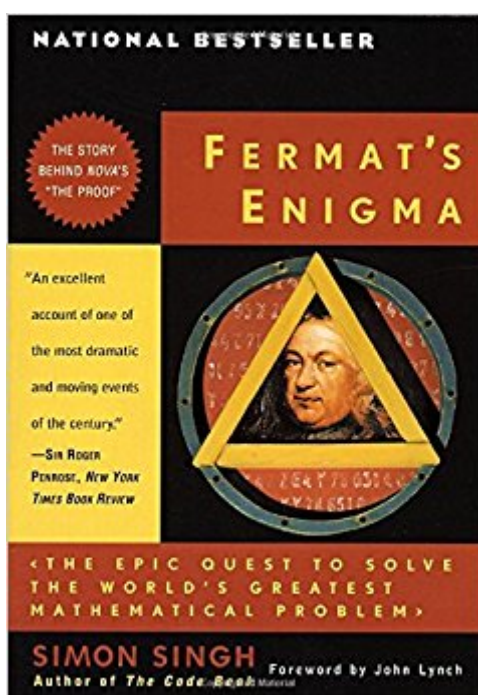


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Fermat's Enigma: The Epic Quest To Solve The World's Greatest Mathematical Problem



Synopsis

$x^n + y^n = z^n$, where n represents 3, 4, 5, ...no solution" I have discovered a truly marvelous demonstration of this proposition which this margin is too narrow to contain." With these words, the seventeenth-century French mathematician Pierre de Fermat threw down the gauntlet to future generations. What came to be known as Fermat's Last Theorem looked simple; proving it, however, became the Holy Grail of mathematics, baffling its finest minds for more than 350 years. In Fermat's Enigma--based on the author's award-winning documentary film, which aired on PBS's "Nova"--Simon Singh tells the astonishingly entertaining story of the pursuit of that grail, and the lives that were devoted to, sacrificed for, and saved by it. Here is a mesmerizing tale of heartbreak and mastery that will forever change your feelings about mathematics.

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Customer Reviews

When Andrew Wiles of Princeton University announced a solution of Fermat's last theorem in 1993, it electrified the world of mathematics. After a flaw was discovered in the proof, Wiles had to work for another year--he had already labored in solitude for seven years--to establish that he had solved the 350-year-old problem. Simon Singh's book is a lively, comprehensible explanation of Wiles's work and of the star-, trauma-, and wacko-studded history of Fermat's last theorem. Fermat's Enigma contains some problems that offer a taste of the math, but it also includes limericks to give a feeling for the goofy side of mathematicians.

YA The riveting story of a mathematical problem that sprang from the study of the Pythagorean theorem developed in ancient Greece. The book follows mathematicians and scientists throughout history as they searched for new mathematical truths. In the 17th century, a French judicial assistant and amateur mathematician, Pierre De Fermat, produced many brilliant ideas in the field of number theory. The Greeks were aware of many whole number solutions to the Pythagorean theorem, where the sum of two perfect squares is a perfect square. Fermat stated that no whole number solutions exist if higher powers replace the squares in this equation. He left a message in the margin of a notebook that he had a proof, but that there was insufficient space there to write it down. His note was found posthumously, but the solution remained a mystery for 350 years. Finally, after working in isolation for eight years, Andrew Wiles, a young British mathematician at Princeton University, published a proof in 1995. Although this famous question has been resolved, many more remain unsolved, and new problems continually arise to challenge modern minds. This vivid account is fascinating reading for anyone interested in mathematics, its history, and the passionate quest for solutions to unsolved riddles. The book includes 19 black-and-white photos of mathematicians and occasional sketches of ancient mathematicians as well as diagrams of formulas. The illustrations help to humanize the subject and add to the readability.

Penny Stevens,
Centreville Regional Library, Centreville, VA
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My first Singh book was "Big Bang" which was also excellent. He is phenomenal at weaving a massive story over a period spanning multiple millennium in a few hundred pages. He gives short bios on each major player, and tells interesting stories about their lives. His method keeps you on the edge of your seat, and what others would think would be a boring subject is indeed a page turner! Some of these mathematicians committed suicide, some were killed at an early age (Galois, mathematical genius dead at 20), others had to disguise their gender (Sophie Germain) due to discrimination. It's very interesting to learn about each character. Altogether a highly readable book on a journey to solving Fermat's Last Theorem. I read it in about 3 days (it's 300 pages), and maybe 15 pages discuss math that I don't understand (modular forms and elliptic equations), but it's very minimal and doesn't get in the way. It was mostly about the lives of these mathematicians and their struggles. If you are interested in learning about the lives of Pythagorus, Euclid, Euler, Gauss, Germain, Galois, Wiles, and countless others... Check it out. On a side note I would love it if Simon Singh wrote a book on the history of evolution. He is a master at simplifying very complex subjects.

An educational and sometimes engaging history of number theory's biggest problem and the many efforts it took to solve. Singh typically writes his unique histories for the casual layman (I've also read "The Code Book"), which makes them as accessible as possible. However, if you have much of any background in mathematics, you'll find a few of the explanations annoyingly simple. Just skim past those and keep on.

Fermat's Last Theorem is the greatest riddle ever challenged by mathematicians spanning different centuries and different concepts and that's how this book is all about. Fermat's Enigma is truly one of the most dramatic reading where various mathematicians in real life are on a quest to solve the world's greatest mathematical problem where n represents 3, 4, 5...no solution. It has been quite as dramatic as reading a best-selling cult classic novel you all heard about but more importantly, it has given me several purposes that mathematicians tried and tried until they succeed in solving the greatest math problem we know as Fermat's Last Enigma. Of course, there has been some downfall faced by mathematicians, especially the men behind the Taniyama-Shimura conjecture, but this book I read is all drama without the fuss and thanks to such wondrous sources, I am more than welcomed to recommend reading this fascinating book to almost everyone who has a deep interests in mathematics. Solving Fermat's Last Theorem literally holds a very special place in the history mathematics and no matter how many mathematicians sacrificed themselves to solve this problem, only one had triumphantly solved it with the help of his trusted people in his life. Students, like us, are truly fascinated about what sort of mysteries lurking around the history of mathematics but this Fermat's Last Theorem we all read about in this book really hits the spot, literally.

I first came across "Fermat's Enigma" years ago while completing a Masters degree. I was doing research for a History of Mathematics class when this book grabbed my attention while sitting on the library book shelves. I checked it out, started reading and just found myself totally engrossed in the story, almost from the get go, and finished it in two days. The story of the solving of Fermat's Last Theorem contains almost all of the features that draw us to read books in the first place. What is super-interesting is this: though the story takes place within the mathematics field, it contained elements of fraud, murder, suicide...all in the pursuit of a seemingly elusive proof, based on an equation that, at first glance, seems so simple. And because almost all of us are familiar with the Pythagorean Theorem from our school days, the fact that over 350 years and hundreds of different mathematicians were needed to come up with the elusive answer just makes the story that much more fascinating. I now teach college mathematics and recently, noticed that one of my students

was reading "Fermat's Enigma." It brought back fond memories and I desired to check it out again from the library to give the book another read. This time, it was not available...so I did what the student did: ordered my own copy from . It arrived today and I'm excited about having an entire weekend to once again visit the cast of characters and the engrossing saga that evolved over the centuries. Fantastic read! And highly recommended!

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