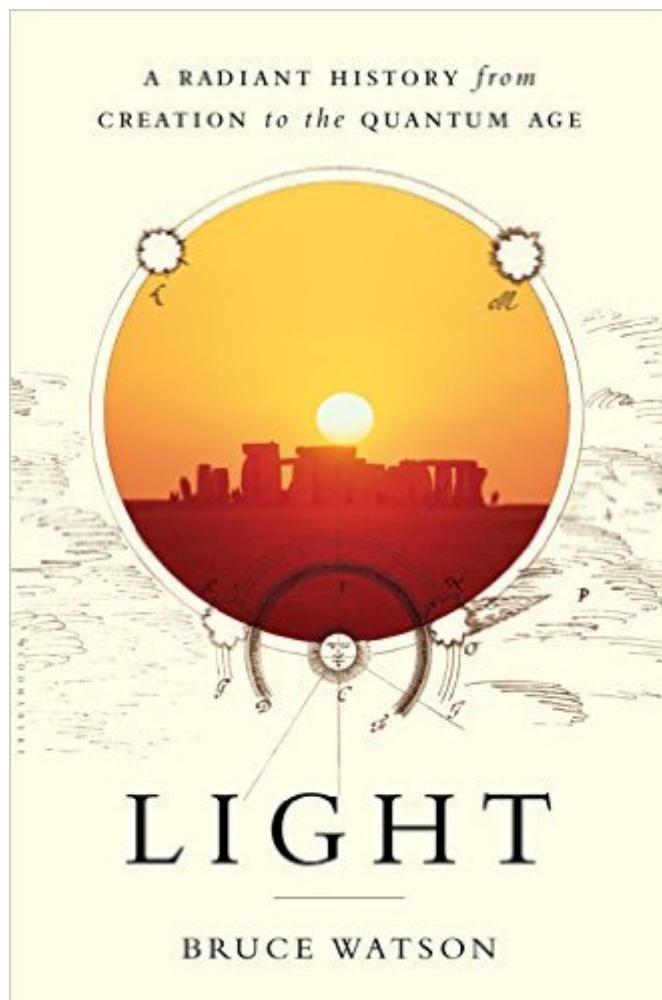


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# Light: A Radiant History From Creation To The Quantum Age



## **Synopsis**

Light begins at Stonehenge, where crowds cheer a solstice sunrise. After sampling myths explaining First Light, the story moves on to early philosophers' queries, then through the centuries, from Buddhist temples to Biblical scripture, when light was the soul of the divine. Battling darkness and despair, Gothic architects crafted radiant cathedrals while Dante dreamed a "heaven of pure light." Later, following Leonardo's advice, Renaissance artists learned to capture light on canvas. During the Scientific Revolution, Galileo gathered light in his telescope, Descartes measured the rainbow, and Newton used prisms to solidify the science of optics. But even after Newton, light was an enigma. Particle or wave? Did it flow through an invisible "ether"? Through the age of Edison and into the age of lasers, Light reveals how light sparked new wonders--relativity, quantum electrodynamics, fiber optics, and more. Although lasers now perform everyday miracles, light retains its eternal allure. "For the rest of my life," Einstein said, "I will reflect on what light is." Light explores and celebrates such curiosity.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This unusual book describes the entire human conception of light through all modes of thought and creativity: scripture, visual art, literature, science, engineering, etc. The term "biography of light" is apt, since it shows how our understanding has developed over thousands of years and reads almost like a narrative showing the arc of a person/character's life. "Light: A Radiant History" reminds me of James Burke's "Connections," a television show from the 80s that I've never forgotten because it was so smart and stimulating. Each episode traced a complex modern invention or engineering accomplishment (space flight, atomic power, stuff like that) back to its intellectual roots, often originating in the ancient world and spanning thousands of years and many different cultures. Over the course of an hour (or 90 minutes or whatever it was), Burke showed us how scientific and engineering breakthroughs build on previous knowledge, take surprising turns along the way, ending up somewhere marvelous. Watson's book feels similar because it makes a comprehensible continuum out of widely disparate information and approaches to understanding. Where Watson's book differs is in its incorporation of writing, visual art, and spirituality. Although scientists and "creative" professionals don't hang out much in the US in 2016, I've always thought science and the arts are much more closely related intellectually than most people think. In my personal experience, conversations/parties where scientists and artists mix are often much more interesting than a bunch of people from the same field talking shop among themselves. For this reason, I got my dad a copy of this book because I thought it'd be just his thing.

Watson is an established historian with a keen attention to detail. I was introduced to him first through his book *Bread and Roses*, which, unexpectedly, Watson turned into a page-turner. From there I read his detailed, 'politically neutral' presentation of the controversial Sacco & Vanzetti Case. By then a committed fan of the author, I picked up *Freedom Summer* a few years back and have followed him ever since, as I learn so much from historical author's like Watson with well-established credentials. I have rarely read historical accounts that inspire me to read onward, well into the night. This man brings history to life. Having just completed his latest book *Light*, I must say this is his finest and most ambitious work to date. It is a slower read than Watson's previous books, primarily due to the amount of detailed material provided within. It deviates from the books mentioned above only in scope, as it is a very vivid presentation of the history of an amorphous phenomena; one taken for granted by a species that depends upon it for their very lives. It is an excellent presentation of disciplines as disparate as science, aesthetics and mysticism. It provides what is oftentimes esoteric material in a format easily understood by the layman, with the author's skillful prose maintaining a compellingly cohesive thread throughout. A truly encyclopedic exposition

into a topic gleaned from not only the detailed research I have come to rely upon from Watson, much is offered firsthand as he recounts his travels around the globe to witness the various examples of how light has been observed, employed and used by humanity throughout the centuries.

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