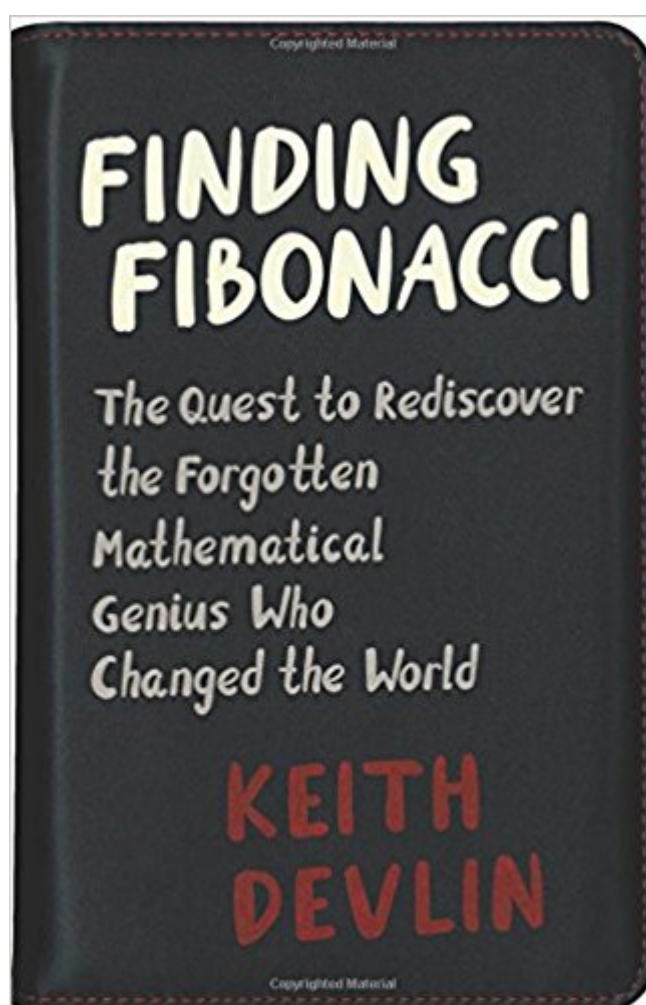




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# Finding Fibonacci: The Quest To Rediscover The Forgotten Mathematical Genius Who Changed The World



## Synopsis

A compelling firsthand account of Keith Devlin's ten-year quest to tell Fibonacci's story. In 2000, Keith Devlin set out to research the life and legacy of the medieval mathematician Leonardo of Pisa, popularly known as Fibonacci, whose book *Liber abbaci* has quite literally affected the lives of everyone alive today. Although he is most famous for the Fibonacci numbers—which, it so happens, he didn't invent—Fibonacci's greatest contribution was as an expositor of mathematical ideas at a level ordinary people could understand. In 1202, *Liber abbaci*—the "Book of Calculation"—introduced modern arithmetic to the Western world. Yet Fibonacci was long forgotten after his death, and it was not until the 1960s that his true achievements were finally recognized. *Finding Fibonacci* is Devlin's compelling firsthand account of his ten-year quest to tell Fibonacci's story. Devlin, a math expositor himself, kept a diary of the undertaking, which he draws on here to describe the project's highs and lows, its false starts and disappointments, the tragedies and unexpected turns, some hilarious episodes, and the occasional lucky breaks. You will also meet the unique individuals Devlin encountered along the way, people who, each for their own reasons, became fascinated by Fibonacci, from the Yale professor who traced modern finance back to Fibonacci to the Italian historian who made the crucial archival discovery that brought together all the threads of Fibonacci's astonishing story. Fibonacci helped to revive the West as the cradle of science, technology, and commerce, yet he vanished from the pages of history. This is Devlin's search to find him.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In his jaunty book Finding Fibonacci, Keith Devlin sets out to tell the elusive story of the 13th-century mathematician Leonardo of Pisa."--James Ryerson, New York Times Book Review

Devlin leads a cheerful pursuit to rediscover the hero of 13th-century European mathematics, taking readers across centuries and through the back streets of medieval and modern Italy in this entertaining and surprising history. . . . Devlin relates Leonardo's adventures with brio and charm. Readers will enjoy this deft and engaging mix of history, mathematics, and personal travelogue."--Publishers Weekly

Finding Fibonacci showcases Devlin's writerly flair. My favourite passages are the incredible story of how Liber Abaci (or at least, the edition he wrote in 1228, the sole surviving one) became available in English for the first time - to this day the only modern-language translation."--Davide Castelvecchi, Nature

[Devlin] talks his way into Italian research libraries in search of early manuscripts, photographs all 11 street signs on Via Leonardo Fibonacci in Florence and strives to cultivate a love for numbers in his readers."--Andrea Marks, Scientific American

