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在咖啡馆遇见牛顿

【英】迈克尔·怀特 / 著 王铮 / 译



黑龙江教育出版社

MICHAEL WHITE

FOREWORD BY BILL BRYSON

【英】迈克尔·怀特 / 著 【美】比尔·布莱森 / 序

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COFFEE WITH

ISAAC NEWTON

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

在咖啡馆遇见牛顿 / (英) 怀特著 ; 王铮译. -- 哈尔滨 : 黑龙江教育出版社, 2013.1
(咖啡馆系列)
书名原文: Coffee with Isaac Newton
ISBN 978-7-5316-6899-2

I. ①在… II. ①怀… ②王… III. ①牛顿, I. (1642~1727) —生平事迹 IV. ①K835.616.11

中国版本图书馆CIP数据核字(2013)第029394号

在咖啡馆遇见牛顿

ZAI KAFEIGUAN YUJIAN NIUDUN

【英】迈克尔·怀特/著 【美】比尔·布莱森/序
王铮/译

责任编辑: 宋舒白
特约编辑: 肖云 王玉春
装帧设计: 了如指掌创意馆

出版: 黑龙江教育出版社
发行: 黑龙江教育出版社
社址: 哈尔滨市南岗区花园街158号
开本: 787mm×1092mm 1/16
印张: 10
字数: 148千字
版次: 2013年6月第1版
印次: 2013年6月第1次印刷
印刷: 北京市通州鑫欣印刷厂
书号: ISBN 978-7-5316-6899-2
定价: 23.80元

著作权合同登记 图字: 08-2011-043
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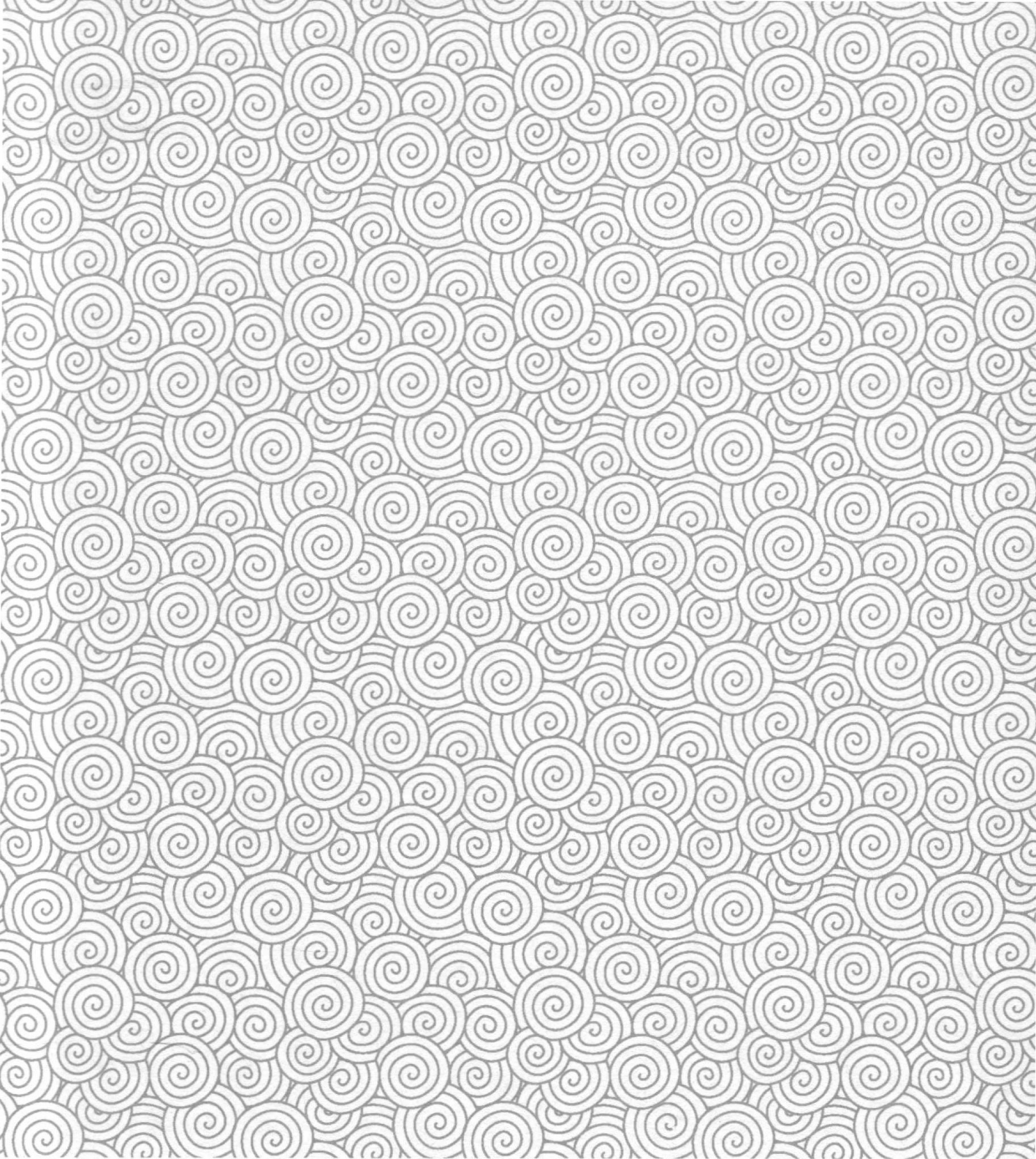
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👉 了如指掌 | 探寻知识与思维的乐趣……





