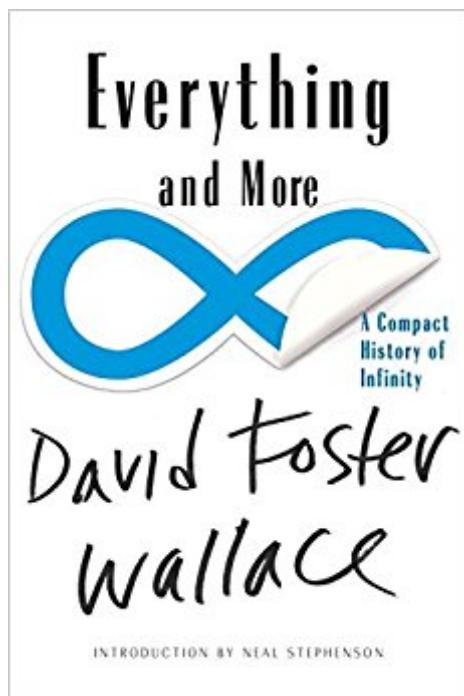


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Everything And More: A Compact History Of Infinity



Synopsis

"A gripping guide to the modern taming of the infinite." •The New York Times. With a new introduction by Neal Stephenson. Is infinity a valid mathematical property or a meaningless abstraction? David Foster Wallace brings his intellectual ambition and characteristic bravura style to the story of how mathematicians have struggled to understand the infinite, from the ancient Greeks to the nineteenth-century mathematical genius Georg Cantor's counterintuitive discovery that there was more than one kind of infinity. Smart, challenging, and thoroughly rewarding, Wallace's tour de force brings immediate and high-profile recognition to the bizarre and fascinating world of higher mathematics.

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Customer Reviews

Since DFW has committed suicide, we will not see an edition revised by him. In re-reading the reviews, it appears that style means a lot. I personally found the book witty. It was a little slow sometimes because of the convolutions he introduced in style, but mostly I kept plowing (and chuckling) through. The librarian who sent back the book did a disservice to some readers. Not everyone likes to learn in the same way. With that kind of attitude, many years ago I would have had Rudin's books removed as too concise to be useful. Of course, there are many mathematicians who love those books for just that reason, and I would have done them a disservice. I am a physicist with a math minor. To me, the best part of this book was his explanation of why mathematicians insist on the epsilon-deltas of mathematical rigor. No one ever did that before. If I could have read this in high school, I probably would have finished my math major as well as my physics major. Instead, the

whole epsilon-delta thing seemed ad-hoc and inexplicable in purpose. I could never accept the need for rigor demanded in advanced analysis.(a drunken prof and Rudin's book didn't help either) DFW showed how a crisis in dealing with the infinite and with infinitesimals led to the development of the what we call the foundations of analysis. Just excellent.I envied him his high school math teacher, who seems responsible for much of the really good parts of this book. No, DFW wasn't a mathematician and he (in spite of what some reviewers seem to think) knew it. He made clear that he wouldn't be able to do justice to Godel. But incompleteness is moderate difficult. DFW didn't know much about Fourier series, but did know they were important enough to mention.

Hi, I'm a set theorist. This book is ambitious. For many pages and sections, I really wanted to give it a lot of stars just for effort. There are some good approaches to some hard material. But the errors got to be just too heinous (I'm not at all referring to oversimplifying for the sake of exposition; of course that's necessary. In fact, I reckon the *level* of rigor in this book is just about ideal). If you want to skip right to a cringe-and-sputter bad part, check out his interpretations of the axioms of set theory starting p. 286. Trust me: Bad. And unlike DFW, I'm not gonna tell you to "trust me" unless I know I know what I'm talking about. He knows a lot of math for a creative writing prof, but he often doesn't know what he does and doesn't know. There was a lot of history and philosophy in the book that I didn't know about, and so I didn't find many errors in those kinds of sections. I probably learned something about that stuff, but unfortunately having seen so much mathematical incompetence I have to distrust DFW as a non-fiction writer. DFW writes with a dangerous tone. Not a compliment in this case. The tone is: "This is a lot of difficult (but gorgeous) material, but *I've* got it all figured out. So you just trust me to guide you through it (and even when I'm telling you stuff that appears unjustified and kooky, you know it is correct and worth reading because I'm so well-educated and clever)." It's pompous and it's fun and it's fine if you're right. If you take that tone and you're wrong, you suck. Sorry, DFW. Other reviewers hate the footnotes and other style/organizational whatnot. I agree with a *little* of that. Mostly I thought his willingness to entertain tangents and interpolations and sidebars an appropriate way of handling the material.

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