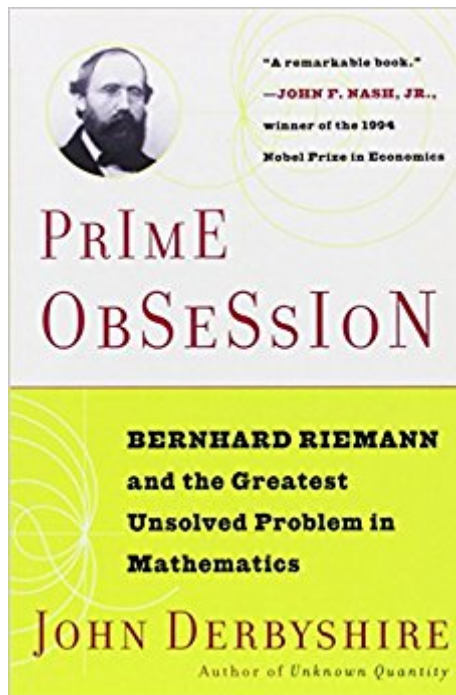


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Prime Obsession: Bernhard Riemann And The Greatest Unsolved Problem In Mathematics



Synopsis

In 1859, Bernhard Riemann, a little-known thirty-two year old mathematician, made a hypothesis while presenting a paper to the Berlin Academy titled "On the Number of Prime Numbers Less Than a Given Quantity." Today, after 150 years of careful research and exhaustive study, the Riemann Hypothesis remains unsolved, with a one-million-dollar prize earmarked for the first person to conquer it. Alternating passages of extraordinarily lucid mathematical exposition with chapters of elegantly composed biography and history, *Prime Obsession* is a fascinating and fluent account of an epic mathematical mystery that continues to challenge and excite the world.

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Customer Reviews

Prime Obsession is a delight: a book about a hypothesis on the distribution of prime numbers that reads like a gripping mystery. Most fiction isn't this vivid, moving, and well written, and this is no fiction. It is history, biography, philosophy, and, yes, mathematics brought to life with wit and wonder. You have to read this extraordinary book. This is the story of the Riemann Hypothesis, the greatest unsolved problem in mathematics today. Here it is in all its glory: "All non-trivial zeros of the zeta function have real part one-half." What on earth does it mean? Mr. Derbyshire, a gifted storyteller, takes the reader on an exhilarating journey of discovery as he painstakingly illuminates the meaning, mystery, and power of those eleven short words. I have never taken a course in calculus and am intimidated by even moderately complex math notation. There's lots of that in this book, and I had my doubts I could get through it. But Mr. Derbyshire knows that some of his readers

will have fear of flying, or only be able to fly for short distances, so he patiently breaks scary-looking formulae into bite-size pieces and gives you the general rules you need to know to digest them. He knows how to explain things with crystal clarity and easy wit. And the man knows how to turn a phrase. Still, he does not coddle his readers, so you need to be prepared to roll up your sleeves and fasten your seat belt. This is a challenging book, no bones about it. I needed to read it twice just to get a passing feel for chunks of it. Why, you may ask, would I twice read a book I had difficulty comprehending? Because with Mr. Derbyshire's gentle urging I could glimpse the beauty and feel the deep wonder of Bernhard Riemann's hypothesis, even if it remained just beyond grasp.

This is a fascinating and very well-written book about a singular problem in mathematics history. Derbyshire presents a look at the history of the Riemann hypothesis (or is it "conjecture"? Derbyshire asks, as an aside, what the real difference is between the two, in mathematical terminology) -- the people and their political context as well as the equation and efforts to prove it. As a blessing to those of us who are not hard-core mathematicians, Derbyshire takes the approach of alternating chapters between (even numbered chapters) math and (odd chapters) people and context. This gives the effect of telling two intimately linked stories simultaneously, and keeping the reader in just a bit of suspense in each while telling the other. I found myself enjoying each of the two tales, yet impatient to see where the other was going next. Derbyshire's style of writing is thoroughly entertaining, as well. His personality comes through as someone who is a "fan" of math. In "Peanuts", the late, great Charles Shultz has Lucy commenting to Schroeder that Beethoven couldn't have been so great, because he never had his picture on bubble-gum cards. It is apparent that if there was ever a set of mathematical gurus bubble-gum cards, Derbyshire would have been a collector. His admiration for genius only added to my enjoyment of the book. Derbyshire directly lets you know which people he holds in high esteem. He clearly honors those with a work ethic, those with dedication to their craft, family, and faith. He almost apologetically admits his appreciation for these sympathetic characters with a style reminiscent of a sports broadcaster who is also quietly rooting for "the good guys" -- not the home team, but the high-character-quality players.

Prime Obsession is, as the other reviewers have established, a well-written, understandable introduction to the Riemann Hypothesis. The Kindle edition of this book is priced higher than the paperback edition (11.79 for the Kindle edition, \$10.88 for the paperback edition), this was not a deterrence for me, as the cost of the paperback edition + shipping costs would have well exceeded the cost of the Kindle edition for the country that I live in (South Africa). Unfortunately this book is far

harder to read on a Kindle than a physical copy would be. The author in explaining the mathematical concepts makes frequent use of, equations, figures and tables, often referring back to an element on a previous page. This requires one to constantly navigate back on the Kindle, which is slow due the nature of the E-ink display. Admittedly this navigation is aided by hyperlinks in the text, which allow one to view a referenced element by clicking on its underlined reference in the text. However, this still requires one to navigate the cursor to the position of the reference in the text and click on it, which can be slow. A quick way to get back to the page you were on before clicking on a hyperlink is to press the "Back" button on your Kindle. The most bothersome aspect of the Kindle edition is that many tables in the book do not display fully on the Kindle in portrait mode (I'm using the Kindle 3rd generation, 6-inch display). In particular, the last columns of a table are often cut off. This can be remedied to an extent by switching the Kindle to landscape mode, however, I still encountered one or two tables in the book where the last column(s) were cut off in landscape mode, with seemingly no way to scroll in order to reveal their content.

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