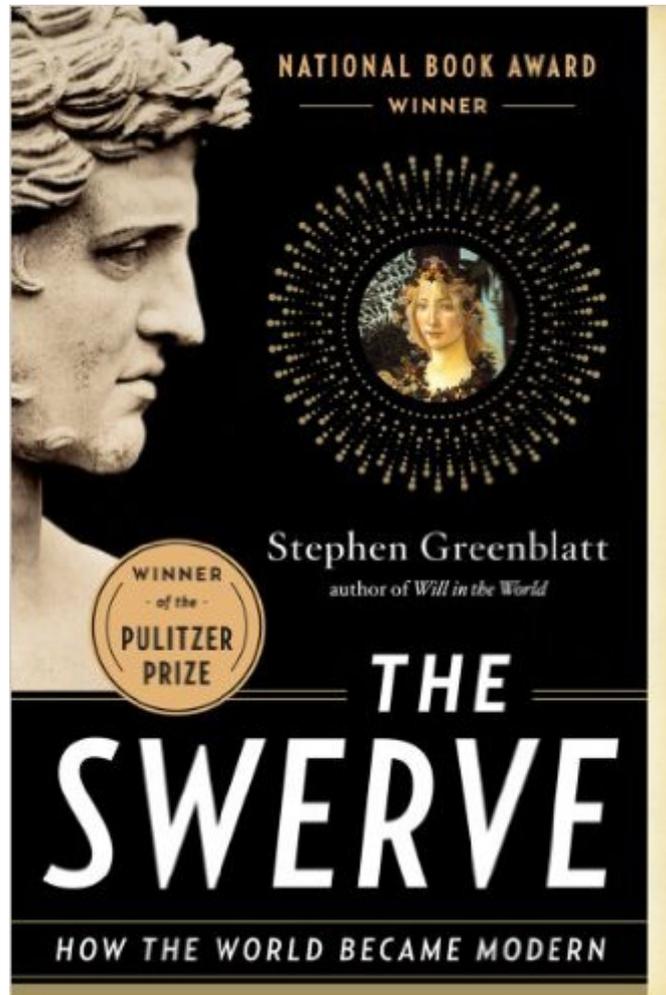


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# The Swerve: How The World Became Modern



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Non-Fiction • Winner of the 2011 National Book Award for Non-Fiction One of the world's most celebrated scholars, Stephen Greenblatt has crafted both an innovative work of history and a thrilling story of discovery, in which one manuscript, plucked from a thousand years of neglect, changed the course of human thought and made possible the world as we know it. Nearly six hundred years ago, a short, genial, cannily alert man in his late thirties took a very old manuscript off a library shelf, saw with excitement what he had discovered, and ordered that it be copied. That book was the last surviving manuscript of an ancient Roman philosophical epic, *On the Nature of Things*, by Lucretius • a beautiful poem of the most dangerous ideas: that the universe functioned without the aid of gods, that religious fear was damaging to human life, and that matter was made up of very small particles in eternal motion, colliding and swerving in new directions. The copying and translation of this ancient book—the greatest discovery of the greatest book-hunter of his age—fueled the Renaissance, inspiring artists such as Botticelli and thinkers such as Giordano Bruno; shaped the thought of Galileo and Freud, Darwin and Einstein; and had a revolutionary influence on writers such as Montaigne and Shakespeare and even Thomas Jefferson. 16 pages of color illustrations

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## Customer Reviews

In the early 15th century Western Europe was just emerging from a couple of centuries of plague, famine, and conflict. Led by the city states of northern Italy, the Europeans were attempting to find their footing, and to do so they looked back 1500 years or more to the classical civilizations of

Greece and Rome. Scholarly humanists began to search out and restudy old scrolls and ancient manuscripts in order to relearn much of what had been lost during the Dark Ages. Of these none was more important than Poggio Bracciolini, a papal secretary whose Pope had been overthrown and replaced, and who dealt with his loss of power and income by searching monasteries in Germany and Switzerland for forgotten scripts. His greatest discovery was Lucretius' long poem *On The Nature Of Things*, which he copied and had distributed, ensuring that it became a seminal document of the emerging Renaissance. Lucretius had been an Epicurean philosopher during the Roman Empire, who taught that the soul did not survive death and that all living things were made up of tiny particles or atoms. Epicureans called on people to enjoy a good life (not a hedonistic one as is often supposed) without worrying about the wrath of God or the gods, who did not concern themselves with anything so insignificant as human affairs. This has a modern ring to us, as it should since Lucretius' writings, as Stephen Greenblatt so ably shows, helped to shape the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. Lucretius' ideas were unwelcome to many in the Church hierarchy, and those who followed his ideas were often in danger of persecution or even execution. Stephen Greenblatt has produced a fascinating chronicle of Lucretius, Poggio, and the worlds they inhabited.

The thesis and tone of *The Swerve* echo Jacob Burckhardt's now somewhat discredited 19th century characterization of the Italian Renaissance with its celebrations of life and beauty as a "return to paganism" (as though the Middle Ages didn't have its festivals and *gai savoir*). Burckhardt's book may be outdated as history but is nevertheless a masterpiece of Romantic historiography that repays rereading. Greenblatt is no Burckhardt, but it sounds like his book will also be valuable - even only insofar as it is successful in familiarizing contemporary readers with the role of characters like the colorful Poggio Bracciolini, Lorenzo Valla and their manuscript-hunting Humanist confreres, many of whom were employees, like Poggio himself, of the Papal court. Greenblatt seriously overstates the role of Lucretius, whose influence, until the mid to late 18th century was arguably quite marginal. Peter Gay's *The Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Paganism*, unfortunately not mentioned by Greenblatt, deals at length with the influence of Lucretius on French Enlightenment thinkers, many of whom really were "pagans", i.e., materialists and epicureans. The standard view, of course, is that a revival of Platonic idealism, not of "pagan" materialism, was responsible for the Renaissance preoccupation with beauty and harmony. Poggio's fifteenth century discovery of the manuscript of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* was not commented on much by Renaissance humanists, who confined themselves to remarks about Lucretius's grammar

and syntax. It was printed in 1511 with a commentary by Denys Lambin, who termed Lucretius's Epicurean ideas "fanciful, absurd, and opposed to Christianity" -- and Lambin's preface remained standard until the nineteenth century.

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