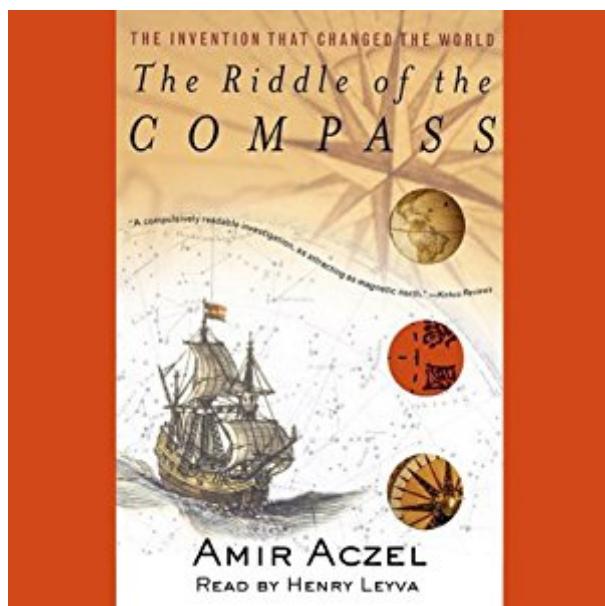


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# The Riddle Of The Compass: The Invention That Changed The World



## Synopsis

The story of the compass is shrouded in mystery and myth, yet most will agree it begins around the time of the birth of Christ in ancient China. A mysterious lodestone whose powers affected metal was known to the Chinese emperor. When this piece of metal was suspended in water, it always pointed north. This unexplainable occurrence led to the stone's use in feng shui, the Chinese art of finding the right location. However, it was the Italians, more than a thousand years later, who discovered the ultimate destiny of the lodestone and unleashed its formidable powers. In Amalfi sometime in the twelfth century, the compass was born, crowning the Italians as the new rulers of the seas and heralding the onset of the modern world. Retracing the roots of the compass and sharing the fascinating story of navigation through the ages, *The Riddle of the Compass* is Aczel at his most entertaining and insightful. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is an extremely poorly researched and written book. It makes a great deal of a very little, touches on many irrelevant subjects and is highly repetitive. One of the most annoying tricks that the author employs is to describe a long voyage and then - at the end - to point out that it wouldn't have been possible without the compass. You'll learn more about the compass from Wikipedia! Save your money.

The online compass museum COMPASSIPEDIA [...] recommends this book because it offers in a short form the best status on the knowledge about the development of the compass in ancient times. Mr. Aczel cites all relevant sources known and demonstrates in a wonderfull way that the Chinese did invent and use the compass before the western civilization, that the Church was once again responsible for the destruction of many most important documents about this science and that the famous story about Flavio di Gioia is but a legend. The only problem that we have with this book: it will probably be equally difficult and need a courageous gentleman to destroy another legend, namely that the Briton Alexander Neckham was the first one in Europe to describe a mariner's compass, where he copied the words of the French monk and poet Hugue de Bercy/Guyot de Provins. But this is another story...

I bought this to read as I work with magnetic fields and needed to learn about the history of compasses. The book is written with passion and I literally went through it in a couple of days commuting to and from work. I highly recommend it for anyone who has ever wondered at the invisible force field that permeates through our world and lives at every instant. Give it a read, it will inform you while entertaining you.

Amir Aczel spent his childhood on the Mediterranean Sea--literally--sailing around in and sometimes steering a passenger ship that was captained by his father. This romantic personal history makes Aczel particularly suited to tell the story of the compass, which so improved navigation in the late thirteenth century that it sparked a commercial revolution and made possible the Age of Exploration that was to follow. In his highly readable narrative Aczel provides a brief history of navigation centered on the compass--from navigation by stars and sounding lines to the naval supremacy of the Venetians in the 14th and 15th centuries to the masterful sailing of the great explorers--da Gama, Magellan--who opened up the world in the 15th and 16th centuries. We learn, too, about the early invention of the compass in China, where it was evidently not used at sea, and of its perfection as a naval instrument in the Italian city of Amalfi. The Riddle of the Compass is at its best when Aczel discusses the actual "riddle" to which the title of the book refers: the question of the historicity of a certain Flavio Gioia, whom the people of Amalfi credit with having invented the mariner's compass in 1302. Most interestingly, the question of this Gioia's existence involves the correct interpretation of a single Latin phrase, a reference to the invention of the compass in an early 16th century commentary on the poetry of Lucrezio Caro. Readers of Dava Sobel's popular book *Longitude*, which tells the story of the invention of the naval chronometer, will enjoy Amir Aczel's

equally readable history of the compass. Reviewed by Debra Hamel, author of *Trying Neaira: The True Story of a Courtesan's Scandalous Life in Ancient Greece*

The topic was certainly interesting, but the device is so simple that it's a little difficult to go much deeper than the author did. He certainly cites enough documents, but, not too unexpectedly, they seem to talk to human events rather than of anything technical. It's good to know about how the sixteen points came about, but he offered no explanation about what I consider the somewhat bizarre naming of the points. Maybe I'm missing something, but is the scheme for name ordering the points between, say, N and E, the same as from, say, E to S? The section of Flavio Gioia left me almost as confused about the supposed inventor of the 'modern' (1302?!!) compass as the Italians who erected a statue in 1902 to this apparently fictional character. The name Gioia appears from nowhere. I would like to have more detail about how early navigators actually did some of their navigation, but what he did supply was still interesting. Not too long ago I was in the Maritime Museum in Greenwich, and saw some interesting devices the Scandinavians used. Unfortunately, a huge crowd of students made it difficult to really figure out and even see what the exhibit had to offer. It would have been good to see the detail offered there expressed in such a book as this. I found a section near the very end of the book a little puzzling. He talks about how the Chinese were very secretive about their discoveries, and mentions they had a cure for malaria for some two centuries. Only recently has it become known to the West. It's based on a herb that's not only found in China but in N. America. He never mentions what it is! This is somehow how I felt about the book. It seemed to leave the door open for other answers to items discussed in the book.

Let's get this out of the way - the book is not written or edited to American form. The style does not flow in the same manner as other historical books. It was not a fun read for me. The organization of material is not straightforward - chronologically or technologically. I was also disappointed by the lack of technical detail regarding the compass and other navigation aids. Historical detail is also lacking which I should have guessed from the size of the book. Not to ruin it for others, but there isn't much intrigue regarding his story either. I did learn more about Italian city states and would check out the credited creator's statue if ever in town.

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