Tom Petsinis *The French mathematician*, Hardcover: Penguin Books, 1997; Pocket edition: Berkeley Pub Group, 2000; *De franse wiskundige*, Cargo/De Bezige Bij, 2002.





This is a fictional biography of Evariste Galois (Bourg-la-Reine 25 Oct 1811 - Paris 31 May 1832). The known facts about his life can be found at the math history site *http://www-gap.dcs.st-and.ac.uk/~history/Mathematicians/Galois.html*. A brief summary: He was introduced to mathematics by Vernier and later by Louis Richard at the Lycée of Louis-le-Grand in Paris. He took up a passion for mathematics, but had much difficulties in communicating his results. In 1828 he took an examination to enter the Ecole Polytechnique but failed. His first paper on continued fractions was published in 1829. In that year however, his father committed suicide because of malicious actions of the priest of Bourg-la-Reine. This turned Galois into a passionate anti-clerical republican. One should know that in that period were the hectic revolutionary demonstrations against the king Louis-Phillipe with the slogans "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité". He tried a second time to enter the Ecole Polytechnique, not only because that would give him the occasion to develop his mathematical skills, but also because of the revolutionary atmosphere there. He failed again because of his lack of communicative talent, still being in an emotional shock after his father's provoked death. Instead he enrolled at the Ecole Normale. The director locked the students up to prevent them from taking part in the riots outside. Galois published a pamphlet against this and was expelled from school. He became now heavily involved with the revolution and when he brought a threatening toast to the king, showing a blank dagger, he was arrested but released shortly after. On Bastille Day (14 July 1830), he was arrested a second time while wearing a military uniform (which was forbidden), a rifle and several pistols. When he got ill in prison, a cholera epidemic sweeping Paris, he was transferred to a health pension where he met Stephanie-Felice du Motel. He seemed to have fallen in love with her which probably resulted in the duel with his friend d'Herbinville. He was wounded and died in hospital on 31 May 1832. The night before his death he tried to write up his mathematical testament, which was posthumously published and forms the outlines of what we now call Galois theory.

All these facts truthfully appear in this novel but they form only the decor. Instead, the author has transformed himself into this young genius and writes down a character study of such a man. The I-person is Galois telling what he feels and thinks. This person comes forward as a provocative revolutionary (in the broad sense) teenager, living in his own isolated world, desperately trying to please his father and despising his mother for her devotion to the church. He is not very healthy and socially unadapted. He thinks himself high above his teachers and does not want to take the effort to communicate with them. He is the real genius, misunderstood by everybody. Mathematics is the only pure thing to be trusted. Only in mathematics, things are clean, pure and uncorrupted. Mathematics is in a sense the ultimate goal of mankind and the revolution has to free the people so that man like himself

can be free to be occupied only with mathematics and mathematics is what brings prosperity to mankind.

Tom Petsinis, born in Greece, but raised in Australia, where he teaches mathematics at the Victoria University of Technology in Melbourne has written several novels and plays. So he knows how to write and he knows about mathematics. In this book he attributes the kind of ideas, that were sketched above, to Galois and writes them down in over 400 pages of engaged and tragic prose. It is thus not the story of mathematics, but the story of a tormented young person living in a revolutionary world. He let him meet Cauchy, Fourier, Poisson and others of the Academy with whom Galois clashes because at first his memoir is "misplaced" and lost, and later it was rejected. He lets him have a conversation with Alexandre Dumas about the revolution. He lets Galois have hallucinations where he discusses with Pascal, Abel, and (this is a bit weird) also with his own biographer. This reflects in a sense how thoroughly Petsinis has tried to actually become Galois: the Galois-Petsinis is talking to the biographer-Petsinis, and it is not likely that the real Galois would have done that.

These multifaceted aspects: a psychological character study of a young self destructing rebellion, the mathematics which are constantly present, at first brightly shining when Galois discovers mathematics, but later more latently, the turbulent historic events, the mixture of fiction and historical facts make this novel a highly appreciated piece of work. You do not need to know anything about mathematics to read the book, but it will give an extra kick if you do.

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