# [Review of: A.D. Aczel (2011) A strange wilderness: the lives of the great mathematicians]

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Amir D. Aczel
**A Strange Wilderness
The Lives of the Great Mathematicians**
*Sterling, 2011*
*xix + 284 p., prijs £15.99*
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Amir Aczel, a prolific author of popular books on mathematics and science in general, came up with a new book devoted to the lives of mathematicians. On the whole the book is highly informative, entertaining and produced with great care. Several illustrations, interesting photos, and various aesthetically chosen fonts and font sizes make it an attractive volume.

Aczel occasionally writes with flair and panache. Regrettably, the book is very uneven. The fifteen page long account of Cantor's life and his conflicts with Kronecker is fascinating, and so is the chapter on Grothendieck. However, some other parts of the books read as if they came from the pen of a secondary school pupil forced to write a homework on a boring topic. The two pages on the Chinese mathematician Li Zhi are uninteresting and just boring. We finally learn that "Li Zhi [...] studied equations as high as sixth order [...] obtained when one relationship about triangles involving an unknown quantity is inserted into another". Those interested to understand what equation Li Zhi actually studied, and why, might turn to Chapter 5 of *History of Mathematics, A Supplement* by Craig Smoryński, Springer, 2008.

Also, some details are simply unneeded. Why should we care to know that the wife of the eldest son of Tartaglia was called Brandonia di Seroni?

Aczel begins the book by mentioning some lively lecturers during his studies of mathematics at Berkeley. One of them, John Kelley, used to come to the lectures with two dogs, non-stop smoking a pipe. Kelley is given as an example of a brilliant and eccentric mathematician, whose manners demonstrate that mathematicians can be as interesting and unusual as artists. The book is indeed full of known and less known anecdotes and accounts of unusual stories concerning mathematicians, but it is in this sense strangely incomplete. If the author's intention was to highlight lives of some more unusual mathematicians,

then one would have expected some references to twentieth century mathematicians, in particular to: Kurt Gödel, who starved himself to death, suspecting that one was trying to poison him (and thus succumbing to a form of the liar paradox that was at the base of his incompleteness theorems), see *Logical Dilemmas: The Life and Work of Kurt Gödel* by John Dawson, AK Peters, 1996; Alfred Tarski, a notorious womanizer and user of drugs, who during his long term association with the University of Berkeley organized well-attended parties during which his homemade vodka was lavishly served, see *Alfred Tarski: Life and Logic* by Anita Burdman Feferman and Solomon Feferman, Cambridge University Press, 2004; The brothers Chudnovsky, who in their quest to compute $\pi$ with an ever bigger precision developed an algorithm and ran it on a supercomputer built in their small apartment in New York, see 'The Mountains of Pi' by Richard Preston, *The New Yorker*, March 2, 1992; Jean van Heijenoort, a secretary and bodyguard of Trotsky, mainly known for the standard source book on the history of logic in the 19th and 20th century, who was killed by his fourth and fifth wife (the same person), see *From Trotsky to Gödel* by Anita Burdman Feferman, AK Peters, 2000. Not to mention Paul Erdős, John Forbes Nash and Grigori Perelman.

If in turn the intention of the book was to discuss lives of the towering figures of mathematics, then several *dramatis personae* are missing, for instance Blaise Pascal (only briefly mentioned in the context of the work of his predecessors), Henri Lebesgue (only briefly mentioned once while discussing Grothendieck), Stefan Banach and John von Neumann, to name a few.

Also, the space devoted to individual mathematicians reflects neither their relative importance nor their 'degree' of eccentricity. For example, Thales is generously accorded five pages, while Archimedes only two.

For the sake of completeness let me mention a few slips: the rational numbers are defined three times, on pages 15, 18 and 35, Hilbert's list of problems consisted of twenty-three and not of ten problems, Lebesgue's name does not appear in the index.          *Krzysztof R. Apt*