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Foreword

by BILL BRYSON

In a basement room of the Royal Society in London, Joanna Corden, the society's friendly archivist, opens a white box and gently lifts out one of that learned institution's most venerated relics: the death mask of Isaac Newton, made on the evening of his death in 1727.

It ought to be a thrilling moment—this is, after all, the closest we can come to the physical presence of the most fertile and intriguing mind of its age—and yet, as Corden has promised, there is something oddly disappointing in Newton's impassive visage. You don't expect a death mask to be terribly expressive, of course, but this one has an almost determined blankness to it.

"Even in death," notes Corden, "he didn't give much away."

We stare respectfully at the mask for half a minute, then she returns it to the box and replaces the lid, and I realize that already I'm beginning to forget what he looked like.

Perhaps no great figure in history has been harder to know and understand than Isaac Newton. Indeed he is doubly unknowable—first because of the complexity of so much of his science and second because of the secrecy and very real oddness with which he conducted so much of his life. Here is a man who spent three decades as an academic hermit in Cambridge, as withdrawn from worldly affairs as one could be, but

序言

伦敦，英国皇家学会的一间地下室里，亲切友好的档案管理员乔安娜·柯登打开一个白色箱子，小心翼翼地取出一件这家学术机构最珍贵的文物：艾萨克·牛顿的尸体面模，这是在他1727年去世当晚制作的。

激动人心的时刻到来了——毕竟，这是我们第一次如此近距离地瞻仰这位时代伟人的真容。然而，正如柯登之前所说，牛顿那冷漠的表情令我有几分失望。当然，没人愿意面对一副狰狞的面孔，但他的表情也太过苍白了。

“甚至去世时，”柯登在一旁说，“他也没有展露出太多情绪。”

我们满怀崇敬地凝视了半分钟，柯登随后将面模放回箱子里。合上盖子的瞬间，牛顿的相貌已经开始在我脑海中变得模糊不清。

历史上恐怕没有比艾萨克·牛顿更令人难以捉摸和理解的伟人了。他的神秘之处有两点：其一，其学说本身的复杂性；其二，他一生中大部分时间都在刻意回避公众的视线。他性格孤僻，在剑桥度过了30年隐士般的学术生活，自行设下独居的藩篱与世事隔离，但中年以后又开始行走于伦敦上流社会。他能够揭开宇宙的根本奥秘，也同样痴迷于炼金术和异端邪说。他曾花

then in late middle age became a fêted public figure and comparative gadfly in London. He could unpick the most fundamental secrets of the universe, yet was equally devoted to alchemy and wild religious surmise. He was prepared to invest years in embittered fights over credit for the priority for discoveries, yet cared so little for conventional adulation that his most extraordinary findings were sometimes kept locked away for decades. Here is, in short, a man who was almost wilfully unknowable.

