



© 1997–2009, Millennium Mathematics Project, University of Cambridge.

Permission is granted to print and copy this page on paper for non-commercial use. For other uses, including electronic redistribution, please contact us.

March 2009

Reviews

'Strange attractors'

reviewed by Rachel Thomas



Strange attractors: Poems of love and mathematics

Edited by Sarah Glaz and JoAnne Growney

*Zero is a number
of yearning.*

from "Five Poems about Zero" by Eryk Salvaggio

It's not often I get misty-eyed reading a book about mathematics, but that was just what happened when I read this, and several other poems, in the poetry collection *Strange Attractors: Poems of love and mathematics*.

The idea of a love poem is not new, love has inspired poets for millennia. But the combination of maths and love poetry might seem an odd mix. Despite loving maths myself, I was a little skeptical when I picked up this book, and thought it would be a tongue-in-cheek selection of witty but humorous poems about love using mathematical language and imagery. There are some funny poems giving a mathematical take on love, (I particularly liked "Valentine" by Michael Stueben), but what pleasantly surprised me was the large number of poems that seem to be really exploring human emotions.

'Strange attractors'

I had no idea there would be so many poems suitable for such a collection, or that it would span so many centuries and include so many diverse contributors. The excerpt from King Solomon's "Song of songs" (which is thought to have been written about 765 BC) and Bhaskaracharya's "Lilavati" (a twelfth century Indian mathematician), the "Square Poem in Honor of Elizabeth I" (written by Henry Lok in 1597), as well as contemporary poets from nearly every continent, give the collection significant cultural depth (helpful appendices give brief biographies of both the contributors, and the mathematicians mentioned). It's a nice thought that mathematics, as well as love, is a ubiquitous experience for all of humanity.

The book is divided into three sections: romantic love, love of family and life, and love of mathematics. In the first two sections it is surprising just how powerful mathematics can be as a metaphor for our emotions and experiences. Some poems very effectively use mathematical imagery, such as the image of tangential curves ("kissing curves") in Ann Calandro's poem "Where the Kissing Never Stops":

*They strive to make each other
equal zero
to reach that point
at which they will reduce to lines
and kiss...*

or in Young Smith's "She Considers the Dimensions of Her Soul":

*The shape of her soul is a square.
She knows this to be the case
because she often feels its corners
pressing sharp against bone...*

The collection features some of the most famous love poems, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning's measuring of love in her sonnet: "How do I love thee, let me count the ways...". One of the most interesting poems using counting is "Who Counts, Counts" by Stephanie Strickland, where the shifting status of relationships, and the bond of motherhood, is conveyed very simply by counting and recounting the people in a relationship.

Some of the poems have a mathematical structure, one is even written in the form of a proof. In some poems mathematical concepts are used as metaphors, such as Robin Chapman's sad use of the non-associativity ($f(x+y)$ not equally $f(x) + f(y)$) to describe a child's experience of divorce in "Nonlinear Function".

The final section, where poets (many mathematicians) write about their love of maths, also has many examples of strong expression, and strangely enough, many of these poems seem almost less mathematical than those in the previous sections. It is nice to see the passion for the subject that so many mathematicians share expressed in this unusual and open-hearted way. I think one of the strengths of such a book is that not only can it show people who are looking for poems to express love, the beauty of the language of maths, but it also might help explain some of the deep emotions mathematicians feel for their subject. I also like the duality of combining maths and poetry: that as well as taking maths to poetry lovers, it will also expose mathematicians to poetry, and perhaps as the best artistic-scientific collaborations do, allow insight on both sides.

Book details:

Strange attractors: Poems of love and mathematics
Edited by Sarah Glaz and JoAnne Growney
hardback 250 pages (2008)
A K Peters
ISBN-10: 1568813414

'Strange attractors'

ISBN–13: 978–1568813417

You can buy the book and help *Plus* at the same time by clicking on the link on the left to purchase from amazon.co.uk, and the link to the right to purchase from amazon.com. *Plus* will earn a small commission from your purchase.

About the author

Rachel Thomas is Co–Editor of *Plus*.



Plus is part of the family of activities in the Millennium Mathematics Project, which also includes the NRICH and MOTIVATE sites.