Thinking In Numbers: On Life, Love, Meaning, and Math

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A stunning rumination on math and numbers from the bestselling author of *Born on a Blue Day.*

Thinking In Numbers is the book that Daniel Tammet, bestselling author and mathematical savant, was born to write. In Tammet's world, numbers are beautiful and mathematics illuminates our lives and minds. Using anecdotes, everyday examples, and ruminations on history, literature, and more, Tammet allows us to share his unique insights and delight in the way numbers, fractions, and equations underpin all our lives.

Inspired by the complexity of snowflakes, Anne Boleyn's eleven fingers, or his many siblings, Tammet explores questions such as why time seems to speed up as we age, whether there is such a thing as an average person, and how we can make sense of those we love. *Thinking In Numbers* will change the way you think about math and fire your imagination to see the world with fresh eyes.

Thinking In Numbers: On Life, Love, Meaning, and Math Details

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From Reader Review Thinking In Numbers: On Life, Love, Meaning, and Math for online ebook

Brian Clegg says

This collection of 25 essays by Daniel Tammet, probably best known for his feat of memorising vast quantities of digits of pi, is an enjoyable light way of getting an introduction to some of the reasons that maths is more than just a mechanism for doing science or adding up your shopping bills.

Some essay collections don't work so well in book form, but these make excellent bite-sized nuggets, with Tammet ranging far and wide over a landscape that successfully pulls in poets, authors and playwrights as much as it does mathematicians. I loved, for instance, the parallels Tammet brings out between Tolstoy's view of history and calculus.

Inevitably in such a collection there will be some pieces that appeal less to an individual reader. I was less interested in the more autobiographical essays, but I am sure they would appeal to others. If I'm being picky I'd also say Tammet is occasionally a little loose factually. So, for instance, he says the odds of him being in a particular location is 1 in 2 – he's either there or he's not. That's a very strange way of defining odds, which usually means the probability of something: and clearly there isn't a 1 in 2 chance of him being (say) in my kitchen.

Overall, though, a very enjoyable and informative read.

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Miriam says

A brilliant exploration of the way Tammet's mind works, but also of the way that numbers influence our lives. I think of myself as a "word" person, not a "number" person, but this beautifully written series of essays about numbers made me love them.

CortoRasp says

7/10 - je retiendrais "Les équations d'Einstein" et "La cataracte du temps".
Dans le genre, lecture et math, j'ai préféré et le Théorème du Perroquet et La Théorie des Cordes

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Jessica McCann says

When it comes to math and numbers, generally speaking, I am not a fan. I'm a word girl. And yet, in THINKING IN NUMBERS, Daniel Tammet has found a way to help me appreciate the complexity, the magic and, yes, even the beauty he sees in numbers. Early on in this book of essays, Tammet put math into terms I could understand.

"Like works of literature," he wrote on page 10, "mathematical ideas help expand our circle of empathy, liberating us from the tyranny of a single, parochial point of view. Numbers, properly considered, make us better people." While I wasn't quite yet sold that numbers make us better people, I was intrigued by the analogy and compelled to keep reading.

Tammet is a savant (one who broke the world record for reciting from memory more than 22,500 digits of Pi), and some of his essays are pretty heady. I'll admit, he lost me in a few of them, and I was forced to skim. My brain simply could not wrap around some of his ideas. As a person inspired by words and art, I was most drawn to his essays that related math to those elements.

For example, in "Book of Books," Tammet examines the process of novel writing and the infinite possibilities and configurations the author must consider, much like a mathematical equation. And he introduced me to a novel by Julio Cortazar, titled Hopscotch, with a unique structure that enables readers make their own sense of the story. One can read the chapters consecutively from beginning to end, or in reverse order. One can read only the even numbered chapters, or only the prime numbered ones. And each reader will experience a different story. Wow. As a writer, and as a reader, this mathematical concept of a novel structure blew my mind.

Many of Tammet's essays were thought provoking, some were whimsical. All offered a unique glimpse into the mind of someone who thinks and views the world in ways far different than I. If you love math, or if you enjoy gaining new perspectives on familiar aspects in life, I highly recommend THINKING IN NUMBERS.

p.s. I also have read, enjoyed and recommend Tammet's memoir, BORN ON A BLUE DAY.

Jennifer Kristin Taheri says

One of the most validating. reassuring books I have ever read regarding a numerical perspective on all things.

