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# January 27 is Family Literacy Day



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**FICTION**

## Genius, jealousy, sex and mathematics

What happens when a lowly Indian clerk gets embroiled in elite British society

Jan 20, 2008 04:30 AM

**NANCY WIGSTON**

### The Indian Clerk

by David Leavitt

Bloomsbury,

478 pages, \$29.95

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The year is 1913. Cambridge mathematician G.H. Hardy reads a 10-page letter from a stranger, a poor clerk in Madras; it is filled with tantalizing mathematical theorems, unsupported by proofs. Hardy and his Byronic collaborator J.E. Littlewood realize the letter contains "genius on a scale neither has ever imagined."

David Leavitt's historical novel traces the working friendship that transpired between Hardy, his friends, and short-lived math genius Srinivasa Ramanujan.

Framing the novel with a 1936 memorial speech Hardy gave at Harvard, Leavitt uses both real and invented incidents to create a vanished world of eccentric professors, cultures in collision, erotic pairings, and the terrible 1914-18 war.

We will, we hope, be forgiven our cluelessness about the numbers series, fractions, symbols, and equations with which Leavitt spices his text – for not speaking the language of the mathematically gifted. Overall, however, it is human cluelessness that most interests Leavitt; his intrigues turn on those old standbys: sex, jealousy, possessiveness – sometimes it seems everyone wants to own a piece of the genius from Madras.

Ramanujan's culture accepts his strict vegetarianism, his 14-year-old bride (left at home in India), and his stated belief that the goddess Namagiri places theorems on his tongue while he sleeps.

In England he encounters a nation of meat-eaters, and a university where the atheist Hardy, his patron, belongs to The Apostles, a secret society whose members include G.E. Moore, Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, and Rupert Brooke. Leavitt's account of the evening when another foreign genius, Ludwig Wittgenstein, attends an Apostles' meeting as Bertrand Russell's guest – and abruptly flees – is gloriously unforgettable.

Had Ramanujan been able to not only do high-level mathematics but also, say, play cricket, college life might not have proven so arduous. As it is, the Great War soon strands him in England, where he produces copious amounts of original work, amid steadily worsening health. There is mystery concerning his illness; the English medical establishment's grotesque inability to diagnose their patient adds a dash of bleak humour.

Leavitt, using Hardy as his main voice, writes like a particularly knowledgeable tour guide, turning his cool, perceptive eye on the chilly culture the reluctant Brahmin encounters. At Trinity, colleagues like the halitosis-plagued womanizer Russell and the homosexual Hardy – "good friends [although] they don't much like each other" – meet for meals at High Table, where "a smell of soured wine and old meat hovers." That neatly sums up English society.

Although fiercely anti-God, Hardy particularly loves Hermione, his cat, and converses with the ghost of a lover he drove to suicide. By digging deeply, Leavitt's aim may be to produce a more rounded and sympathetic Hardy, but he risks making him seem a bit loopy.

He does no less, however, for Ramanujan, who abandons his own dinner party after his homemade Indian soup doesn't receive sufficient compliments. But Hardy/Leavitt saves his real venom for Alice

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Neville, who meets Ramanujan in Madras with her mathematician husband; she houses him in Cambridge, and, from the kindest of motives, feeds her guest hideous vegetarian meals. After he moves to his own rooms and his own cooking, she puts the moves on him.

This desperate housewife is the least persuasive among an otherwise impressive array of characters. As Ramanujan deteriorates in various prison-like sanatoria, Hardy and Littlewood try to buoy his spirits by making sure he is heaped with honours: a BA, an FRS, a Trinity Fellowship. Meanwhile war spreads like another virulent infection. Leavitt does not fail to remind us how many intellectuals were vocal in their opposition to it; Russell, for instance, not only lost his fellowship, but his pacifist views also sent him to jail.

Early on it seems that Ramanujan's sad fate will form another in the series of injuries attributed to Hardy's careless effect on those close to him – his sister's glass eye, his lover's suicide – but Leavitt ultimately creates a kinder, more caring Hardy who does his best to be human.

In his Harvard speech, he recalls his chance collaboration with this rare mind: "the one romantic incident in my life." This is the exact phrase uttered by the real G.H. Hardy. As for Ramanujan, by saying little and accomplishing much, he emerges as a romantic genius of the purest sort.

**Nancy Wigston** is a frequent contributor to these pages.

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