



Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture: A Novel of Mathematical Obsession

By Apostolos Doxiadis

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In this critically acclaimed international bestseller, Petros Papachristos, a mathematical prodigy, has devoted much of his life trying to prove one of the greatest mathematical challenges of all time: Goldbach's Conjecture, the deceptively simple claim that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes. His feverish and singular pursuit of this goal has come to define his life. Now an old man, he is looked on with suspicion and shame by his family-until his ambitious young nephew intervenes.

Seeking to understand his uncle's mysterious mind, the narrator of this novel unravels his story, a dramatic tale set against a tableau of brilliant historical figures-among them G. H. Hardy, the self-taught Indian genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, and a young Kurt Gödel. Meanwhile, as Petros recounts his own life's work, a bond is formed between uncle and nephew, pulling each one deeper into mathematical obsession, and risking both of their sanity.

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Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture: A Novel of Mathematical Obsession

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"Every family has its black sheep--in ours it was Uncle Petros." The narrator of Apostolos Doxiadis's first novel, *Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture*, is unable to understand the reasons for his uncle's fall from grace. A kindly, gentle recluse devoted only to gardening and chess, Petros Papachristos exhibits no sign of dissolution or indolence: so why is he held in such low esteem? One day, his brother reveals all:

'Your Uncle Petros cast pearls before swine; he took something holy and sacred and great, and shamelessly defiled it!' ... 'His *gift*, of course!' ... 'The great, unique gift that God had blessed him with, his phenomenal, unprecedented, mathematical talent! The miserable fool wasted it; he squandered it and threw it out with the garbage. Can you imagine it? The ungrateful bastard never did one day's useful work in mathematics. Never! Nothing! Zero!'

Needless to say, such apoplexy only provokes the boy's curiosity, and what he eventually discovers is a story of obsession and frustration, of Uncle Petros's attempts at finding a proof for one of mathematics' great enigmas--Goldbach's Conjecture.

The innumerate may initially find this undramatic material for a novel. Yet Doxiadis offers up a beautifully imagined narrative, which reveals a rarefied world of the intellect that few people will ever enter, in which numbers are entirely animate entities, each possessed of "a distinct personality." Without ever alienating the reader, he demonstrates the enchantments of this art as well as the ambition, envy, and search for glory that permeate its apostles. Balancing the narrator's own awkward move into adulthood with the painful memories of his brilliant relative, Doxiadis shows how seductive the world of numbers can be, and how cruel a mistress. "A mathematician is born, not made," Petros declares--an inheritance that proves both a curse and a gift. --*Burhan Tufail*

From Scientific American

Petros Papachristos, born in Athens in 1895, was sent to the University of Berlin after his teachers discovered his enormous talent for mathematics. He earned his doctorate in 1916 and left for England, where he began an intensive collaboration with G. H. Hardy, J. E. Littlewood and Srinivasa Ramanujan, the world's leading number theorists. In 1919 he was appointed professor at the University of Munich. Over the years, he withdrew into almost complete isolation, directing his research to one of the great unsolved problems of his discipline: the Goldbach Conjecture, which states that every even number is the sum of two primes. He lived an uneventful life up to the moment he claimed to have succeeded in his efforts, whereupon he died, leaving a mystery surrounding his proof as perplexing as the one that enshrouds Fermat's Last Theorem.

Petros Papachristos is of course the invention of Apostolos Doxiadis. But the story of his life is enriched with so many authentic details from history in general and from science in particular that one feels tempted to look him up in a biographic dictionary. Doxiadis manages to keep the reader's attention until the tragic end--but don't be misled: he implies that a first-tier mathematician either dies early or goes mad, referring to Cantor, Gödel and Uncle Petros. But this is definitely a biased selection. Gauss, Hilbert and lots of others lived to a ripe old age in complete mental health, and so far Andrew Wiles doesn't show the slightest sign of madness.

From Kirkus Reviews

An intellectual thriller that manages to convey the high drama and excitement involved in the pursuit of an answer to a mysterious . . . mathematical theorem. Eccentric uncles are usually better loved than conventional ones, for some reason, and the narrators uncle Petros Papachristos is about as loopy as they come. Apparently unemployed and rumored to be insane, Uncle Petros lives alone in the countryside and seems to do nothing other than read and play chess. The eldest of the three Papachristos brothers, he grew up in comfort as the son of a successful Athens businessman and was sent for his early education to a fashionable French Jesuit school, where his gift for mathematics was so prodigious that his teachers had to concede their teenaged charge knew more than they. He was then dispatched to Berlin for higher studies, and eventually was on the faculty of the University of Munich. There Uncle Petros became intrigued by Goldbach's Conjecture which speculates that every even number greater than two may be expressed as the sum of two prime numbers and sets himself to the task of proving it. By the time he comes to the conclusion that the conjecture is unprovable, he's spent so many years on the effort that his career has been wasted. What effect does his example have on his nephew? Why, naturally it inspires him to become a mathematician and prove the conjecture himself! Some people never learn. Neither do some families. And some end up learning very different things than they set out to discover, as Uncle Petros found out about mathematics and his nephew found out about Uncle Petros himself. Delightful fun, well-conceived and nicely executed. --
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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