Rupert says

This is a philosophy book, a psychology book, an autobiography and a history book. But ultimately it's not a maths book, despite what the cover claims.

Sure, it dabbles in numbers and multiplication somewhat, but nothing beyond basic primary school level. I'm all for encouraging learning in areas where people aren't experienced, but at no point does it say that it's a book for beginner mathematicians, so why would people outside of keen mathematicians pick it up?

For example, it spends a whole chapter ('Family Values') simply stating how sets work, i.e. The set of planets is that same size as the set of siblings he has. Not exactly "change the way you think about maths" material.

And although some of his findings and theories are interesting, at the same time they are not fully supported in the mathematical and
logical way one would expect, but rather just stated.

For example, 'Shapes of Speech' talks about how Pythagoras was the world "first rhetorician". There is no supporting source, just statement. It then goes on to display the comparison between maths and speech making. It's an interesting theory, but only somewhat basic evidence, with no discussion or counter argument, which any good essay should have.

This is a fine book of you like interesting ideas, but should not be read expecting "unique insights and delights" in maths.

Evan Snyder says

While I liked the concepts of the book as a whole and thought he chose some interesting topics to write about, the actual writing on said topics did got quite do it for me. Tammet's storytelling ability was lacking, with the monologue wandering aimlessly and filled with excessive efforts to sound poetic. He also had an uncanny ability to not do the math when I wanted to see some number crunching and write out arithmetic where I didn't have any interest.

Despite my frustration with most of the essays, I loved the chapter "A Novelist's Calculus" about differentials, Tolstoy, and history as the summation of the attitudes/decisions/actions of large populations of people. Fascinating concept.

I was disappointed that there were 25 chapters and not 23, given the discussions about the beauty of prime numbers.

Melissa Snyder says

Not everyone would enjoy this but some interesting thoughts on numbers in life.

Gary says

The book listens like a long poem and explains how our understanding of the world comes about through our imagination and understanding the maths that make up our world and is the key to understanding our place in the universe. As in any good poem it's probably best listened to by the author who wrote it. It did take me all of three minutes to realize that the author was a very good narrator and his speech patterns did take those three minutes for me to get used to. After that, I realize he was the best reader for the book.

The author really makes his work speak to me. For example, his explanation that Shakespeare at his core uses the "presence of the absence" makes me finally appreciate Shakespeare. Shakespeare was the first class of students in England to accept zero (cipher) and use Arabic numbers including zero. The existence of nothing (cipher) has consequences. Shakespeare helped make the world aware of that.

Another example, Abraham Lincoln loved Euclid's elements and in his debates with Douglas, say, would speak as if he was quoting from Euclid to make his points. Another example, the author states Pythagoras was the first to realize the power of the imaginary over tradition (myths and the empirical) and why that was so important for understanding our place in the universe.

The book is full of gems like the above examples. I never got lost while listening to the math stuff in the book, sometimes I would get lost on foreign words such as how the Icelandic use many different words for the smaller numbers.

Those who are not good with math and numbers will follow the major points. Imagination and how we use is understandable by all listeners.

Elisala says

Ce livre m'a paru bien souvent un peu creux: certes, l'auteur a le sens du rythme, mais quand on essaye de voir derrière les (trop?) nombreux effets de manches, il y a finalement peu d'infos, toutes assez éparses, et qui ne font que moyennement palpiter mon coeur de mathématicienne. Et ces infos sont souvent noyées au milieu de nombreuses anecdotes que je n'ai pas toujours trouvées très intéressantes, sans éviter l'écueil des calculs qui perdent, un comble pour un livre de vulgarisation mathématique.

Et puis il y a bien (trop) souvent des suppositions hasardeuses sur ce que tel ou tel personnage historique a pu vivre ou ressentir ou penser; ce n'est pas inintéressant, mais à ce point ça commence à ressembler à un injonction à le prendre comme une vérité...

Sur un plan pas du tout objectif, je considère par ailleurs que parler des "cités invisibles" sans faire référence aux Invisible Cities ou villes invisibles d'Italo Calvino révèle un manque de goût certain...

Quelques points qui m'ont toutefois intéressée voire titillée: la question de l'infini, le "danger" des moyennes par rapport à la physique ou aux humains uniques, l'approche des proportions pour aborder la question de la pauvreté.

Et puis j'aime quand le style prend une tournure plus inattendue, moins académique, quelque chose qui me fait penser à l'écriture automatique, la pensée immédiatement retranscrite, comme une prise de note - là il y a du style que j'aime, inattendu et direct!

