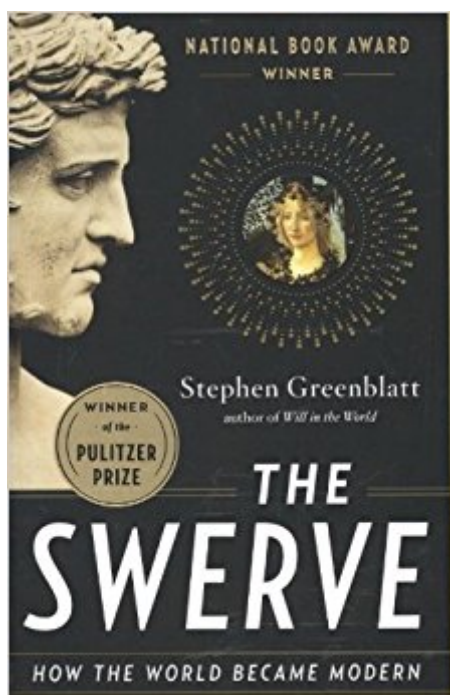


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# The Swerve: How The World Became Modern



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction • Winner of the 2011 National Book Award for Non-Fiction One of the world's most celebrated scholars, Stephen Greenblatt has crafted both an innovative work of history and a thrilling story of discovery, in which one manuscript, plucked from a thousand years of neglect, changed the course of human thought and made possible the world as we know it. Nearly six hundred years ago, a short, genial, cannily alert man in his late thirties took a very old manuscript off a library shelf, saw with excitement what he had discovered, and ordered that it be copied. That book was the last surviving manuscript of an ancient Roman philosophical epic, *On the Nature of Things*, by Lucretius • a beautiful poem of the most dangerous ideas: that the universe functioned without the aid of gods, that religious fear was damaging to human life, and that matter was made up of very small particles in eternal motion, colliding and swerving in new directions. The copying and translation of this ancient book—the greatest discovery of the greatest book-hunter of his age—fueled the Renaissance, inspiring artists such as Botticelli and thinkers such as Giordano Bruno; shaped the thought of Galileo and Freud, Darwin and Einstein; and had a revolutionary influence on writers such as Montaigne and Shakespeare and even Thomas Jefferson. 16 pages of color illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

• The ideas in *The Swerve* are tucked, cannily, inside a quest narrative. . . . The details that Mr. Greenblatt supplies throughout *The Swerve* are tangy and exact. . . . There is abundant evidence

here of what is Mr. Greenblatt's great and rare gift as a writer: an ability, to borrow a phrase from *The Swerve*, to feel fully 'the concentrated force of the buried past.' - *New York Times*

In this gloriously learned page-turner, both biography and intellectual history, Harvard Shakespearean scholar Greenblatt turns his attention to the front end of the Renaissance as the origin of Western culture's foundation: the free questioning of truth. - starred review, *Publishers Weekly*

More wonderfully illuminating Renaissance history from a master scholar and historian. - starred review, *Kirkus Reviews*

In *The Swerve*, the literary historian Stephen Greenblatt investigates why [Lucretius'] book nearly dies, how it was saved and what its rescue means to us. - Sarah Bakewell, *New York Times Book Review*

In this outstandingly constructed assessment of the birth of philosophical modernity, renowned Shakespeare scholar Greenblatt deftly transports reader to the dawn of the Renaissance...Readers from across the humanities will find this enthralling account irresistible. - starred review, *Library Journal*

Every tale of the preservation of intellectual history should be as rich and satisfying as Stephen Greenblatt's history of the reclamation and acclamation of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* from obscurity. - John McFarland, *Shelf Awareness*

It's fascinating to watch Greenblatt trace the dissemination of these ideas through 15th-century Europe and beyond, thanks in good part to Bracciolini's recovery of Lucretius' poem. - *Salon.com*

But *Swerve* is an intense, emotional telling of a true story, one with much at stake for all of us. And the further you read, the more astonishing it becomes. It's a chapter in how we became what we are, how we arrived at the worldview of the present. No one can tell the whole story, but Greenblatt seizes on a crucial pivot, a moment of recovery, of transmission, as amazing as anything in fiction. - *Philadelphia Inquirer*

[*The Swerve*] is thrilling, suspenseful tale that left this reader inspired and full of questions about the ongoing project known as human civilization. - *Boston Globe*

