



The Hunt for Vulcan: . . . And How Albert Einstein Destroyed a Planet, Discovered Relativity, and Deciphered the Universe

Thomas Levenson

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The captivating, all-but-forgotten story of Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein, and the search for a planet that never existed

For more than fifty years, the world's top scientists searched for the "missing" planet Vulcan, whose existence was mandated by Isaac Newton's theories of gravity. Countless hours were spent on the hunt for the elusive orb, and some of the era's most skilled astronomers even claimed to have found it.

There was just one problem: It was never there.

In *The Hunt for Vulcan*, Thomas Levenson follows the visionary scientists who inhabit the story of the phantom planet, starting with Isaac Newton, who in 1687 provided an explanation for all matter in motion throughout the universe, leading to Urbain-Jean-Joseph Le Verrier, who almost two centuries later built on Newton's theories and discovered Neptune, becoming the most famous scientist in the world. Le Verrier attempted to surpass that triumph by predicting the existence of yet another planet in our solar system, Vulcan.

It took Albert Einstein to discern that the mystery of the missing planet was a problem not of measurements or math but of Newton's theory of gravity itself. Einstein's general theory of relativity proved that Vulcan did not and could not exist, and that the search for it had merely been a quirk of operating under the wrong set of assumptions about the universe. Levenson tells the previously untold tale of how the "discovery" of Vulcan in the nineteenth century set the stage for Einstein's monumental breakthrough, the greatest individual intellectual achievement of the twentieth century.

A dramatic human story of an epic quest, *The Hunt for Vulcan* offers insight into how science really advances (as opposed to the way we're taught about it in school) and how the best work of the greatest scientists reveals an artist's sensibility. Opening a new window onto our world, Levenson illuminates some of our most iconic ideas as he recounts one of the strangest episodes in the history of science.

Praise for *The Hunt for Vulcan*

"Delightful . . . a charming tale about an all-but-forgotten episode in science history."—*The Wall Street Journal*

"Engaging . . . At heart, this is a story about how science advances, one insight at a time. But the immediacy, almost romance, of Levenson's writing makes it almost novelistic."—*The Washington Post*

"Captures the drama of the tireless search for this celestial object."—*Science*

"A well-structured, fast-paced example of exemplary science writing."—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"A short, beautifully produced book that tells a cautionary tale . . . Levenson is a breezy writer who renders

complex ideas in down-to-earth language.”—*The Boston Globe*

“An inspiring tale about the quest for discovery.”—**Walter Isaacson**

“Equal to the best science writing I’ve read anywhere, by any author. Beautifully composed, rich in historical context, deeply researched, it is, above all, great storytelling.”—**Alan Lightman, author of *The Accidental Universe***

“Levenson tells us where Vulcan came from, how it vanished, and why its spirit lurks today. Along the way, we learn more than a bit of just how science works—when it succeeds as well as when it fails.”—**Neil deGrasse Tyson**

“Science writing at its best. This book is not just learned, passionate, and witty—it is profoundly wise.”—**Junot Díaz**

From the Hardcover edition.



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