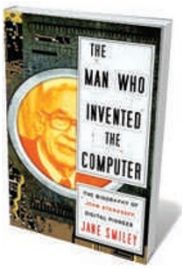

The Man Who Invented the Computer: The Biography of John Atanasoff, Digital Pioneer
JANE SMILEY
Doubleday: 2010. 256 pp. $25.95

business for himself. His Ordnance Engineering Corporation was sold for a healthy profit five years later.

Atanasoff was brought back into the picture by the untimely death of Berry in an apparent suicide in 1963. Concerned, Atanasoff travelled to New York to investigate. The family considered that murder was a possibility — Berry's father had been shot decades earlier by a disgruntled ex-employee — but it was never proven.

In 1973, Atanasoff again found himself in the spotlight after his work was cited in the conclusions of a patent dispute between computing-industry giants Honeywell and Sperry Rand about the early development of the digital computer. Smiley quotes Judge Earl Larson's acknowledgement that "between 1937 and 1942, Atanasoff … developed and built an automatic electronic digital computer for solving large systems of simultaneous linear algebraic equations".

Judge Larson further noted that John Mauchly, one of the ENIAC developers who had visited Atanasoff in Iowa, had inspected the Atanasoff–Berry Computer and had read the manuscript describing it. Mauchly derived from this, the judge said, "'the invention of the automatic electronic digital computer' claimed in the ENIAC patent" — indicating Atanasoff's key contribution, albeit unwitting, to the later project.

Belatedly, and largely through the advocacy of friends and writers, Atanasoff gained recognition. Owing to his father's origins, he received early plaudits in Bulgaria, where in 1970 he was granted the Order of Cyril and Methodius, First Class. In 1990 he was awarded the National Medal of Technology by President George H. W. Bush for his invention of the electronic digital computer and for contributions to the development of a technically trained US workforce. Atanasoff died in 1995.

The Man Who Invented the Computer is a vivid telling of the early story of the computing industry. By focusing on Atanasoff, Smiley blends obscure threads with those that are better known. The result would, without embellishment, make an exceptional feature film. ■

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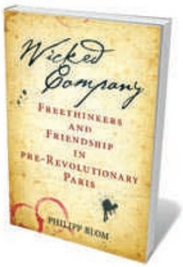
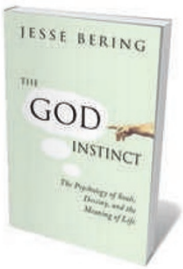
Books in brief



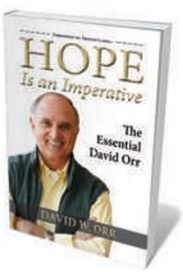
Wicked Company: Freethinkers and Friendship in Pre-Revolutionary Paris
Philipp Blom BASIC BOOKS *384 pp. $29.95 (2010)*
The French Enlightenment's triumph of reason over religious dogma was plotted in an eighteenth-century Paris salon. Hosted by Baron Paul-Henri Thiry Holbach, the radical thinkers who gathered there included the philosophers Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Historian Philipp Blom revives their legacy and examines the rivalries that sprang up among the group and with competitors such as the writer Voltaire. Their ideas about society and the natural world went on to influence politics and science globally.

How Old is the Universe?
David A. Weintraub PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS *380 pp. $29.95 (2010)*
Astronomer David Weintraub explains in his latest book how we know that the Universe is 13.7 billion years old, a finding that has had an impact on science, philosophy and religion. By looking at the various ways in which the age of the cosmos has been established over the centuries — from the lifecycles and pulsations of stars to galactic structures and cosmology — he reveals the process of scientific enquiry and shows how astronomers gather evidence to grapple with deep questions.

The Abacus and the Cross: The Story of the Pope Who Brought the Light of Science to the Dark Ages
Nancy Marie Brown BASIC BOOKS *328 pp. $27.95 (2010)*
Far from being intolerant of science, the medieval Catholic Church saw reason as a means of getting closer to God. In the year 1000, there was even a 'scientist pope': Gerbert of Aurillac was the leading mathematician and astronomer of his day. Science writer Nancy Marie Brown describes his dramatic rise from humble peasant to visionary pontiff. A mathematics teacher to kings, and occasional spy, he adopted scientific ideas from the Islamic world, including the nine Arabic numerals and the concept of zero.



The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny and the Meaning of Life
Jesse Bering NICHOLAS BREALEY PUBLISHING *288 pp. £16.99 (2010)*
Psychologist Jesse Bering argues that religious beliefs are a sophisticated cognitive illusion rather than an irrational delusion. Because we have the ability to think beyond our immediate surroundings, we have evolved a tendency to project the idea that a transcendent being, or God, influences our lives. Taking a balanced and considered approach to this often inflammatory topic, he explains why this religious trait has evolutionary benefits and why it sets us apart from other animals.



Hope is an Imperative: The Essential David Orr
David Orr ISLAND PRESS *400 pp. £31 (2010)*
Key writings of environmental scientist David Orr from the past 30 years are collected in this volume. A champion of ecological design, Orr explains why it is important to educate people about sustainability, why university campuses should be green, and the environmental consequences of bringing children into the world. Leading a push within his own town of Oberlin, Ohio, to embrace green building practices, he reveals why he is both an optimist and a pragmatist.