

Books

Puzzle-Math

by George Gamow
and Marvin Stern

The Viking Press, N.Y. \$2.50

A couple of years ago George Gamow, professor of physics at the University of Colorado, and author of a series of deservedly popular science books (*The Birth and Death of the Sun*, *Biography of the Earth*, *One, Two, Three . . . Infinity*, and *The Creation of the Universe*) spent a summer in San Diego as a consultant to Convair.

In this position Dr. Gamow had to confer a good deal with Marvin Stern, technical assistant to the vice president of Convair. The two men had offices on different floors, so they became heavy users of the elevators, and they soon noticed a curious thing: Whenever one of them started out for the other's office, the first elevator that came by was almost always going in the wrong direction.

Direct action

Now, maybe this *wasn't* a particularly original observation; it must have occurred to *everybody* at some time or other. The difference is that, where most people just indulge in a little swearing and then forget the whole thing, Gamow and Stern have *done* something about it; they have written a book.

In the course of solving the elevator problem (it's in the book, on page 59) the two men discovered that they had a mutual weakness for mathematical puzzles—and this book is the result.

There are some 30-odd brain-twisters here, presented in the form of short stories. (Dr. Gamow, of course, could be counted on not to present *anything* in school textbook style.) This technique manages to trap those people who are still nervous in the presence of mathematics by involving them in the *problems* rather than in sets of figures.

Puzzle addicts can count on this book for several long, sleepless nights. It is dedicated to a famous addict — “Theodore von Karman, who likes puzzles.”

Fantasia Mathematica

edited by Clifton Fadiman

Simon & Schuster, N.Y. \$4.95

In his introduction to this anthology, Mr. Fadiman claims that the stories and oddments he presents here are not suitable for mathematicians, “who will be bored by their naiveté.” Even non-mathematicians may not learn much mathematics from them, Mr. Fadiman says, “but they may lead readers like myself, curious but unlearned, to create a better image of a few mathematical ideas.”

Odd numbers

The book is divided into three sections. The first (called “Odd Numbers” because the material is drawn from writers not usually associated with the field of mathematics) includes short stories by Karel Capek and Aldous Huxley, mathematical snippets from novels by Arthur Koestler, James Branch Cabell and H. G. Wells, and even one of Plato's Socratic dialogues.

The second section of the book (“Imaginarities”) consists of 16 short stories. Most of these come from the science-fiction field, but there is also one of William Hazlett Upson's Alexander Botts stories from the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the late Russell Maloney's *New Yorker* classic about the man who decided to test the mathematical cliché that six chimpanzees, pounding six typewriters at random, would eventually write all the books in the British Museum.

The book ends with a miscellany of poems, paragraphs and jokes. All in all, it's a graceful collection, a beguiling book—even for mathematicians.

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