Diane S ? says

I was always abysmal at math in school, not the ordinary stuff like addition, subtraction and multiplication, but fractions, geometry, and algebra sent me running for help. I could never understand why some people found it so fascinating and spent their lives trying to solve complicated equations, so not for me. So when this book promised to show the reader how math could be interesting, how it applied to everyday life, I though why not?

In these essays, Tammett show how math can be used for everyday use, how it can be somewhat interesting by using examples from history and in a clear concise manner make math accessible to all. So while I will not be running out to purchase books on famous mathematicians, the author was somewhat successful. I did find many of the examples, interesting, especially Anne Boleyn's sixth finger story. I will maybe look at the world with a bit of a broader view and have at least a glimmer of understanding on why some people find math so fascinating.

James Swenson says

Interesting and poetic. Caveat: much of this book is about numbers, but very little of it is about math. Its main value is the insight it offers into the author's differently-functioning brain.

I'm unable to quit without mentioning that the author fell into a couple of mathematical errors. The first of these occurs as Tammet disparages the techniques of high-school algebra:

> $x^2 = 2x + 15$. I word it out like this: a square number... equals fifteen more than a multiple of two. In other words, we are looking for a square number above seventeen (being fifteen more than two). The first candidate is twenty-five (5 x 5) and twenty-five is indeed fifteen more than 10 (a multiple of two); $x = 5$.

This reasoning is wrong for two opposite reasons:

(1) It "justifies" wrong answers. *E.g.:* Another "candidate" square is forty-nine (7 x 7), which is also fifteen more than a multiple of two -- namely, 34. Nevertheless, $x = 7$ is not a correct solution of the equation, because 34 is the *wrong* multiple of two.
(2) It fails to identify correct answers. *E.g.:* $x = -3$ is a correct solution, even though the square number nine (-3 x -3) is not above seventeen.

Tammet's plausible reasoning leads to false conclusions; this points up the value of studying algebra as a problem-solving technology.

The error exposes a common misconception. When a mathematician solves the above equation, the point is not to prove that "If $x = 5$, then $x^2 = 2x + 15$." The objective is actually a converse claim: "If $x^2 = 2x + 15$, then $x = -3$ or $x = 5$." The difference is subtle but profound: The former claim is a triviality about a single number, leaving infinitely many others unconsidered, while the latter is a universal generalization that rules out an infinity of possibilities. Algebraic variables give us the power to reason about infinitely many numbers simultaneously.

Another error also involves the notion of the infinite, this time in the decimal expansion of pi:

> Circles, perfect circles, thus enumerated, consist of every possible run of digits. Somewhere in pi, perhaps trillions of digits deep, a hundred successive fives rub shoulders; elsewhere occur a thousand alternating zeroes and ones. Inconceivably far inside the random-looking morass of digits, having computed them for a time far longer than that which separates us from the big bang, the sequence 123456789 repeats 123,456,789 times in a row. If only we could venture far enough along, we would find the number's opening hundred, thousand, million, billion digits immaculately repeated, as though at any instant the whole vast array were to begin all over again. And yet, it never does. There is only one number pi, unrepeatable, indivisible. (pp. 136-7)

This, too, is a double-edged error:

(1) Pi is not known to have this property. I think it is commonly believed that pi is "normal in base 10," which would be sufficient, but this claim has never been proved, and it is wrong to assert it to be a fact. (2) On the other hand, the digits of pi may behave as described, but this would not make pi a Very Special Number. In fact, in 1909, Emile Borel proved that almost all real numbers do have this property.

Read this book for its flavor, but not for its details.

Saadia says

I am a fan of Daniel Tammet and loved his first book "Born on a Blue Day", 7 years ago. He is one of a handful of living geniuses and is quite, quite human and able to communicate and have a loving social life. I am awed by his ability to discuss and reframe complicated concepts using math as well as his linguistic ability. Learning and understanding multiple languages and his ability to convey his thoughts clearly, incisively and beautifully in English, his native tongue.

For example, in the "Cataract of Time", he is talking about human perception of time as proportional to age and this was eye-opening to me. When I was a child, a year seemed such a very long time. Now as an older adult, a year seems to go by much faster. So he talks about an individual's "effective age". Food for thought!

