

Book Review

777 Mathematical Conversation Starters

By John DePillis
c. 2002 by the Mathematical
Association of America

REVIEWED BY SUSAN PALMER SLATTERY

Tell people you are a mathematics instructor/mathematician and many will respond that they hate math and/or that they cannot balance their checkbook. Then plan to suffer through the usual jokes about word problems, nerds and incomprehensible lectures. (Sigh!) Think about how strange this is: We all agree that we are living in a technological age, where mathematical and scientific ability is in demand, and yet people are still “bragging” about how poor their mathematical skills are! People generally do not openly discuss whether or not they have poor reading skills; instead, they realize, on some level, that having poor reading skills is something to be concerned about! Mathematics is viewed as dull, hard, useless, and, worst of all, a requirement for every student, regardless of their major. It just can't be *fun* to teach or study that stuff, and the people who do must be dull and have no life! Author John DePillis proves just the opposite in *777 Mathematical Conversation Starters*.

There are many books available that provide quotes of famous mathematicians and famous problems. There are books that include a large number of mathematics jokes and cartoons. In this book, the reader will find a lot of both. From the well-know quote of Descartes, to humorous songs by Tom Lehrer, the reader will

find plenty to amuse. Items are organized into categories and are individually numbered so that specific topics can be readily found. Although a reader may choose to read the book from start to finish, individual topics stand alone and are cross-referenced with other items in the book.

The reader is cautioned, however, to take the title of this book with a grain of salt: Much of what is included in this book will be conversation *stoppers* with non-mathematicians. Several longer passages attempt to explain complex mathematical topics, such as the Banach-Tarski paradox, in a conversational style. Although the expositions are clear and readable, they still require a significant amount of mathematical background to understand. Those items would be more useful in discussions with college mathematics majors than in a general conversation about mathematics. In addition, several of the cartoons require quite a bit of thought and mathematical background and, much like reading *The Far Side*, there may be some cartoons the reader will never understand.

Despite its drawbacks, this book is entertaining and provides a rich source of office door postings or quotes of the day. Presenting appropriately chosen items to students can have a positive effect on the classroom atmosphere and could lead to further investigations of the speaker of the quote or the topic presented.

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