Can a poem change the world? Harvard professor and bestselling Shakespeare biographer Greenblatt ably shows in this mesmerizing intellectual history that it can. A richly entertaining read about a radical ancient Roman text that shook Renaissance Europe and inspired shockingly modern ideas (like the atom) that still reverberate today. - *Newsweek*

A fascinating, intelligent look at what may well be the most historically resonant book-hunt of all time. - *Booklist*

Pleasure may or may not be the true end of life, but for book lovers, few experiences can match the intellectual-aesthetic enjoyment delivered by a well-wrought book. In the world of serious nonfiction, Stephen Greenblatt is a pleasure maker without peer. - *Newsday*

*The Swerve* is one of those brilliant works of non-fiction that's so jam-packed with ideas and stories it literally boggles the mind. - Maureen Corrigan, *NPR/Fresh Air*

Stephen Greenblatt (Ph.D. Yale) is Cogan University Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University. Also General Editor of The Norton Anthology of English Literature, he is the author of eleven books, including *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (winner of the 2011 National Book Award and the 2012 Pulitzer Prize); *Shakespeare's Freedom*; *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*; *Hamlet in Purgatory*; *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*; *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*; and *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. He has edited seven collections of criticism, including *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, and is a founding coeditor of the journal *Representations*. His honors include the MLA's James Russell Lowell Prize, for both *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* and *The Swerve*, the Sapegno Prize, the Distinguished Humanist Award from the Mellon Foundation, the Wilbur Cross Medal from the Yale University Graduate School, the William Shakespeare Award for Classical Theatre, the Erasmus Institute Prize, two Guggenheim Fellowships, and the Distinguished Teaching Award from the University of California, Berkeley. He was president of the Modern Language Association of America and is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Excellent and wide ranging book on the history of the origins of scientific thought in Greece and how those ideas survived the dark ages and reappeared to shape the modern world. Of particular interest to me was the role religion played in suppressing the ideas, but also in preserving the manuscripts for future scholars to "rediscover". A fascinating story of Lucretius's *The Nature of Things* and so much more.

Stephen Greenblatt has given scholars of the early modern period a number of important books, but with *"The Swerve,"* he provides an account of intellectual life in late medieval/early renaissance Europe that will appeal to a larger audience. His prose is readable, clear, and intelligent, with pauses for reflection and conjecture. This is my favorite sort of history. Greenblatt takes the premise that the rediscovery of Lucretius's *"On the Nature of Things"* was the turning point that created modern thinking about, well, the organization of the universe. The book follows the progress of Poggio Bracciolini, who rediscovered the manuscript in 1417, but also traces the origin of Lucretius's ideas and considers why both Lucretius's work and that of his predecessors nearly disappeared forever. If you like this sort of intellectual history, you'll enjoy *"The Swerve."*

One fateful day in 1417, Poggio Bracciolini, former Apostolic Secretary to Antipope John XXIII, now unemployed, roamed into a monastery in southern Germany. History doesn't record which one. And the journey wasn't accidental; Poggio went deliberately, with one goal in mind, to uncover ancient Latin books forgotten in dusty scriptoria. This monastery proved a treasure trove, including one book so important, its worldview arguably changed the world. Harvard professor Stephen Greenblatt is primarily famous as a Shakespeare scholar. But like most public intellectuals, Greenblatt's interests run pretty polyglot. This multiple-award-winning nonfiction narrative combines history, philology, philosophy, and other topics into an impressively exuberant stew linking several stages of European history together. The shared focus: the last surviving copy of Titus Lucretius Carus' epic philosophical poem, *De Rerum Natura*. Poggio was one among several Italian thinkers known as the Humanists. Despite that term's present association with atheism, early Humanists were fairly religious. Their founder, Petrarch, was a cleric, while many layman Humanists, like Poggio, were nevertheless employed by the church. One early Humanist was even elected Pope. In an era of Inquisitions and Ecumenical Councils, church status provided pioneering Humanists with significant protection and economic stability. The Humanists shared a conviction that ancient Roman culture, and later the Hellenic culture that preceded Rome, represented an apex of human accomplishment. Notwithstanding their religious alliances, the Humanists sought to recover Roman history from a millennium of abandonment and willful suppression. Some, like Petrarch, doubled as creative artists, while others were content as scholars. Poggio was the latter, using his church income to subsidize a career in book hunting. That winter's day in 1417, Poggio used his papal connections, immense historical knowledge, and impeccable handwriting to gain access to a neglected monastic library. Greenblatt postulates it may have been Fulda, a one-time center of knowledge and education, since fallen on hard times, though he concedes that's speculation. Wherever it was, the library yielded several irreplaceable texts, including an astronomy guide and a verse history of the Second Punic War. It also yielded a single copy of Lucretius. This poet was known from throwaway references in Cicero and St. Jerome, but his work was considered lost. Poggio couldn't have known the full significance of his discovery, because he had time enough to skim a few pages before entrusting it to some underpaid copyist. But he'd rediscovered the most thorough introduction to Epicurean philosophy, a complete worldview written without reliance on gods, spirits, or afterlife. Lucretius recorded, in unrhymed Latin verse, a Greek philosophy declaring that reality, not Platonic ideals, are the starting point of conjecture. Epicureanism postulates that matter is not infinitely divisible, but comprised of atoms. These atoms combine and separate, creating the

