

# The Last Man Who Knew Everything: Unraveling the Extraordinary Life of Thomas Young

In the annals of scientific history, there stands a towering figure who defies categorization: Thomas Young, the "Last Man Who Knew Everything." As a visionary polymath, Young possessed an unparalleled breadth of knowledge and made groundbreaking contributions to a myriad of disciplines, spanning medicine, physics, and linguistics. His insatiable curiosity and relentless pursuit of understanding left an indelible mark on the intellectual landscape of the 19th century.



## The Last Man Who Knew Everything: The Life and Times of Enrico Fermi, Father of the Nuclear Age

by David N. Schwartz

★★★★☆ 4.6 out of 5

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Screen Reader : Supported  
Enhanced typesetting : Enabled  
X-Ray : Enabled  
Word Wise : Enabled  
Print length : 481 pages



### Early Life and Education

Thomas Young was born into a Quaker family in Milverton, Somerset, England, on June 13, 1773. From a young age, he displayed an

extraordinary aptitude for learning, mastering several languages, including Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Italian, and German. At the tender age of 14, he enrolled at the University of Göttingen in Germany, where he immersed himself in the study of medicine.

## **Medical Career and Physiological Discoveries**

After completing his medical studies in 1796, Young returned to England and embarked on a distinguished medical career. He became a physician at St. George's Hospital in London, where he made significant contributions to the fields of ophthalmology and acoustics. In 1801, he published his seminal work, "On the Mechanism of the Eye," which revolutionized the understanding of how we see.

Young also pioneered the field of physiological optics. He conducted groundbreaking experiments on the perception of light and color, culminating in the development of the Young-Helmholtz theory of color vision. This theory postulated that the human eye contains three types of receptors that respond to different wavelengths of light, forming the basis for our perception of color.

## **Physics and the Wave Theory of Light**

Young's scientific pursuits extended beyond medicine into the realm of physics. He played a pivotal role in establishing the wave theory of light, which challenged the prevailing particle theory of the time. In 1801, he conducted a now-famous experiment known as the double-slit experiment. By passing light through two closely spaced slits, Young demonstrated the interference patterns created by the overlapping waves, providing compelling evidence for the wave nature of light.

## **Linguistics and the Decipherment of Hieroglyphics**

As if medicine and physics were not enough, Young also made substantial contributions to the field of linguistics. His interest in ancient languages led him to study Egyptian hieroglyphics, which had remained undeciphered for centuries. By comparing the Rosetta Stone inscription with the Greek text that accompanied it, Young made a breakthrough in 1819 by identifying the phonetic values of several hieroglyphic symbols. This discovery laid the foundation for the eventual decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphics by Jean-François Champollion.

## **Legacy and Influence**

Thomas Young's legacy as a polymath is unparalleled in scientific history. His groundbreaking contributions to medicine, physics, and linguistics have had a profound impact on our understanding of the world. He is remembered not only for his scientific achievements but also for his passion for knowledge and his belief in the interconnectedness of all disciplines.

In the words of physicist David Brewster, "Young was one of the most extraordinary men that ever lived." As the last man who knew everything, he left an indelible mark on the intellectual landscape of the 19th century. His unwavering curiosity and insatiable thirst for understanding continue to inspire generations of scientists and scholars to push the boundaries of human knowledge.

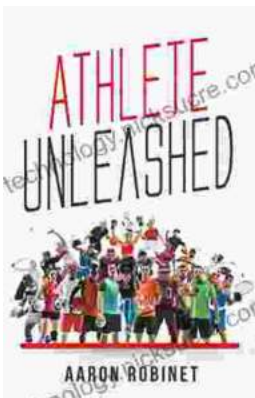
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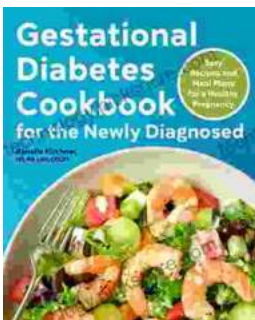


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