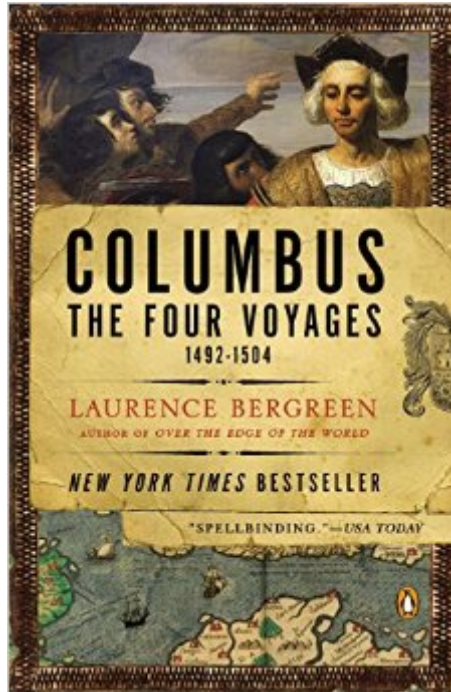


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Columbus: The Four Voyages, 1492-1504



Synopsis

He knew nothing of celestial navigation or of the existence of the Pacific Ocean. He was a self-promoting and ambitious entrepreneur. His maps were a hybrid of fantasy and delusion. When he did make land, he enslaved the populace he found, encouraged genocide, and polluted relations between peoples. He ended his career in near lunacy. But Columbus had one asset that made all the difference, an inborn sense of the sea, of wind and weather, and of selecting the optimal course to get from A to B. Laurence Bergreen's energetic and bracing book gives the whole Columbus and most importantly, the whole of his career, not just the highlight of 1492. Columbus undertook three more voyages between 1494 and 1504, each designed to demonstrate that he could sail to China within a matter of weeks and convert those he found there to Christianity. By their conclusion, Columbus was broken in body and spirit, a hero undone by the tragic flaw of pride. If the first voyage illustrates the rewards of exploration, this book shows how the subsequent voyages illustrate the costs - political, moral, and economic.

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Customer Reviews

I'm a little bit of a fan of Christopher Columbus. The challenges he faced in his life, especially in the first voyage he took across the Atlantic, were tremendous, and he faced them down with what appears to be considerable fortitude, viewed across 5 centuries. The ships he and other explorers sailed in were so small that today they'd probably be termed "boats" instead; the navigational instruments he had were hilariously primitive; his weaponry was not that much further advanced than that of the natives he met; and of course he was hampered by court politics and the fact that he

wasn't even Spanish, yet sailed for the Spanish Crown. In spite of all of this, he accomplished a lot more than you'd expect, finding a host of islands in the New World, and founding the first settlement there. Of course, he never really got over the idea that India and China were just across the horizon, a few day's journey away, so his legacy is one of accomplishment rather than theoretical discovery, but he *did* accomplish things, and those accomplishments were of course very crucial in the development of civilization around the globe. Laurence Bergreen does an excellent job of laying out Columbus's accomplishments, the places he discovered, things he saw, people he met or brought with him on the voyages. Bergreen doesn't ignore the rest of Columbus's life, but he does skim over it, pretty much. From what I remember, we don't know that much about the rest of Columbus's life anyway, so it's not that big of a loss that the author sees fit to concentrate on the voyages themselves, and tries to tell us what is known about them.

If you want a detailed perspective on Columbus's voyages, this is a good book. It sets his travels in the context of their times, and provides what seems like a balanced and well-documented description of the Admiral's challenges and actions on both land and sea. It is difficult to finish the book and still admire the man whole-heartedly, given his frequent brutality with the native population he found as well as his ineptness at dealing with men on land. Yet the book also leaves me admiring his seamanship, courage, and persistence. Where the book suffers as serious history is in keeping details straight. As another reviewer wrote, it often seems that the writer kept jumbling up his index cards. One glaring instance: On page 266 it describes how in August of 1499, one Adrian de Mújica was sentenced by Columbus to die for his part in a revolt, and the man was apparently soon dispatched. But on page 273, in June 1500, Adrian de Mújica is conspiring once again (from the grave?) and he is sentenced again to hang. Were there two men of the same name, and the author failed to explain it? Did the first execution actually not happen? If so, the text is completely obscure. Or did the author confuse two different men? Prior to the start of the fourth voyage, Columbus seems washed up, enfeebled, without connections, living in a monastery. This is enlightening material, enriching our understanding of the man's life. But then one page later he is heading out to sea with four ships, going back to the New World. What happened? We are never told. Surely this was an expensive and difficult undertaking to mount, and making it happen from such a poor foundation is more than a missing detail.

Laurence Bergreen has made a habit of crafting well-told modern historical narratives about some of history's greatest explorers. Bergreen went world-wide with an exploration of the great world

navigator himself, Ferdinand Magellen in "Over the Edge of the World". Then he took readers East to follow Marco Polo on his travels in "Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu". And now Bergreen comes closer to home as he travels from Spain to the New World with Christopher Columbus in "Columbus: The Four Voyages". All of these books synthesize a wealth of contemporary sources and modern references to build out something more than just 'the story' of discovery. Bergreen constructs a view into their exploits through historic and modern lenses that ultimately shines a broad beam of light across the entirety of their adventures. Moving from Marco Polo to Christopher Columbus is not such a long leap for Bergreen. Columbus carried a well-worn copy of Polo's "Travels" during all his journeys and used it as guidebook in his own search for a route west: from Europe to the Indies and to see the Great Khan in China, then known as Cathay. Marco Polo was a 15th Century Frommer, apparently. Unfortunately, what Columbus had no way of knowing was that "...two oceans and two centuries separated..." Columbus from his target, wrote Bergreen. Bergreen paints Columbus in a rainbow of personality traits. He was the brave, god-fearing (and preaching), navigational genius that traditional history remembers and teaches us as children. And at the same time he was confused, lost, indecisive and downright delusional. He single-handedly expanded an empire, while at the same time ignited a slave trade across both sides of the Atlantic. Christopher Columbus is a complicated individual.

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