

Animated Dimensions ■ Desperate Contentment ■ Crucial Numbers

BY MICHELLE PRESS

→ **FLATLAND: THE MOVIE**

by Seth Caplan, Jeffrey Travis and Dano Johnson. Includes DVD, original novel by Edwin A. Abbott, essays on making the movie and an introduction by Thomas Banchoff. Princeton University Press, 2008 (\$29.95)



Edwin Abbott wrote the mathematical allegory *Flatland* in 1884. Enmeshed in his two-dimensional world, the hero, A. Square, has an epiphany: there is an existence beyond his plane, a three-dimensional universe. By laying out how two dimensions relate to our three,

Abbott entices the reader to imagine how our own world would relate to a fourth spatial dimension. And by showing the tendency to take refuge in dogma, the book satirizes Victorian

class consciousness and attitudes toward women; the females of Flatland, for example, are lines, who present a danger to males, especially to the priestly circles, whom they might fatally pierce.

The filmmakers have animated the story—not the first such attempt—to make it more accessible to 21st-century readers. Their essays on the aesthetic choices they faced make fascinating reading: How do you depict a two-dimensional creature turning around and moving in the opposite direction, for instance? (See the DVD for their successful solution.) I asked Peter White, an eight-year-old friend unfamiliar with the novel, what he thought of the movie. He liked the graphics and the length (about 30 minutes), and he said he understood the “larger concept”: that you can believe in things you can’t see, such as other dimensions. But he had a lot of



questions about motivation: Why did the priestly circles care about whether others knew about the third dimension? Why was that particular square chosen to receive this knowledge? and so on. It is true, the movie (necessarily) oversimplifies the story. It provides inspiration to read the novel rather than replacement for it—and delight for *Flatland* fans of all ages.



EXCERPT

→ **AGAINST HAPPINESS: IN PRAISE OF MELANCHOLY**

by Eric G. Wilson. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008 (\$20)

Wilson, a professor of English at Wake Forest University and the author of five books on the relation between literature and psychology, is careful to draw a line between clinical depression and ordinary melancholy. He then argues against relentlessly seeking happiness:

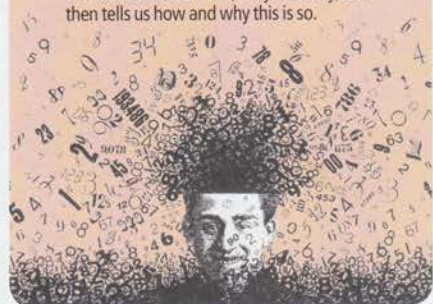
“A recent poll conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that almost 85 percent of Americans believe that they are very happy or at least happy. The psychological world is now abuzz with a new field, positive psychology, devoted to finding ways to enhance happiness through pleasure, engagement, and meaning.... Surely all this happiness can’t be for real. How can so many people be happy in the midst of all the problems that beset our globe?...

“I for one am afraid that our American culture’s overemphasis on happiness at the expense of sadness might be dangerous, a wanton forgetting of an essential part of a full life. I further am wary in the face of this possibility: to desire only happiness in a world undoubtedly tragic is to become inauthentic, to settle for unrealistic abstractions that ignore concrete situations. I am finally fearful over our society’s efforts to expunge melancholia from the system. Without the agitations of the soul, would all of our magnificently yearning towers topple? Would our heart-torn symphonies cease?”



NEW AND NOTABLE BOOKS ABOUT NUMBERS

- One to Nine: The Inner Life of Numbers** by Andrew Hodges. W. W. Norton, 2008 (\$23.95)
Beginning with the puzzle of unity and ending with the recurring nines of infinite decimals, Hodges tackles mathematical conundrums in elegant, witty prose.
- Guesstimation: Solving the World's Problems on the Back of a Cocktail Napkin** by Lawrence Weinstein and John A. Adam. Princeton University Press, 2008 (paperbound, \$19.95)
Through a series of puzzles, the book shows how to make numerical estimates.
- The Jinn from Hyperspace: And Other Scribblings—Both Serious and Whimsical** by Martin Gardner. Prometheus Books, 2007 (\$25.95)
A collection of published, and a few unpublished, writings with new introductions.
- Group Theory in the Bedroom, and Other Mathematical Diversions** by Brian Hayes. Hill & Wang, 2008 (\$25)
Twelve essays, each built on a mystery, that explore the surprising mathematics of everyday life.
- The Book of Numbers: The Secret of Numbers and How They Changed the World** by Peter J. Bentley. 350 illustrations in color and black-and-white. Firefly Books, 2008 (paperbound, \$29.95)
“Numbers rule our lives,” says Bentley, who then tells us how and why this is so.



FROM FLATLAND: THE MOVIE (geometric characters); FROM THE BOOK OF NUMBERS (head)