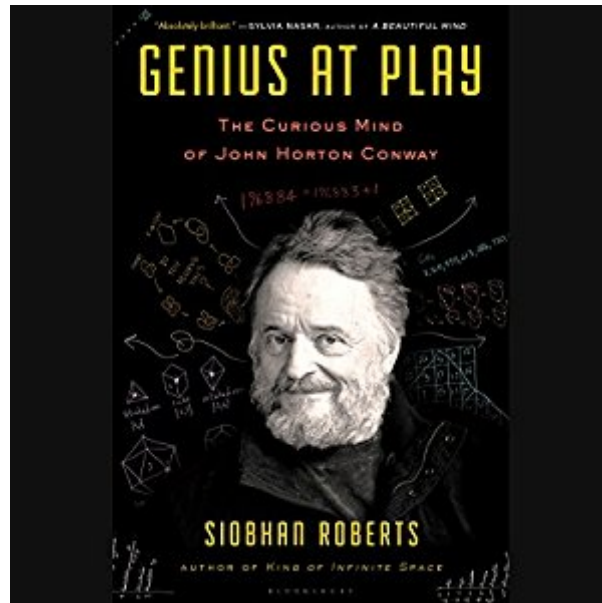


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Genius At Play: The Curious Mind Of John Horton Conway



Synopsis

"Conway is a creative genius." (Martin Gardner) An unabashed original, John Horton Conway is Archimedes, Mick Jagger, Salvador Dali, and Richard Feynman all rolled into one - a singular mathematician with a rock star's charisma, a sly sense of humor, a polymath's promiscuous curiosity, and a burning desire to explain everything about the world to everyone in it. Born in Liverpool in 1937, Conway found fame as a barefoot Cambridge professor. He discovered the Conway groups in mathematical symmetry and invented the aptly named surreal numbers as well as the cult classic Game of Life - more than a cool fad, Life demonstrates how simplicity generates complexity, and the game provides an analogy for all mathematics and the entire universe. Moving to Princeton in 1987, as a mathematician he deployed cards, ropes, dice, coat hangers, and even the odd Slinky as props to extend his winning imagination and share his mathy obsessions with signature contagion. He is a jet-setting ambassador at large for the beauties of all things mathematical. *Genius at Play* is an intimate investigation into the mind of an endearing genius, laying bare Conway's personal and professional idiosyncrasies. The intimacy comes courtesy of the man himself. He generously granted Roberts full access, though not without the occasional grudge and grumble: "Oh hell," he'd say. "You're not going to put that in the book. Are you?"

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Conway is a highly unusual mathematician. Correspondingly, this excellent book offers an unusual combination of biographical narrative, elements of insight into Conway's mathematics, and stories

from several years the author spent interviewing Conway while researching this book. I was especially impressed with the way the mathematics was seamlessly integrated into the text. There is just enough precision to satisfy those with more technical interests, while remaining of interest to those who have no inclination to understand the details, and merely want a glimpse of Conway's insane genius.

Fascinating biography of a stellar mathematician. He's infinitely talented, but seriously unbalanced. The book presents an affectionate but serious look at his career, strange habits, and obsessions, replete with quotes from the subject and entertaining opinions on being chronicled. It's more like a conversation than a novel. Wives, heart attacks, professional jealousy, poor eating habits, strange ways to motivate himself to research and prepare for lectures, the prose is straightforward and moderately unsparing. As the one-star rating guy already said, the Kindle version loses the formatting that says whether the writer or Conway himself is talking, and about 1/4 of the book is quotes. One can more or less figure it out, but it's a nuisance. That's why this rating is not 5 stars. There's maybe 1/4 of the book that is math and games, which I found more inscrutable and less amusing than the rest, despite being a scientist, although that seems par for the course in biographies of science. I picked this up because of a thorough review that I saw in Nature - <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v523/n7561/full/523406a.html>

I downloaded this book in mid-July, 2015, shortly after it was released on Kindle. I should be ashamed of the formatting. The book has challenges, which I will write about when I am done, but no challenge could be more insurmountable than the lousy formatting job that has been done with this book. The author frequently quotes the subject without quotation marks. Sometimes these quotes are buried in with the main text of the book; sometimes they are indented in smaller fonts; sometimes they just spring up like new paragraphs without any introduction; all of which means working through this book is like dissection. Buy a hard copy of the book or send a message that you insist that they have a human being edit their Kindle version before springing it on an unsuspecting population.

A *phenomenal* book. I know JHC a little, and of what I know, this is spot on. It's clear that John Conway has opened up to Ms Roberts, baring his mathematical soul, and allowing her to tell his life's tale. And what a tale to tell, and how beautifully she tells it. There is mathematics in there, a little, but if you are not mathematically inclined, it is easy to skip, so don't let it scare you. Read this book. It will give you insight into one of the most unusual minds in history!

As a mathematician with a PhD in Discrete Mathematics, I have long been familiar with the work of John Conway, and have often presented his mathematical contributions in my teaching, including Conway's Game of Life, theory of surreal numbers in Game Theory, and his envy-free cake-cutting algorithm for the case $n=3$. But this outstanding biography by Siobhan Roberts reveals so much more about John Conway: his passions, his personality, his character, and his authenticity. I found myself engrossed reading each chapter, to learn about this flawed complex mathematician and what makes him tick, and how he has devoted his career to developing truth and creating knowledge: "in a fundamental way, my job is thinking... I personally can only understand things after I've thought about them for ages and made them very, very simple" (p. 5). I was particularly fascinated with Conway's Free Will Theorem, and his FRACTRAN algorithm (starting with 14 elementary fractions, combined with two simple rules, we can generate the set of prime numbers), which will infuse my teaching in the years to come. "Genius at Play" is an outstanding work of art, and I highly recommend it for teachers and students of mathematics.

Roberts starts out by announcing that Conway is such a force of nature he deserves his own font...and Kindle says "Oh, no, he doesn't". Fortunately Conway is sufficiently distinctive that this is rarely an issue but it's a silly oversight on Kindle's part. I'm not entirely convinced by the structure either - by the time the opening reappears at the end you have been exposed to a significant range of intellectual material and the thread is hard to pick up. I am pretty certain that Roberts didn't follow all the mathematical concepts - and indeed the famous prod at quantum physics ('If you think you've understood it, you haven't') appears and is relevant - but just occasionally there isn't quite enough groundwork to maintain the flow. However if your criterion of a good biography is that you come away with a clear view of the subject's character and thinking style then this hits the nail on the head in all 23 dimensions.

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