Dan says

In turns fascinating and exasperating, as I imagine it might be to talk with someone, whom, like the author, is a savant in a particular area of knowledge, but not others. The author's abilities with numbers and linguistics are notable, and that comes through in page after page of these short essays on, as the subtitle indicates, life, love, meaning and math. At the same time, he shows a remarkable lack of grasp of areas outside of those, and his conclusions and musings often seem contrary to what we might call "shared reality". He asserts, for example, in one chapter that the Japanese have a negative view of even numbers and a positive one of odd numbers. But he provides no evidence for this other than noting that there are some example phrases using the words 2 and 6 in Japanese that could be construed as negative, and also brings up the number 4, as meaning death, within the culture. He fails to note that there are probably equally many phrases utilizing 2 and 6 in positive context, and that (surprisingly given his supposed grasp of linguistics), it's not that the number 4 means death, but that the Japanese words for 4 and death are homonyms, and so people avoid situations where the words might have to be spoken, superstitiously casting a pall over an event. He also fails to mention the 8, the next even number in sequence is considered quite positive, lucky, even - and gives not a single example of how odd numbers equate to positive things. Other chapters delve into other areas of life with a similar lack of apprehension. Still, for anyone fascinated with numbers, the book is a recommendable read.

Shannon says

Speechless. So here are some quotes.

Epigraph: "Like all great rationalists you believed in things that were twice as incredible as theology." ~Halldor Laxness

"the play between numerical concepts saturates the way we experience the world." (xvii)

"Like works of literature, mathematical ideas help expand our circle of empathy, liberating us from the tyranny of a single, parochial point of view. Numbers, properly considered, make us better people." (10)

"The Brothers Grimm introduced me to the mystery of infinity," (11)

"When I discussed the ways in which we could think about the number 56, I borrowed this feature of proverbs and put the sum's answer at the start. [The proverb "an apple a day keeps the doctor away" could be worded as a question: "What keeps the doctor away? An apple a day."] Saying, '56 = 7 x 8' lends emphasis where it is needed most: not on the seven or the eight, but on what they produce." (40)

"Proverbs, like times tables, can often strike us as strange, their meanings remote..... The choice of words seems to us as arbitrary and archaic as the numbers in the times tables. But the truths they represent are immemorial." (43)

"The fortuitous error pleased him; it made him pause and think." (50)

"There was pleasure in confiding our mutual amazement, almost in the manner of gossip. And like gossip, it was something that we both knew and did not know." (54)

"A nothing, the boy sees, depends on the kind." (60)

"Imagination can reconcile even one and one million." (61)

"...only the bodhisattvas, beings who have arrived at their ultimate incarnation, are capable of counting so high." (78)

"There exist magnitudes so immense that they escape all our words, and all our numbers." (83)

"We imagine snowflakes with the purity of a mathematician's mind." (91)

"What would it be like, a world without snow? I cannot imagine such a place. It would be like a world devoid of numbers. Every snowflake, unique as every number, tells us something about complexity. Perhaps that is why we will never tire of its wonder." (93)

"Cities are the embodiments of numerical patterns that contain and direct our lives." (95)

"Being constructed with complete regularity did not mean that it would suffer from sameness." (102)

"Unlike Augustine, Bruno had no difficulty imagining an infinite number of Christs. For this and other "theological errors," the authorities denounced the heretic and burned him at the stake." (106)

"Knowing we are the only ones might make us realize that we are too valuable to destroy." (quoting Michael Papagiannis, 116)

"The circle that pi describes is perfect, belonging exclusively to the realm of the imagination." (136)

"Those digits seemed to speak of endless possibility, illimitable adventure." (137)

"I do not wish to fragment the number [pi]. I am not interested in breaking it up. I am interested in the dialogue between its digits, in the unity and continuity that underlie them all." (145)

"I know numbers are beautiful. If they are not beautiful, nothing is." (quoting Paul Erdos, 148)

"what we laymen really admire in the work of a Euclid or an Einstein is its ingenuity, rather than its beauty." (149)

"The beauty adored by mathematicians can be pursued through the everyday: games, and music, and magic." (149)

"Pythagoras taught that the cosmos sang and was composed of music." (152)

"Problems, in magic or mathematics, are wonderful things. Without problems, we would have no proofs, and the shimmering pleasure of elucidation is a thing of beauty." (156)

"Human beings' quest for meaning is perpetual; lack of meaning is offensive to the mind, and whatever the scale of the problem, a solution is a thing of beauty." (158)

"Sleep on it. Why not? Our dreams contain the infinite." (175)

