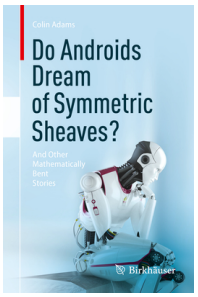
Do androids dream of symmetric sheaves? and other mathematically bent stories
Colin Adams. Birkhäuser, 2023 (x+253 p.), isbn: 978-3031314902 (pbk)




Colin Adams

Colin Adams is the author of a humorous column *Mathematically Bent* in the *Mathematical Intelligencer*. After his bundle of 30 columns in *Riot at the calc exam and other mathematically bent stories*[1], (AMS, 2009), the current collection has another 45 of these short stories.

Some returning themes are the anxiety that someone steals your theorem and publishes first, or the teachers assistants that get an overload of grading to do, leaving no time for research, tyrannical advisors or department chairs, and dropping overly specialized abstract concepts used to stun your adversary and leave them bewildered and dumbfounded.

Inspiration is easily found in well known books, films, series, etc. Some examples: *The adventures of Robin Caruso* (a mathematician stranded on a deserted island), *Silence of the Lemmas* (Dr. Lecture teaches math from prison), *A Pi day Carol* (Scrouge harassing poor Cratchitch), *CSI-MSRI* (Mangum is a P.I. (*principal* investigator) on an NSF grant)... Other inspiration is found in known mathematical stories: Hardy and Ramanujan, The book (with the most beautiful proofs, conceived by Erdős), A prisoner's dilemma, etc.

Let me pick a few examples that made me really laugh out loud. *The presidential address* is about the speech of a newly appointed president of the AMS who proclaims himself as the best mathematician ever. To make mathematics great again, it should be simplified: no more integrals, derivatives should do, pi is simplified to 3, and he proposes to build a wall between the AMS and the MAA, and he promises that they will pay for it, and more of these promises and dictums that are spitting image of some American president whose name is not mentioned.

Another one is *The Lord of the Ring, part I: the NSF fellowship of the rings*, where the algebraist Frodo obtains the definition of a very secret and powerful ring from Bilbo, and is stimulated by Geisenbud with a long beard and a staff to get rid of it before it is too late.

In *The referee's report*, we read about a stupid discussion started by the author of a paper who does not agree with a referee report and this degenerates into an increasingly offensive discussion which in the end involves the editor who is in between.

GUI stands for 'grading under influence' where the head of the department is investigating Hanson of his staff who has been caught drinking coffee while grading exams, sometimes tea, and even having a glass of wine after an evening of correcting homework. Hanson tries to defend himself, but he has to admit that it had been a tough semester when he is shown a video where, clearly drunk, he throws a bunch of papers down the stairs that has grades marked on the steps.

Under the title *Happiness is a warm gun*, we meet Craig who is addicted to mathematics and is visiting a doctor because his mathematitis has lead to a serious depression. While the shrink doctor is analysing Craig's mind, Craig suddenly gets an idea of how to prove the theorem that had brought him into this situation and he cannot wait to leave the consult.

The title of the book refers to a text where the situation is sketched in which the robots are the intelligent species that teach humans to be their servants.

Some of the stories are hilarious, others a bit less so. One gets easily used to the pattern and the senseless mathematical terminology (like noncommutative abelian ring, nondifferentiable smooth manifold etc.). So you should consume them as they are originally intended, every time a new issue of the *Mathematical Intelligencer* appears they are like fresh and can surprise the reader. Therefore I do not advise you to read this cover to cover, but you should put it aside for a while, and read a story in between other serious work as a snack.

Adhemar Bultheel

[1]See BMS-NCM Newsletter, vol 78, May 2010. Check also his *Lost in the math museum* (2022) and *Zombies and calculus (2014)*.
Do androids dream of electric sheep is a novel by Ph.K.Dick that inspired the *Bladerunner* film by Ridley Scott.