

Fermat's Last Theorem: Unlocking the Secret of an Ancient Mathematical Problem

By Amir D. Azcel, Amir D. Aczel



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Simple, elegant, and utterly impossible to prove, Fermat's last theorem captured the imaginations of mathematicians for more than three centuries. For some, it became a wonderful passion. For others it was an obsession that led to deceit, intrigue, or insanity. In a volume filled with the clues, red herrings, and suspense of a mystery novel, Amir D. Aczel reveals the previously untold story of the people, the history, and the cultures that lie behind this scientific triumph. From formulas devised from the farmers of ancient Babylonia to the dramatic proof of Fermat's theorem in 1993, this extraordinary work takes us along on an exhilarating intellectual treasure hunt. Revealing the hidden mathematical order of the natural world in everything from stars to sunflowers, Fermat's Last Theorem brilliantly combines philosophy and hard science with investigative journalism. The result: a real-life detective story of the intellect, at once intriguing, thought-provoking, and impossible to put down.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Born in 1601, Pierre de Fermat lived a quiet life as a civil servant in Toulouse, France. In his spare time, however, Fermat dabbled in mathematics, and somehow managed to become one of the great mathematical theorists of his century. Around 1637 he scribbled a marginal note in one of his books. In it, he stated that he had solved a celebrated number theory problem: "I have discovered a truly marvelous proof of this, which, however, the margin is not large enough to contain."

If only the margin had been wider! For more than 300 years, mathematicians labored to crack the secret of Fermat's Last Theorem, without any success. Finally, in 1995, a Princeton-based mathematician named Andrew Wiles solved the riddle. Amir Aczel's account of this brainteaser and its solution is an irresistible read. And for mathematical dolts--like myself, for instance--it includes a concise, profusely illustrated history of mathematical theory from the Bronze Age to our own fin-de-siecle.

From Library Journal

It is extremely unusual for an advance in pure mathematics to draw the attention of the press worldwide. However, there was a great furor in 1993 when Andrew Wiles announced he had derived a proof of Fermat's Last Theorem, which had defeated mathematicians for more than 300 years. This brief book, written by a statistician rather than a number theorist, presents for the general public the long historical background, the awkward temporary retraction by Wiles, and his final triumph in 1995. The human drama is well presented, but the discussion of the mathematics itself is less successful. The author makes a good start in dealing with the fundamentals but leaps too quickly for lay readers into more complex ideas laden with jargon that is only partially explained. The book might have worked better if the author had taken several dozen additional pages to work through the mathematical concepts in more detail. For larger math collections.?Jack W. Weigel, Univ. of Michigan Lib., Ann Arbor

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Review

"Aczel does a superb job ... A mathematical bonbon of a book."

"Aczel maps the strange, beautiful byways of modern mathematical thought in ways the layperson can grasp."

"It employs a staggering range of abstract devices, which Mr. Aczel is a dab hand at explaining: Abelian varieties, Galois representations, automorphic forms, and on and on."

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Wayne Santiago:

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Joseph Griego:

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Rosalind Bowlin:

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