

Beware of the Devil in your Dreams!

Reviewed by Vishnu Lakshman

*“Pure mathematics is, in its way,
the poetry of logical ideas”*

– Albert Einstein

As an eleven-year-old, I rarely read. I hardly ever found entertainment in reading books. I'd rather have been playing outside, climbing rocks or doing anything that didn't require me to sit and stare at words.

However, during this time, I was introduced to a book called the Number Devil by my school librarian. The book was the odd one out among the books on its shelf, tall, broad and had a peculiar devilish-looking man on the cover. I browsed through it and saw that it contained intriguing illustrations and text in a huge font. So I decided to read it.

I fell in love with the book the very first time I read it. And for someone who doesn't read books very often, I have read this book five times!

The book is about Robert, a ten-year-old boy who hates math and his treacherous math teacher. He doesn't understand what happens in class nor is his mind able to handle all the jumbled numbers in his head. The only absolute that he believes to be true is that he hates anything mathematical!

I fell in love with the book the very first time I read it because it was able to simplify mathematical concepts which were surely way beyond my level, such as exponents, irrational numbers and prime numbers. The advanced mathematical concepts became more straightforward but also more importantly, applicable. An example is the way the number devil introduces permutations and combinations through the different ways in which Robert's friends can be seated in class.

Keywords: Mathematics, children's books, number patterns, curiosity, exploration

I'm pretty sure I didn't understand all the concepts completely the first time I read it. For example, the sum to infinity concept was particularly hard to grasp. More often, though, I was just fascinated by results like when you start with half ($\frac{1}{2}$), divide by two repeatedly and then add them all together, the sum is equal to one! And in every one of the five times I read it, I understood a concept I hadn't been able to earlier, or was able to grasp more of the mathematics behind a result.

Along with being tired of math, Robert was also fed up of dreaming. He was always getting swallowed by a large fish, or it would be the bike or computer game that he never had that would haunt him. However, one night it was different. No getting swallowed by a fish, no bike, no computer - instead he meets a man proclaiming to be the 'number devil'. At first, he is slightly apprehensive, and moreover, can't stand the thought of getting homework in his dream! Once Robert trusts the number devil with his intentions, he quickly gets hooked on his catchy ways of teaching, such as using coconuts to introduce triangle numbers, or using rabbits to teach him the Fibonacci numbers. Together they make their way from the basics of maths like exponents and prime numbers, to more adventurous topics which Robert could have never dreamed of understanding just a short while back before meeting his new friend.

It is unreasonable and probably impossible to force someone, especially a young kid, to enjoy a subject they are having difficulty with. For mathematics, the reasons could be as simple as that it is too hard, or too abstract, or boring and repetitive, and therefore a child gradually loses interest. Teachers should read this book and possibly use it in their class as a way to introduce

children to slightly more complex topics that could give them a break from what they are currently learning, because it could lead to a re-sparking of interest in the subject. They may also want to read chapters of the book aloud in class. The story-telling writing style is easy, and the plot is straightforward and easy to follow. Students will like the devil's devil-may-care attitude! The large page-filling illustrations are fascinating and feed into the imagination of a young child. The fun comes from simple ideas, like the number devil jumping onto trees and counting fruits to make a complex maths concept come true.

The first time I read this book was with my dad, which made a huge difference to the extent to which I understood the content. So if you are reading it when you're eleven or twelve, then I recommend you read it with an adult, whereas at an older age you can read it alone.

One criticism of the book is that certain chapters can get long, when many concepts surrounding the same topic are being covered (for example, the chapter on permutations and combinations). Smaller chapters where only one concept is being explained could make for an easier read. In addition, the explanation in certain chapters can get verbose. However, some could argue that this is better because, after all, Robert is eleven years old, so he is going to need some extra explanation!

The novelty of the concept of meeting a number devil in your dreams really intrigued me, especially the first time. I often wished I could have someone appear in *my* dreams, someone to help me in all the subjects I struggled with! And in fact, the story of Robert shows that we all could have struggles in any avenue of life, but there is always a number devil out there to help us with our problems and they may appear in the most unusual ways!



VISHNU LAKSHMAN is a 17-year-old studying at Centre for Learning in Bengaluru. His interests are varied - the environment, math and the outdoors (he can be outside and play all day). He enjoys reading non-fiction books, exploring new and exciting topics and ends up rereading treasures like *The Number Devil* too many times. He loves his time on long walks with his dog, Kivi, where they explore the wilderness around home together and lose track of all time.