movements of reality. Everything, from gods and stars to humans and dust, shares this atomic nature. Atomism, to Lucretius, makes humans part of reality, free from fear of divine retribution. Greenblatt isn't so naïve as to believe Poggio's discovery transformed Europe overnight. Indeed, Lucretius threatened worldly authorities so much, his verses circulated surreptitiously in learned circles for a generation. But Greenblatt situates this discovery amid a European culture where recovered Latin learning was already beginning to transform arts and sciences—a sort of Renaissance, if you will. Poggio was part of the metamorphosis already sweeping European Christendom. Epicureanism's deist (not really atheist) structures led scholars to re-examine their approaches to thorny issues, both religious and secular. It led devout Catholics like Thomas More to give increased weight to scientific reasoning. It prompted Giordano Bruno to question received dogma, eventually exposing the Inquisition's moral rot. European scientists began testing hypotheses, not just receiving them, while moralists began examining human consequences, not just divine mandates. Sometimes Greenblatt speculates beyond the limits of evidence. His descriptions of medieval Christian asceticism, for instance, assert that Christians flagellated themselves to purge the influences of Epicureanism. That seems like a reach, given how even fellow pre-Christians frequently distrusted and caricatured Epicureanism. Christians probably tortured themselves, rather, in reaction against sybaritic behaviors common among Roman persecutors. In this and some other circumstances, Greenblatt arguably oversimplifies complex historical trends. Nevertheless, Greenblatt's massive historical narrative, stretching from the Third Century BCE to the early American Republic, demonstrates history's arc. While we moderns hope that progress is a universal imperative, Greenblatt shows it's more contingent than that, with movements toward both knowledge and ignorance. History isn't vague or impersonal, it's driven by human activities and momentary choices, which may initiate consequences we cannot fully comprehend until years, sometimes even centuries, later.

A truly extraordinary book in content and, even more remarkably, simultaneously a delight to read. The sheer vividness of Greenblatt's writing of, for example, John XXIII's (the bad one, not Roncalli) and his entrance to a Church Council is not to be missed. You can tell that Greenblatt's long devotion to Shakespeare really paid off in his attention to telling detail. Plus his range of scholarship is breathtaking.

In history class we learned that the Dark Ages were, well, dark, and the lights didn't come back on

until the Greek and Roman humanist traditions were rediscovered in the Renaissance. Thus modern civilization officially began. What I never understood was how the lights came back on? How does a culture that has been actively and accidentally suppressed for over 1000 years reappear? Fragments of the physical monuments of the great civilizations remained even during the Dark Ages. In Rome, citizens were accustomed to the presence of ancient ruins and scavenged accordingly. But the intellectual underpinnings of the architecture were long gone. Oral histories were forgotten, and manuscripts destroyed by book worms, fire, and mold. But not everyone ignored the traditions of the past. In the 14th C, the scholar Petrarch discovered, studied, and distributed ancient masterpieces by Cicero and others. His work inspired other scholar sleuths. The hunt for lost manuscripts began in earnest. The main hunting ground for classic works was monasteries. Here monks mindlessly copied the great works and then shelved them for hundreds of years. In one such remote monastery in 1417, a book hunter and sometime papal court employee Poggio Bracciolini uncovered a copy of Lucretius's influential poem *On the Nature of Things*. Its discovery was the equivalent of replacing a 40 watt bulb with stadium lighting. Greenblatt explores how this surprisingly modern poem influenced thinkers from Shakespeare to Thomas Jefferson and took the world in an entirely new direction. I loved this book--- a mini refresher course in Western Civ without the boring lectures and the final exam!

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