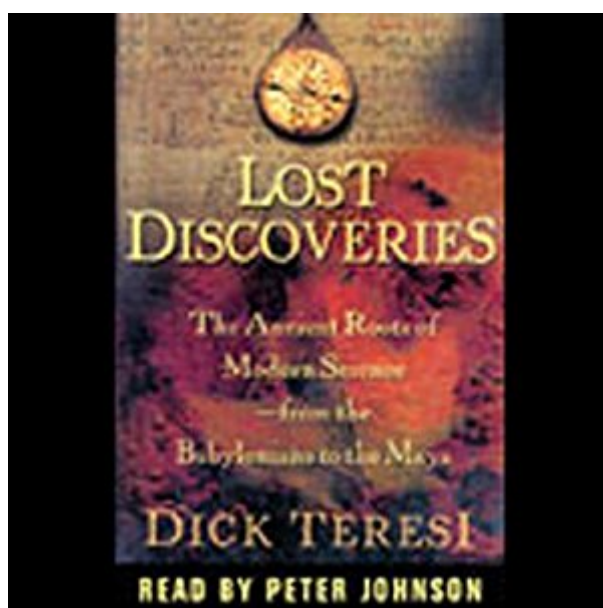


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Lost Discoveries: The Multicultural Roots Of Modern Science From The Babylonians To The Maya



Synopsis

Boldly challenging conventional wisdom, acclaimed science writer and Omni magazine cofounder Dick Teresi traces the origins of contemporary science back to their ancient roots in an eye-opening account and landmark work. This innovative history proves once and for all that the roots of modern science were established centuries, and in some instances millennia, before the births of Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. In this enlightening, entertaining, and important book, Teresi describes many discoveries from all over the non-Western world -- Sumeria, Babylon, Egypt, India, China, Africa, Arab nations, the Americas, and the Pacific islands -- that equaled and often surpassed Greek and European learning in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, physics, geology, chemistry, and technology. The first extensive and authoritative multicultural history of science written for a popular audience, *Lost Discoveries* fills a critical void in our scientific, cultural, and intellectual history and is destined to become a classic in its field. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 14 hours 38 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Random House Audio

Audible.com Release Date: November 15, 2002

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00007IDZ3

Best Sellers Rank: #47 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Mayan #55 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Assyria, Babylonia & Sumer #73 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Mesopotamia

Customer Reviews

Teresi starts his book by noting, "I began to write with the purpose of showing that the pursuit of showing that the pursuit of evidence of nonwhite science is a fruitless endeavor...Six years later, I was still finding examples of ancient and medieval non-Western science that equaled and often surpassed ancient Greek learning.... "My embarrassment at having undertaken an assignment with the assumption that non-Europeans contributed little to science has been overtaken by the pleasure

of discovering mountains of unappreciated human industry, four thousand years of scientific discoveries by peoples I had been taught to disregard." One reviewer has correctly noted that science consists of reproducible experiments, and I pretty much agree. But not all science is reproducible or even falsified or tested (consider super string theory). While I would not call Indian ideas of vibrations the precursor of quantum physics, I would not go as far as Morris Kline, whom Teresi noted characterized Babylonian and Egyptian math as the "scrawling of children, and called Indian mathematicians "fools." Teresi's book is full of eye-opening accounts of ancient science that was as much real science as anything our "scientists" of 300 or 400 years ago cooked up. Is map-making a science? Chinese made Mercator projection maps almost 2000 years ago. Is astronomy a science? Ancient Chinese not only kept records of but also predicted solar and lunar eclipses. And recently Nasa has referred to ancient Chinese records in their efforts to determine how much the earth's rotation has slowed down. They used ancient Chinese records because they were meticulous, scientific observations. Of course, Teresi's book is so chock full of facts that, inevitably, he slipped up on some. For example, on page 240 he wrote that "According to Confucius, there are also records of drilling with bamboo poles for natural gas in Szechwan in 211 B.C." Indeed, there was such drilling (2000 feet deep!), but if Confucius wrote about it, he was also a prophet, because Confucius died 268 years before this. But everyone, even an ex editor of Omni, slips up. If writing this book opened Teresi's eyes, it can also open readers' eyes--unless they are determined to restrict the definition of science so narrowly that even some modern physics would not qualify. I highly recommend this book. And if you're interested in ancient Chinese inventions, as I am, having lived in China over 20 years (in Xiamen, former Amoy), I highly recommend "Chinese Science and the West", written a couple decades ago by Clarke. Absolutely intriguing--and objective (based, I think, on a BBC series).

The author of "Lost Discoveries" claims he began to write "with the purpose of showing that the pursuit of evidence of nonwhite science is a fruitless endeavor," but his goal changed when he kept finding "examples of ancient and medieval non-Western science that equaled and often surpassed ancient Greek learning." The book he wrote instead is a compendium of miscellaneous ancient, non-Western discoveries or beliefs in what he calls the "hard sciences." (An unfortunate lapse: By "nonwhite," Teresi apparently means non-European; his investigation includes other Caucasian civilizations.) Non-Western scientific background is definitely a topic worthy of a book for the general reader, and, although there's some fascinating stuff here (and a solid bibliography that will expand anyone's reading list), "Lost Discoveries" suffers from several shortcomings. One problem is the

book's organization. Teresi divides his discussion into distinctions that were unknown a few centuries ago--mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, physics, geology, chemistry, and technology--and then divides each of these chapters by localities. As a result, the book has little narrative flow and makes for some awfully dry reading--the type of disconnected paragraphs one usually finds in textbooks or reference works. I found it difficult to read this book for more than a few pages at a stretch. Furthermore, since modern scientific specialties were, of course, unknown to ancient investigators, his categorization results in some odd choices. For example, beliefs concerning the shape of the earth (round, flat, or square) are discussed in geology as well as cosmology. Similarly, he arbitrarily divides up the work of alchemists among several chapters. Since ancient and medieval studies span many disciplines, there is a lot of annoying (and often verbatim) repetition: we read about the yin-yang duality and ch'i in the sections on astronomy, physics, geology, and chemistry; about Jainism with regards to cosmology, physics, and chemistry; and how Avicenna influenced physics, geology, and chemistry. Teresi was cofounder of Omni Magazine, which had a reputation (some might call it notoriety) for including articles on topics that strayed well beyond science and into paranormal exploration and New Age quackery. Although "Lost Discoveries" is usually on firmer scientific ground, the author occasionally recalls his earlier career with an eager enthusiasm to find direct or symbolic connections between ancient learning and modern scientific investigation. This is particularly true in his chapter on cosmology. (Teresi's obvious distaste for Big Bang theory doesn't help here.) The Manganian creation myth, describing an infant universe emerging from a coconut root, may offer interesting literary and cultural insights, but it in no way "anticipates" modern cosmological theories of an inflationary universe. Elsewhere, it's simply preposterous to find intimations of quantum theory in the ancient Indian "yadrcha" (chance) or of the Higgs field in the Buddhist "maya" (the weight of the universe). One may as well argue that William Bennett is a quantum physicist every time he walks into a casino. It's too bad that Teresi didn't organize his research by civilization and time period, compare these societies on their own terms (rather than ours), chart their influences on each other and on subsequent cultures, and avoid misguided attempts to find inklings of 21st-century theories and knowledge in every ancient myth. Readers looking for a stronger investigation of the wonders of non-Western science, technology, and civilization should check out Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel" or Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's "Civilizations."

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