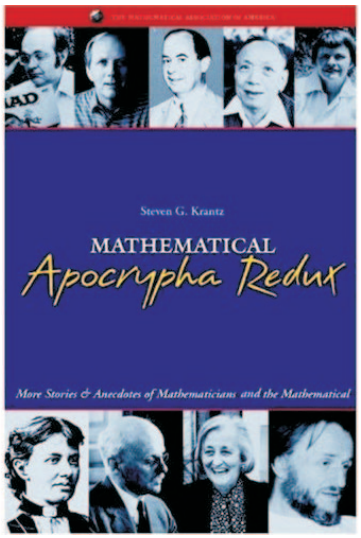
From the Editor

People Matter

Mathematics is about ideas, the ultimate in abstraction. What has it got to do with people? Well, for one thing, it has profoundly affected our lives. Without mathematics there would be no science or technology; we would still be in the Dark Ages! For another, behind mathematics there are mathematicians, who invented (or discovered?) it. What sort of people are they? Steven Krantz has compiled a follow-up volume to his *Mathematical Apocrypha* in which he continues with his anecdotes about mathematicians. It helps if you are a working mathematician who may recognize a good number of the names and mathematical terms, and if you are American. But even if you aren't, a dip into its pages will fill in odd minutes agreeably. The general impression is that mathematicians are a strange lot, so be warned if you are contemplating becoming one! Here is a taster to whet your appetite.

St Augustine in the fourth century AD advised that 'all good Christians should avoid contact the mathematicians, for they and others of empty prophecies are in league with the devil and lead us into darkness' (p. 267). Even if he was describing astrologers rather than those we would recognize as mathematicians, it can feel like that when you are struggling to understand a piece of mathematics or solve a problem.

Paul Erdős, who died in 1996, is a great subject for anecdotes, and features prominently. He was an itinerant mathematician. He never owned or rented a home, didn't have a driver's licence, and didn't have a credit card. He habitually would show up on the doorstep of a friend or collaborator anywhere in the world, declare that 'My brain is open', and expect to be fed, housed, and clothed. His motto was 'Another roof, another proof'. When he lost the sight in his right eye, he said 'Now I will have less distraction', a reminder of the great 18th century Swiss mathematician Leonhard Euler. When Erdős was detained by the police for loitering and asked to account for his activities, he offered up one of his maths papers – and



they accepted it! (pp. 251–252). When told that a friend of his had shot and killed his wife, he said 'Well, she was probably interrupting him when he was trying to prove a theorem' (p. 4). He even posed a problem in *Mathematical Spectrum* and offered a prize for a solution; no one claimed the prize!

Did you know that Karl Marx wrote a calculus book? *Das Kapital* wouldn't feed his family! (p. 182). Or that Albert Einstein played in string quartets with his friends? When he failed for the fourth time to get his entry right, the cellist said 'The problem with you, Albert, is that you simply cannot count' (p. 141).

Marilyn vos Savant has a popular column *Ask Marilyn* in a newspaper. A reader wrote in to ask what has become known as the *Monte Hall problem*. Monte Hall has a television game show *Let's Make a Deal*. You are a contestant on the show. You face the stage on which are three doors. Behind one door is a Cadillac, and behind the other two doors are goats. You are to choose a door, and you get as your prize whatever is behind that door. You choose door 2, and wait to see what is behind it.

While you are waiting, Monte Hall teases you by commanding that his assistant opens door 1, revealing a bleating goat standing there. Then he asks you, 'OK, one of the remaining doors – 2 or 3 – has a goat behind it and one has the desirable Cadillac. You have chosen door 2. Based on what I have just shown you, would you like to change your pick to door 3? What should you do?

According to Krantz, when Marilyn vos Savant gave her answer, over 2000 academic mathematicians wrote in to say she was wrong, some not too politely. But she was right! What advice did she give?

In case you are put off from an intention to study maths (or 'math' in American!), the story on page 119 might reassure you. The head at a local school in Arizona decided to remove all the controversial books from the library. When she had finished with her local version of the inquisition, nothing remained on the shelves but mathematics textbooks!

Reference

1 Steven G. Krantz, *Mathematical Apocrypha Redux: More Stories & Anecdotes of Mathematicians & the Mathematical* (Mathematical Association of America, Washington, DC, 2005).