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Pask, Colin

Math for the frightened. Facing scary symbols and everything else that freaks you out about mathematics.

Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books (ISBN 978-1-61614-421-0/pbk; 978-1-61614-422-7/ebook). 380 p. (2011).

This is a very nice book aimed at the audience “intimidated by the sight of mathematical symbols and equations”. Its primary goal is to assist the reader making not-so-confident steps towards understanding of numbers, algebra, and geometry. Colin Pask stresses the importance of the visual side of mathematics and pays a special attention to links between algebraic and geometric approaches to mathematical problems. Promoting the use of mathematics as “the essential language of science”, he also emphasizes the beauty of the subject arguing that “the pleasures of mathematics are sometimes compared with the experiences of music and poetry”. Reflecting about who the reader might be, Colin Pask comes with a concise recommendation: “if you want to contact the mathematical world but feel nervous about taking the first steps, then this book is written for you.” In reality, the book appeals to a wider audience; mathematics enthusiasts may enjoy reading it even more. The exposition is transparent and easy to follow; the author entertains readers blending mathematics with a good wealth of interesting historical facts, quotations, diagrams, tables, illustrations, pointing out that “the style of this book is relaxed and conversational. However, the intent is serious, and a little concentration will be required. The rewards are great: by genuinely confronting the ideas and methods of mathematics you can overcome your fears and begin to appreciate its joys, beauty, and power.” There are twenty one chapters in the book which are grouped into five blocks with rather descriptive titles: “Introducing mathematics” (Chapters 1–8), “Further mathematical explorations” (Chapters 9–12), “Applications” (Chapters 13–16), “The visual side of mathematics” (Chapters 17–19), and “Thinking, reasoning, and mathematics” (Chapters 20–21). Answers to examples for independent study, extensive bibliography and suggestions for further reading are collected in the informative final block “Reference material”. Unreservedly recommending this lovely text, the reviewer wishes to conclude with the words of the well-known popular-science writer Professor Ian Stewart on the back cover of the book: “What a great way to get your brain back into gear, face your fears, and watch them vanish as your comfort level with math dramatically improves.”

Svitlana P. Rogovchenko (Kristiansand)

Classification: A80

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