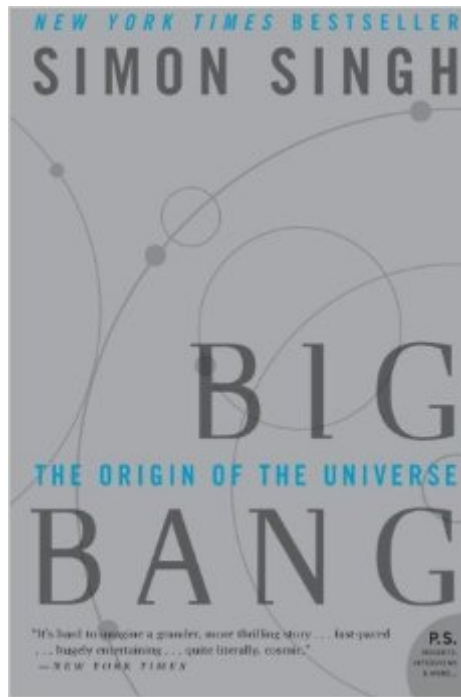


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Big Bang: The Origin Of The Universe



Synopsis

A half century ago, a shocking Washington Post headline claimed that the world began in five cataclysmic minutes rather than having existed for all time; a skeptical scientist dubbed the maverick theory the Big Bang. In this amazingly comprehensible history of the universe, Simon Singh decodes the mystery behind the Big Bang theory, lading us through the development of one of the most extraordinary, important, and awe-inspiring theories in science.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Simon Singh is an adept popular science writer. His first significant book was Fermat's Enigma which was an entertaining and informative chronicle of the solution to Fermat's Last Theorem. Then there was the Code Book which provided a nice history of cryptography. Now, in Big Bang, Singh deals with one of the biggest questions of them all: how did the universe begin? Actually, for astronomy junkies - those who've read books like Brian Greene's The Elegant Universe or Hawkings's Brief History of Time - Big Bang is probably a little tame and won't offer much new insight. Singh's audience is the general reader, one who may understand what the Big Bang is but not how the concept was arrived at. Singh starts with the ancient Greeks and the origins of science. Soon enough, we read of Copernicus and his revolutionary idea that the Earth was not the center of the universe. Through Galileo, Kepler, Newton and others, the design of the universe kept changing, sometimes radically (geocentric to heliocentric) and sometimes more subtly (circular orbits to elliptical ones). Then things began to move beyond the solar system to look at the Milky Way: did it

contain all the stars in the universe or were there other galaxies as well? The determination that there were many galaxies and that they seemed to mostly receding from each other led to a somewhat startling idea: if the galaxies are moving away from each other, they must have been closer in the past and at some point, they were all in one place. The Big Bang theory would have its fair share of opposition, most notably from Fred Hoyle; ironically, it was Hoyle who wound up coming up with the term "Big Bang."

Who first looked up at the night sky wondering about those specks of light? Whoever and wherever that was, the quest for an answer has endured. Simon Singh traces the results of that search in very human terms. From early creation myths through the orbiting of machines that view the universe in selected frequencies, he explains how our knowledge of the cosmos has built and changed over four long centuries. Using an effective conversational style, he demonstrates how the slow accumulation of knowledge built our picture of the universe. With clarity came distance in our growing perception of the age and scope of the cosmos. After nearly fifteen billion years, the universe has had much time to expand. Whether that will long continue is one of the points of this excellent story. Arranging his topics carefully, Singh ties concepts to their investigators. Early ideas were based on "common sense" and accepted authorities. Naked eye observation limited our ability to "see" the universe until the telescope was developed. "Decentralising" is an ongoing theme in this book as we learn how Western Europe came to understand the Earth was not the centre of things. Galileo's telescopic observations shifted that centre to the sun. When telescopes improved even the sun's location moved to the edge of the Milky Way. Singh demonstrates how each step was proposed, considered and contested, then accepted with additional data. With hindsight, the conclusions all appear obvious. At the time of each new concept's proposal, "established" views held sway until overwhelming evidence displaced them. No proposal was so hotly disputed as the notion that the cosmos began as a tiny region which rapidly expanded - the Big Bang.

Almost everyone has heard of "The Big Bang" and its claim that the Universe began with an "explosion" from an infinitesimally small point some fifteen billion years ago. It is one of those terms that everyone needs to know something about in order to be connected to the larger culture. You don't have to agree with it or believe, but you need to know about it. This book is a terrific way to gain an overview of the theory, its history, and its connection to the history of astronomy since Ptolemy and the earth centered universe. "The Big Bang" is a terrific read because Simon Singh is an exceptionally talented writer who is able to open even arcane subjects for the general reader. He

has a special gift for knowing just how much a subject needs to be simplified while leaving it just challenging enough to make the reader think a bit and puzzle things out in order to appreciate the intellectual change the new insight represents. Mr. Singh also humanizes the story by keeping the men and women who made these discoveries front and center. It is the human rivalries, their mistakes, and their genius that attracts us and keeps us turning the pages to find out what happens next. And what a cast this book has. Just some of the big names are Ptolemy, Copernicus, Galileo, Brahe, Kepler, Newton, Hubble, Hoyle, and Einstein. There are dozens of important names I am not listing here simply because they aren't as well known as they deserve to be. I love the story of how Eratosthenes made a pretty good calculation of the circumference of the earth using a stick, a well, some careful measurements, and trigonometry. Once that distance is known, figuring out the size and distance of the moon and the Sun are not that hard.

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