"He compared composing a story with fitting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle." (referring to Vladimir Nabokov, 176)

"It is the writer and reader together who compose their infinite tale." (179)

"Poetry and prime numbers have this in common: both are as unpredictable, difficult to define, and multiple-meaning as a life." (192)

"The delicate balance of convention and invention gives meaning to what we say." (213)

"These players do not so much think about chess, as think IN chess, just as we think in language." (228)

Aurora Rodríguez says

Un libro ameno que nos muestra la cara más amable de las matemáticas y su presencia en todas partes. Fácil de leer en general, aunque algunos capítulos un poco pesados.
Los que más me han gustado:
*Las formas del discurso
*El cálculo del novelista
*Todas las cosas se han creado desiguales
*Las cataratas del tiempo

Me gusta porque a lo largo de cada capítulo te va dejando reflexiones en las que pensar:
"El ser humano y su egoísmo son inseparables, pero la desigualdad solo puede inventarla una sociedad".

Paula says

I received this book from the GoodReads First reads giveaway program. Thank you author/publisher for the opportunity to read and review this book.

Thinking in Numbers by Daniel Tammet is a book of twenty-five short essays relating to math and our lives. I personally liked several of the essays but there were some that I just couldn't relate to. I did find myself doing some of the math calculations as I was reading. In the essay Proverbs and Times Tables, I do remember learning some of the number tricks when I was in school regarding time tables. I also thought the essay Counting to Four In Icelandic was quite interesting. I had no idea people (example Chinese, Icelandic) could have such diverse ways of just counting numbers. The essay Invisible Cities had me googling for more information about the 1939 World's Fair in New York. This book definitely had me THINKING. I imagine I will be picking up this book again in the future for reference.

Daniel Tammet is also the author of the New York Times bestseller Born on a Blue Day.

Ben Babcock says

I can't resist picking up mathy books when I'm in a bookstore. As a mathematician, I love broadening my knowledge about the field—and seeing what passes for "popular mathematics" these days. *Thinking in Numbers* is a slim volume that promises to "change the way you think about maths and fire your imagination to see the world with fresh eyes". It didn't do that for me—but maybe that's because I already think about maths that way. Daniel Tammet is an exceptionally talented voice when it comes to presenting the inspirational elements of mathematics, so I hope that for people who don't quite understand why I get so excited about maths, the book does make a difference.

I last wrote about why I love math in 2011. Since then, I've graduated from university. I've completed research in mathematics and had a paper published. I've begun teaching math and English at a high school level. All of these changes have deepened, broadened, and otherwise changed my love for math. As a student, math can be a mystery, a puzzle that demands both ruthless logic and amazing creativity, something that can tickle both the left and right hemispheres of the brain. As a teacher, I've tried to make my math classroom as "safe zone" where students can learn, and indeed where they can express a dislike for math, if

that's their opinion. Of course, I'm always out on a little bit of an evangelical mission to change people's minds. But I'm not asking people to love math; I'm just asking them to reconsider whether they actually hate it, whether they are wrong when they say, "I just can't do math". Everyone can do math; everyone does math every day. Math is an integral (no pun intended) part of our society. And it's just wonderful.

Tammet captures a lot of these sentiments in *Thinking in Numbers*. This is a very unusual math book, in that it isn't really about math. It's a collection of 25 very short essays on topics that relate to math tangentially. There are precious few equations or formulae in this book. Instead, Tammet takes a what I might even call an *intersectional* approach to math. In one of my favourite essays, "Counting to Four in Icelandic," he explores how different languages form words for numbers. Some languages, Icelandic included, have completely different words for the same numeral depending on whether what it describes is abstract or concrete (whereas, in English, we just say *four* regardless). In another essay, he ponders the recurrence of the motif of nothingness and synonyms for zero in Shakespeare's works. He connects this to the spread of zero, from the Arabic world through Italy to the rest of Europe, during Shakespeare's time.

The essays are bite-sized. This is a book easy to devour over the course of a few evenings: read a few essays, then put it down and mull over them before going to bed. There is a preface but no conclusion, and **there is no overarching connection or theme**, beyond Tammet's obvious love for the relationship between life and math. On a related note, the topics are quite varied. There is little to suggest a pattern beyond different connections between math and life that have occurred to Tammet over the years. This might prove frustrating for people who are used to more forthright or even argumentative non-fiction. Tammet isn't so much presenting an argument as opening the door to another perspective on the topic. It's an invitation, not one side of a debate.