Corden brings out another of the Society's treasures—a small reflecting telescope made by Newton himself in 1669. It is only six inches long but exquisitely made. Newton ground the glass himself, designed the swivelling socket, turned the wood with his own hand. In its time this was an absolute technological marvel, but it is also a thing of lustrous beauty. The man who made this instrument had sensitivity and soul as well as scientific genius.

"It's strange, isn't it," says Corden, reading my thoughts, "that you can feel more in his presence from one of his instruments than from his own death mask."

There really never was a more private man. So how lucky we are to have this volume in which Michael White deftly brings this impossible character to life, and makes his frequent wild actions and wayward notions seem almost reasonable. Even better, White conveys to us Newton's most challenging scientific concepts in terms that render them logical and wondrously, instantly comprehensible, and in so doing he fully captures the excitement, satisfaction and very real beauty of scientific discovery.

So prepare yourself for an unusual treat. You are about to enter one of the greatest minds in history.

Bill Bryson

费多年执著于科学发现优先权之争，也曾因不屑谄媚之道以致自己最重要的发现被尘封数十载。简而言之，这就是牛顿——一个谜一般的人物。

接下来，柯登又取出皇家学会珍藏的另一件宝贝——一架小巧的反射望远镜。这是牛顿1669年亲手制作的，长度仅有6英寸，但很精致。打磨镜面、设计旋转底座和制作手柄等工作都是他独立完成的。这架望远镜在那个时代绝对是一件巅峰之作，堪称艺术精品。看来他的手工制作水准和科学天赋同样令人惊叹。

“简直太令人惊奇了，不是吗？”柯登看出了我的想法，“这件精巧的仪器显然比那具尸体面模更能让您真切感受到牛顿的存在。”

再没有比牛顿更具神秘色彩的人物了。幸运的是，迈克尔·怀特先生为我们带来了这部作品，他以细腻生动的笔触刻画出了一位个性鲜活的科学巨匠，使他那些复杂矛盾的行为和想法变得合乎情理。此外，怀特还以浅显易懂、逻辑性极强的语言清晰地阐述了牛顿诸多高深的科学理论，展现了一系列令人兴奋的、满意的和至真美好的科学发现。

现在，请准备好开始一场与众不同的大脑洗礼吧。因为您即将触碰到的是历史上最伟大的一颗头脑。

比尔·布莱森

INTRODUCTION

Isaac Newton was a man who transcended the age in which he lived, and in terms of his influence on the modern world, he is without peer. He formulated the theory of gravity, devised a radically new theory of light and created a calculus that would revolutionize mathematics. His most famous work, *Principia Mathematica*, is arguably the most important scientific book ever published: it explains his theory of matter in motion, which, a generation after his death, sparked the Industrial Revolution.

Newton achieved a phenomenal amount in one lifetime, and he really had several careers. He was a scientist and a mathematician who later became an administrator, serving first as a Member of Parliament, then as Master of the Royal Mint. Late in life, he turned the Royal Society from a dilettante's club into an eminent scientific organization. Although he was extremely pious and a devout Christian, he was thoroughly unorthodox in his religious beliefs and spent much time exploring aspects of arcane knowledge, including the taboo subject of the occult.

The premise of this book is a conversation between myself and Isaac Newton. The setting is left to the imagination of the reader, but we may assume that the interview takes place at the very end of Newton's life when he is able to reflect on his achievements and the key events of his time.

Newton was a disagreeable man who was often unpleasant and antisocial; consequently, he had few friends. He relied entirely upon his own counsel and one had to work hard to earn his respect. He might have been resistant to a conversation such as the one here, but equally, he liked others to know of his brilliance, a commodity he possessed in abundance.