum discussion and this aspect was what bored me most.

Most enjoyable for me were the discussions on the placebo effect, and the later discussions on exercise physiology. In essence the studies of doing nothing.

I found the discussions referring to absolute zero temperature to be highly informative and enlightened me on more than one of the scientific elements of the periodic table that my own school education had neglected.

I also loved the "choose your own adventure" model of organising the book, which I know other readers have found difficult. It allowed me to read the things I was interested in at my own pace, eventually getting through the entire book. This is the reason for the book not seeming to be in any logical or academically sound order, the essays are not meant to be linked together in chronological order. They do not refer to one another and are not supposed to.

The contributions are from a group of highly qualified and intelligent people ranging from Paul Davies and Philip Ball to Ian Stewart and Richard Webb and with professions ranging from professor emeritus of mathematics, particle physicist, cell biologist, novelist, journalist and associate professor of material physics. These people also work at varied institutions including but not limited to CERN, NewScientist and various prestigious universities and research facilities.

Overall, this is a well researched, and cohesive collective study of different states of nothingness.

Andrew says

This book is almost impossible to describe - with the actual book cover introduction pretty much covering it all off. Its about nothing - from the nothing of space to the nothing your mind does when it is resting - and everything in-between from medication to mathematics - if there is nothing, zero or just a total absence of anything it is discussed - and in their own unique way they are then linked together - it is a fantastic journey and one I think made all the most fascinating by the fact you have no idea what will happen next. It can be a little repetitive in places and in true science paper ways a little heavy at times but but generally it is well written and interestingly presented.

Bharath says

This book has an excellent premise and take off. There is a lot to be gained by paying attention to the nothings. It was a long time before zero was accepted. After all the universe also started with nothing or so it may be.

However, since it is a collection of essays matter repeats and is at times too detailed. In that sense the book does not take the theories forward in a consistent manner.

Nevertheless still recommend it as being well worth a read.

Rosemary says

I thought this might have some philosophy in it, as well as science, but no. It covers a lot of different topics,

some more interesting than others for me. It's one of those chatty popular science books that jumps around a lot, but taking it one article at a time works. The chapters (groups of articles) don't hang together particularly well but each article is cohesive on its own terms.