Finding Fibonacci [does] much to restore Leonardo to his proper place in contemporary Western culture."--Dan Friedman, Los Angeles Review of Books

[E]ngaging and entertaining."--Library Journal

A charming new book."--Martijn van Calmthout, de Volkskrant

All in all a book to be recommended. If you already read The Man of Numbers it is most informative to read this 'behind the scenes' version and know how it came about (and what happened after its publication). If you didn't know The Man of Numbers, you at least get a summary of what is in there too. Only it is told in a much more personal and lively version."--Adhemar Bultheel, European Mathematical Society

Readers will enjoy this charming account of the inevitable hitches familiar to anyone pursuing historical research . . . There is much here to enjoy. Devlin's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, and this reader, at least, has been inspired to return to Sigler's translation of Leonardo's important book."--Tony Mann, Times Higher Education

What would make you write a book about writing a book you recently published on a 13th-century mathematician? When you're Stanford University's Keith Devlin (aka, NPR's 'The Math Guy') and the mathematician is Leonardo of Pisa (aka, 'Fibonacci'), the story of researching the first book, The Man of Numbers, becomes an incredible story in itself: Finding Fibonacci: The Quest to Rediscover the Forgotten Mathematical Genius Who Changed the World. What makes Devlin's story so compelling is that it involves many other people, multiple countries, 900+ years, and enough setbacks, twists and turns, courage, and fortitude to rival fictional adventure. Throw in the idea that Leonardo's work helped revolutionize the world forever, parallels with another earth-shaking revolutionary, Steve Jobs, sprinkle well with the best-known number sequence of all time, and you have yourself a real page-turner."--Math-Blog

Finding Fibonacci is a tale not just about Devlin's

work on Leonardo of Pisa. It is also about the seminal contemporary efforts of others in making Leonardo's work better known. . . . Like his earlier work, *Man of Numbers*, this latest book can be appreciated by anyone with a modest background in mathematics and an interest in how mathematics helps shape the world we live in."--MAA Reviews

"How Fibonacci came to write a work that has astounding relevance to the present day makes for exciting reading. . . . Accessible and enjoyable, even for those among us who tend generally to be able to appreciate the artistic side of life more than the scientific. . . . Highly recommended."--Book Pleasures

"Written in the alert and attractive style characteristic to all popular writings of the author, [Finding Fibonacci] will attract a large audience interested to know the story of this genius of the Middle Ages whose books influenced so much development of the modern Western civilization up to our days."--S. Cobzas, *Studia Mathematica*

"A charmingly personal account of Keith Devlin's long quixotic search to understand the man, Leonardo Bonacci, better known as Fibonacci, as well as the thirteenth-century mathematician's surprisingly pervasive influence."--John Allen Paulos, author of *Innumeracy* and *A Numbered Life*

"Lovers of history, travel, and mathematics alike will relish this journey through time to ancient worlds, as master expositor Keith Devlin navigates Italy to uncover the beginnings of modern math. Fascinating!"--Danica McKellar, New York Times bestselling author of *Math Doesn't Suck*

"Though most of us only know about Leonardo of Pisa (aka Fibonacci) because of the numbers named after him, he was in fact the Steve Jobs of the thirteenth century who ushered in a revolution—as we learn from this fascinating book that reads by turns as a detective novel, a moving personal journey, and a meditation on the fate of modernity. Highly recommended to all lovers of math and history."--Edward Frenkel, professor of mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, and author of *Love and Math*

"An unusual and fascinating personal account of a modern mathematician's quest to separate truth from myth and show us the real Fibonacci."--Ian Stewart, author of *Professor Stewart's Incredible Numbers*

"Interesting and engaging. Devlin succeeds in making the reader care about his quest to understand Leonardo the person. He conveys the sense of awe and reverence at holding in your hands a document that has come to you straight from centuries before."--Dana Mackenzie, author of *The Universe in Zero Words: The Story of Mathematics as Told through Equations*

"[A] good beach read for the nerdier among us."--Math Frolic

Mr. Devlin uncovers a closely held secret: Fibonacci was the mathematician that introduced the numbers, or digits, we presently use. And this was done in the XIII Century! Few

people were aware of the importance of Fibonacci's discovery! Thankfully, Devlin unveils this phenomenal character, in a riveting story, with a lot of details, without abusing the lay reader with math formulas! A must read!

Not as interesting as it could have been, alas. Wish there was more about the mathematics and Fibonacci and less about the author.

