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The Universal History of Computing: From the Abacus to the Quantum Computer

Georges Ifrah
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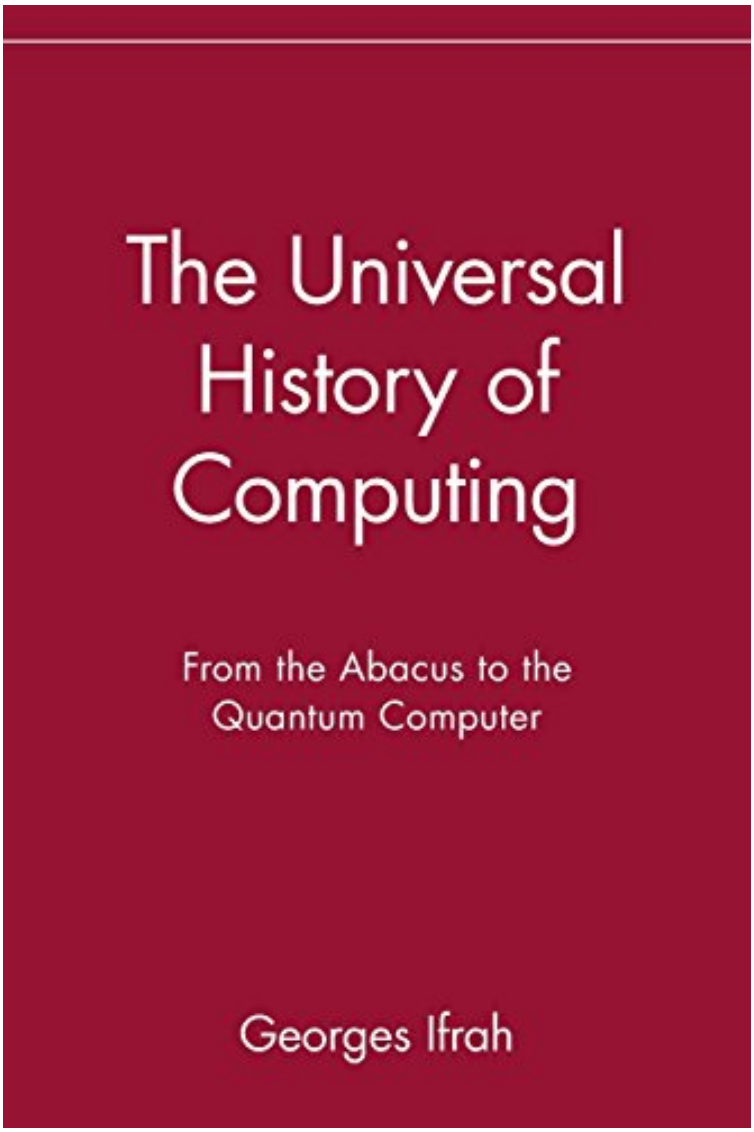

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"A fascinating compendium of information about writing systemsboth for words and numbers." Publishers Weekly "A truly enlightening and fascinating study for the mathematically oriented reader." Booklist "Well researched. . . . This book is a rich resource for those involved in researching the history of computers." The Mathematics Teacher In this brilliant follow-up to his landmark international bestseller, The Universal History of Numbers, Georges Ifrah traces the development of computing from the invention of the abacus to the creation of the binary system three centuries ago to the incredible conceptual, scientific, and technical achievements that made the first modern computers possible. Ifrah takes us along as he visits mathematicians, visionaries, philosophers, and scholars from every corner of the world and every period of history. We learn about the births of the pocket calculator, the adding machine, the cash register, and even automata. We find out how the origins of the computer can be found in the European Renaissance, along with how World War II influenced the development of analytical calculation. And we explore such hot topics as numerical codes and the recent discovery of new kinds of number systems, such as "surreal" numbers. Adventurous and enthralling, The Universal History of Computing is an astonishing achievement that not only unravels the epic tale of computing, but also tells the compelling story of human intelligenceand how much further we still have to go.

.com From the I Ching to AI, tremendous human brainpower has been devoted to devising easier means of counting and thinking. Former math teacher Georges Ifrah has devoted his life to tracking down traces of our early calculating tools and reporting on them with charm and verve. The Universal History of Computing: From the Abacus to Quantum Computing gives a grand title to a grand subject, and Ifrah makes good on his promise of universality by leaping far back in time and spanning all of the inhabited continents. If his scope is vast, his stories and details are still engrossing. Readers will hang on to the stories of 19th-century inventors who converged on multiplication machines and other, more general "engines," and better understand the roots of biological and quantum computation. Ifrah has great respect for our ancestors and their work, and he transmits this feeling to his readers with humor and humility. His timelines, diagrams, and concordance help the reader who might be unfamiliar with foreign concepts of numbers and computation keep up with his narrative. By the end, his slight bias against strong artificial intelligence comes through, but he is careful to acknowledge the future's unforeseeable nature and suggest that we keep our minds open. How can we resist? --Rob LightnerFrom Publishers WeeklyA fascinating compendium of information about writing systemsDboth for words and numbersDand ancient systems of calculation, this followup book by the author of The Universal History of Numbers will enthrall specialists, though its perplexing structure may put off other readers. Part One begins with a 19-page chronology of significant events in the development of number writing up to 1654, followed by 38 pages of charts with codes and figures that are not explained or referenced anywhere in the book. Some of these charts make sense, such as a diagram showing how medieval accountants wrote very large numbers with Roman numerals. Others remain cryptic. However, in Part Two, Ifrah begins to weave together a cogent intellectual history of physical representations of numbers and calculations with compelling stories and philosophical analyses of computational processing. Occasionally, his facts are ungrounded: for example, he places John Patterson (the promoter of the cash register, born 1844) before the Revolutionary War. But since the book is primarily concerned with ideas rather than people or events, this sort of carelessness is not a major problem. Originally writing in French, Ifrah distinguishes sharply between "computing" and "computers"Dand the modern computer has almost no place in his story. Unfortunately, the translator chooses to use "compute" in both senses, which makes some sections of the book unintelligible, and may lead readers to mistakenly expect this book to be a history of computers. (Oct.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.From BooklistIfrah begins his comprehensive study of the development of humankind's ability to manipulate numbers by touching lightly on early humans' first grasp of numbers and counting, and he carries through to the kinds of tasks we can expect future computers to perform. In between is a wealth of detailed information. Ifrah leaves no stone unturned in piecing this history together, covering such topics as the advent of writing, the change from character-based numbering to systems based on digit place value, and the discoveries and development of various mathematical methodologies. He ties it all in with concurrent scientific advances and the socioeconomic factors of the time that played a role in these developments. The result is an impressively thorough account of humankind's advancement from sticks and beads as counting aids, through the early mechanical calculators, to modern electronic calculators and computers. A truly enlightening and fascinating study for the mathematically

oriented reader. Gavin QuinnCopyright American Library Association. All rights reserved