Tammet's writing style always verges on the intimate and philosophical, and he always leans on anecdotes or autobiographical details to furnish his asides. This can work well—I wasn't familiar with his name, so his account of memorizing and reciting 22,514 decimal places of pi for a new record was fascinating. His essay expounding upon mathematical models using his mother as an example, less so. The book is at its best when Tammet takes a concrete piece of mathematics—pi, calculus, primes—and links to another field, whether it's the literature of Tolstoy or the possibilities in a chess game. In this way, he demonstrates how math is more than just a series of problems in a textbook, and it's not just something mathematicians, physicists, and engineers need in their daily lives.

It's this pervasiveness of mathematics that comes to the fore in this book. The dearth of equations, proofs, and even diagrams attests to this: Tammet is not out to *explain* mathematics. Instead, he finds and traces the connections between math and life. He talks about how an Amazonian tribe that lacks names for numbers conceptualizes the world. He examines Tolstoy's use of calculus as an analogy for analyzing history. Having recently read *War and Peace*, I really enjoyed those little allusions to math. For people who only see the epic as this massive work of literature, however, it might seem strange to think that Tolstoy owes his view of history to math. Tammet teases out the cool, unsuspected ways that math can pop up and connect to parts of our lives, and it's wonderful.

Not every essay in this collection is amazing. I'd probably recommend this to most of my friends, with the caveat that they shouldn't read the book all the way through. Instead, this is a collection where it's appropriate to leaf through the chapters and read those that pique one's interest. Tammet covers enough topics that there is probably at least one essay in here for everyone. I was sceptical, when I saw the title of the book and read the brief description, that *Thinking in Numbers* could impress me. It looked so thin, so insubstantial, that I expected it would be too light, too far on the *popular* side of popular mathematics. Instead, Tammet delivers something that I wasn't anticipating at all—and it works.

Sue Smith says

Finally finished! Not that this was a bad book - no, it was genuinely interesting with spots of true insight and genius and lots of chin rubbing, hmmmmm moments. No, it was a worthy read.

But it was the best soporific book I've ever had the pleasure to read.

My reading habits have been - uhh...... 'curtailed' - in the last year due to extenuating circumstances. So my reading times have been relegated to evening, just before bed, which isn't usually an issue. But just you try it while you read a book that's essence is about math. I dare you not to fall asleep mid sentence. Every. Single. Night.

Hence the interminably long reading time to get through this wee book.

Some of my favorite parts - because there were some 'chapters' or 'stories' that did not spark my imagination at all - were interesting thoughts of math memory having rhythm for easy recall (which really rang true for me), and the hidden artistic application of math in writing and poetry and art. The statistic and time chapter insights were pretty cool to think about too.

So, all in all a good book to give thought to.

My only diss was that every now and again I swear that there were made up words. I wish I had written them down because I don't like to be disparaging without some proof. There weren't a lot - just a few that were to embellish a thought, but they just seemed .... well, just not right. Maybe it was because it was too much or too 'floral' ... or something. Just me perhaps. I may have been annoyed because it was taking so long to plow through it and I wasn't as amused as the author was as he wrote it. I had different embellishments! I do have to say that I was glad to complete it though. I had a deadline to get it done and returned to the library, so my standby reading spot was put into use (a damn good hot bath if you need to know) and it did the charm. I stayed awake to finish and it upped my star rating from a 2 to a 3! So if you find it's turning into a chore to get through it because you keep falling asleep, have faith - and take a bath!

Caroline says

Very interesting essays that spin off from Tammet's wisp of seeing a mathematical aspect of something in daily life: how we experience time, the formula behind a sestina, how the recent import of the zero during his days at school might have influenced references to nothingness in Shakespeare's plays. He studies the references to the calculus of history in Tolstoy, and reflects on Nabokov the chess player. The essays are mostly about 5 pages, and with so many the quality varies of course. But most prompt some reflection in the reader, and much of his writing is quite lovely.

'At its best, a well-executed, smooth flowing cricket match can replicate the sense of harmony that we most often associate with music. The tension mounts and falls tidally, like the notes in a song. Time elapses differently on a cricket ground or in a concert hall. A five-day match is adept at slackening and pulling tight the outline of its hours, while every musical composition bears its own time within the structure of its notes.

The unique tempo is also a part of the experience of mathematical beauty.' (page 128)