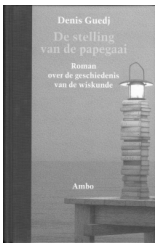
Denis Guedj *Le théorème du perroquet*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1998; *The parrot's theorem*, St. Martin's Press, 2001; *De stelling van de papegaai*, Ambo, 1999.





The author is professor of Mathematics and Science History in Paris VIII. This novel where he mixes adventure, mystery and the history of mathematics is not his sole attempt to sell science in a popular way. He is also a playwright and a cineast. This novel has been a hit in France but not so much in other countries. The plot is as follows. Three study pals from a Paris University have lost track of each other some 30 years ago. Edgar Grosrouve was interested in mathematics and retires in the Amazone jungle to devote himself to the proofs of two important theorems 'that would amaze the whole world', but once he has found them, he wants to keep the secret for himself.

The second one Pierre (πR) Ruche is paralyzed after an accident and lives in the back of his little Montmartre bookshop, which is run by Perrette. This rather obscure woman lives above the shop together with Max, her adopted deaf son, and her twin children Jonathan and Lea. The book starts when Pierre, the philosopher, receives a legacy from Edgar, the mathematician. He leaves Pierre a gigantic library on (the history of) mathematics. Because Edgard's dead is somewhat mysterious, these five people from the bookshop (especially the enthousiastic and adventurous children) try to find out what has happened. They hope to find some answers in the books of the library that has arrived in complete disorder. They try to order and organize the library and while they do, the reader gets informed, more or less chronologically, about the anecdotes of mathematical history. The children become as enthousiastic about these math stories as they are about their 'real' detective work to solve the mystery.

Of course there is also the talking parrot Nofuture (or Sidney in the English version). He is the most colorful (in all senses) character of the book. The animal was saved on page 1 by Max at a flea market where the bird was being mutilated by two mafioso-type of bad-guys. It turns out that the parrot knows more about the proofs of the theorems, since it has been Edgard's companion in the Amazone. When Max and Nofuture are kidnapped by Don Ottavio, and when Pierre goes on a rescue mission, it turns out that this Don Ottavio is the old friend of Pierre and Edgard, and that this rich Don Ottavio is eager to lay hands on the proofs of the theorems and that he is therefore after the parrot. Together they fly to the Amazone jungle in search for the proofs. Did Edgard indeed prove Fermat's last theorem or the Goldbach conjecture?

So far for the plot. The bulk of the book is however on the history of mathematics, and this is rather disconnected from the adventurous part. I can imagine that younger children (13-14 year) for which the book seems to be written will have a difficulty in keeping up the attention during these relatively long mathematical intermezzo's.

Although the mathematics are rather naive, and are constitute more of a 'petite histoire' than of a real history, still several of the important concepts and periods are passing the show:

the Greek and Arab tradition, the quest for the quadrature of the circle, the French and Italian Schools, Goldbach's conjecture and Fermat's theorem, and many more issues.

This novel is an interesting experiment, but the suspense is slowed down too much by the mathematics and the overall concept is less focussed.

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