

Book Review: Littlewood's Miscellany

by Gonit Sora - Wednesday, November 12, 2014

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Littlewood's Micellany

There are books written by mathematicians for mathematicians, and then there are books by mathematicians written for non-mathematicians. But there is another category in between of books written by mathematicians intended for both the mathematician and the non-mathematician. Littlewood's Miscellany is one such book. The book is the successor of the now out of print classic 'A Mathematician's Miscellany' by John E. Littlewood. This book was edited and suitably extended with some more articles by Bela Bollobas and was published by Cambridge University Press in 1986. As the title suggests, this book is a random collection of some very short essays to some moderately long ones, all written with the unique style and wit of Littlewood.

John E. Littlewood was one of the most brilliant British pure mathematicians of the last century. He is most widely known for his collaborative work with Godfrey Harold Hardy spanning almost four decades and producing more than a hundred classic research papers. The book has something to say about this legendary collaboration which has seen no parallel in any field of human activity till now, and which seems quite unlikely to be emulated.

The book begins with an essay that contains some fun mathematics for the layman and then quickly goes on to some complex mathematics intended for the experts. But then the tone of the book changes quite often when we find essays about personal incidents and anecdotes about some of the greatest minds in history at the time of Littlewood when he was at Cambridge. The reader finds reminiscences of Bertrand Russell, Virginia Wolf and of course [Ramanujan](#). It would be really hard not to like this book which covers such diverse topics as the law of large numbers to Fermat's Little Theorem, from the Lion and The Man problem to the discovery of the planet Neptune. This book contains something for every mathematician irrespective of his field of interest and also for the amateur who wants to know how great minds think and do mathematics.

The book in itself is highly nontrivial and is guaranteed to give you many hours of joy reading it, understanding it and then finally appreciating the beauty of it. The book is also an autobiographical legacy of this great mathematician, he speaks about his feelings on the old system of the Cambridge Tripos, about his mathematical education and finally in the last chapter about what it means to do mathematical research. Any young student of mathematics should have this little book in his or her shelf and read it whenever he or she feels that things aren't going their way. After all, lives of great men reminds us indeed how we can make ours sublime.

Title: Littlewood's Miscellany

Author: John E. Littlewood

Editor: Bela Bollobas

Publisher: Cambridge University Press, 1986

Pages: 200

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