A few years ago, Keith Devlin published *The Man of Numbers: Fibonacci's Arithmetic Revolution*, combining a biography of the famous mathematician with an explanation of what his fame rests on. This book is the story of researching and writing that book, also telling the little that is known about Fibonacci's life and describing his arithmetical legacy. It's a strange little book. It reminded me of being left with bits of leftover wool after knitting an elaborate sweater and deciding to use them to make a matching scarf. It feels like an amalgam of all the things Devlin would have liked to have included in his first book, but didn't think quite fitted. Knowing nothing whatsoever about Fibonacci, I found it reasonably interesting since it gave me the basics about his achievements, but I'm not sure of how much interest it would hold for anyone who already knows about him, or indeed, who has read Devlin's earlier book. Devlin starts with an introduction in which he describes his own career as an expositor of math in print and on radio. He tells us he is known as the Math Guy in America (hence the misspelling of maths throughout ;)). This is partly why he is so interested in Fibonacci, since he too was an early expositor of arithmetic. Real name, Leonardo of Pisa, (Fibonacci was a nickname given to him by a much later mathematician), his fame rests mainly on his major work, *Liber Abbaci* (The Book of Calculation), which explained the Hindu-Arabic number system (the use of numerals 1-9). Prior to this, arithmetic in the west had relied on an elaborate finger-counting system or the use of the abacus, both of which required a high level of skill. The system of using numerals was easier to learn and also provided a written record, hence an audit trail. Although Leonardo was not the first man to introduce this system to Europe, his book appeared just at a point where trade was about to take off exponentially in the region, so became hugely important and influential. Leonardo also wrote a follow-up book that included many worked practical examples, so that it could be used as a basis for learning how to use arithmetic even by people who weren't interested in understanding the underlying principles. This was hand-copied thousands of times and was translated into many different regional languages and with the examples converted into local currencies, making it the most important text for spreading the use of arithmetic throughout Europe and beyond. Devlin intersperses this information about Fibonacci with descriptions of how

he, Devlin, went about researching his earlier book. This is sometimes interesting – Devlin writes well when, for example, he re-imagines the Pisa of Leonardo's time – a trading hub, with sea-transported goods being brought into the town via the river Arno. But there are also parts where my interest level fell away almost entirely – for example, when he gives immensely detailed accounts of visits to libraries to look at ancient manuscripts, and includes blow-by-blow accounts of conversations with librarians about opening times, etc. Leonardo's work was almost forgotten for centuries till a few researchers brought him back to prominence, and Devlin gives the story of them and their researches too. Again, these accounts varied in interest level, but overall I felt Devlin was trying too hard to make it seem more exciting than it either was or, indeed, needed to be. When it comes to the arithmetical stuff, Devlin explains things simply enough for my decidedly non-mathematical brain to cope with. He gives some of Leonardo's worked examples, which taught me two things: 1) I've forgotten what little algebra I ever knew and 2) thank goodness for Excel. However, I was pleased to see I can still usually get to the right answer eventually with my own elaborate finger-counting method (which also involves sticking out the tip of my tongue – a widely-recognised technique which oddly both Fibonacci and Devlin overlook), so this will undoubtedly be a handy skill after the apocalypse... In the end, I suspect I might have been better reading Devlin's earlier book rather than this one – the meat of the story for me was Leonardo's achievements, and the rest felt a little extraneous. However, I certainly got enough out of it to make it a worthwhile and informative read overall, and the other aspects of it may appeal more to people who are intrigued to see how a biographer goes about his research process. 3½ stars for me, so rounded up. NB This book was provided for review by the publisher, Princeton University Press.

Keith Devlin has written many books about math and several about Leonardo of Pisa aka Fibonacci. There is only scant actual information about the man. The book is about Devlin's various trips to Italy to do research. Although he makes a number of important points and has significant insights, I would have been just as happy if he did it in fewer pages. He writes about his missing buses because of Italian schedules and difficulties with librarians. Some of this, I felt, was to fill pages to justify the price of the hard cover book.

The book is not a mathematics book, but is a book about the author's quest to find out something about Fibonacci (Actually this is only one of his three names.). It is more of a memoir of his research. He did say a lot about the book *Liber Abbaci* which was written by Fibonacci. The author

considers this work to be of huge significance in western culture, even though most have never heard of it. There are only a few copies that exist and Devlin documents his search for them and his research into them. The book (Liber Abbaci) was the basis of commerce calculations in the western and Arab world. Such things as the concept of algorithm and the 10 Arabic digits were promulgated by Fibonacci in his book. Finding Fibonacci was a good read.

This book is really about the author, Keith Devlin, more than about Fibonacci or his work. It tells about how the author became a writer popularising mathematics in the mass media and also tells a lot of personal stories about how he spent a number of years off and on researching a little about Fibonacci. It is primarily a travel book with Fibonacci as a theme.

interesting but repetitive

was a bit disappointed, expected more math relevance, since I am not a mathematician it is more difficult for me to appreciate the relevance or breakthrough by LeonARDO DI PISA, the other book by Keith " Math---invisible language " will give it the TOP rating of % plus, truly great

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