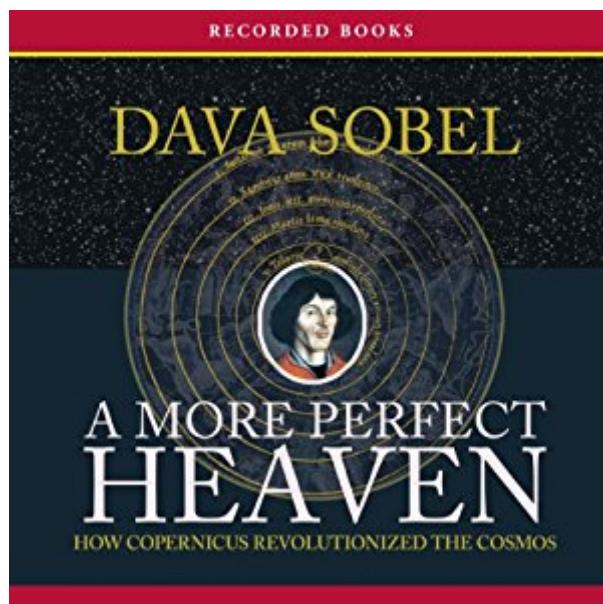


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# A More Perfect Heaven: How Copernicus Revolutionized The Cosmos



## Synopsis

In her graceful, compelling style, Dava Sobel chronicles the history of the Copernican Revolution, relating the story of astronomy from Aristotle to the Middle Ages. In its midst will be her play, *And the Sun Stood Still*, imagining the dialogue that would have transpired between Rheticus and Copernicus in their months together. As she achieved with her best sellers *Longitude* and *Galileo's Daughter*, Sobel expands the bounds of science writing, giving us an unforgettable portrait of scientific achievement.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Davia Sobel is a superlative producer of short but highly illuminating examinations of the history of science and scientists. *A More Perfect Heaven* is a study of Nicolaus Copernicus and his revolutionary theory, and it deserves equal plaudits with her earlier *Longitude* and *Galileo's Daughter*. Copernicus is now a Polish national hero, but during his lifetime his nationality was often uncertain. He spent all or nearly all of his life within the borders of modern Poland, but in those days that meant he lived partly under the rule of the Polish king and partly under that of several German and Polish dukes and princes. He lived in a period of turmoil as the Protestant Reformation challenged the Roman Catholic Church and as warfare swept back and forth across Europe. But one of the most important conflicts had most of its origins within Copernicus' own head: the rise of the heliocentric theory, in which the Earth and planets orbited the Sun, to challenge the established geocentric theory in which the Earth was the center of the universe. This was not just a scientific debate, the argument between heliocentrism and geocentrism appeared to shake the foundations of

the Roman Catholic Church and Christianity, as well as centuries of accepted and approved scientific belief. Copernicus himself was a Catholic canon who depended on the good graces of various bishops in order to keep his position. For years while he worked out the details of what he was certain was the truth Copernicus kept his work a secret, and it was not until he was in his final years that a younger man convinced him to publish his theories using the new printing press technology. Controversy over his theory swirled at once and continued to do so after Copernicus' death as other astronomers like Tycho and Kepler and Galileo added details in support of heliocentrism. The Catholic Church placed Copernicus' writings and those of some of his supporters in the Index, where they remained for some 300 years. Sobel's superb recreation of Copernicus' life and the world in which he lived makes *A More Perfect Heaven* a pleasure to read. Besides the usual elegant writing and the keen eye for a telling anecdote which we have come to expect from Sobel, there is an additional attraction in the form of a play depicting Copernicus' relationship with his collaborator Rheticus. I thoroughly enjoyed *A More Perfect Heaven* and intend to reread it many times.

Ms. Sobel is a highly skilled writer of scientific history. Her books *Longitude* and *Galileo's Daughter* are two of my favorite books in the field. With *A More Perfect Heaven*, she again shows her ability to bring an old story into a new and interesting light. This book tells the story of the life of Nicholas Copernicus--how he lived most of his life as a canon in Varmia, a loyal Catholic surrounded by the growing pressures of Lutheranism in northern Prussia. She describes how he became an expert in mathematics and astronomy, which he pursued as he could around his religious duties, and how he hinted at his revolutionary new view of the solar system in early writings, culminating in *On the Revolution of the Heavenly Spheres*. She also recounts how a Lutheran scholar, Rheticus, finally tracks him down and pushes him to publish his book, a printed copy of which Copernicus receives only as he is dying. Overall, it is a good, brief account of Copernicus' life. If there is a weakness, it is the same as in her last book on the planets; namely, that she has moved away from straight history and into more personal pursuits. In her last book on the planets, her factual account was interspersed with memoir. Here, we have a two-act play stuck in the middle of the biography. Not that the play didn't have its pleasures, but it just didn't seem to fit in an otherwise direct biography. It felt like filler in a book that would otherwise have been too short. Personally, I would have preferred Ms. Sobel to lose the play and develop some of the history a bit more. She does have some historical tidbits that I hadn't seen used in other biographies of Copernicus I have read. I was quite interested in the Prussian politics of the period and the impact of the Teutonic knights, for example.

Still, this is a solid, brief biography and worth the read. I just think Ms. Sobel could have done better.

I've enjoyed Ms. Sobel's previous books and purchased this one on the basis of my experience with her work and an interest in the Copernican Revolution, but "Perfect Heaven" is very disappointing. She meanders through lots of marginally interesting information that is not at all relevant to the apparent topic. In the middle of the book, she drops a play (which was performed off-Broadway) for no apparent purpose other than to fill out the text. It wouldn't be so jarring if the play was interesting, but it is boring. There are much better books on Copernicus and the reception history of his greatest work. (Although I did find her discussion of some of Copernicus's work in fields other than astronomy revealing.)

This book was not as good as the others by Dava Sobel but still an outstanding work. Sobel has an incredible way of presenting history. There's an interesting twist mid-book to present a critical point in Copernicus's life. Loved this book and it will well worth reading. This is a book totally appropriate for young readers, by the way. A good way to teach history.

This is an excellent recount of the Copernican Revolution with stunning research credits and a novel way of depicting moments in which no written account exists. The linkage between the Lutheran and Catholic epochs which dominated the landscape while Copernicus was reaching his greatest conclusions...and his role in those epochs...is fascinating. Finally, the linkage extended to Tycho Brahe, Johannes Kepler and Galileo puts these "stitches in time" together into a marvelous quilt of the beginning of understanding as to who we really are and where we really live. Hats off to Dava Sobel. I feel as if I was there! :)

Copernicus, like Newton, through his own intellect, conceived of a heliocentric solar system in a time when such an idea was heresy. It was satisfying to read that his idea was proved right over the many years after his death. He lives on as a giant in the great hall of science

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