

MATH FOR LIFE: CRUCIAL IDEAS YOU DIDN'T LEARN IN SCHOOL BY JEFFREY BENNETT

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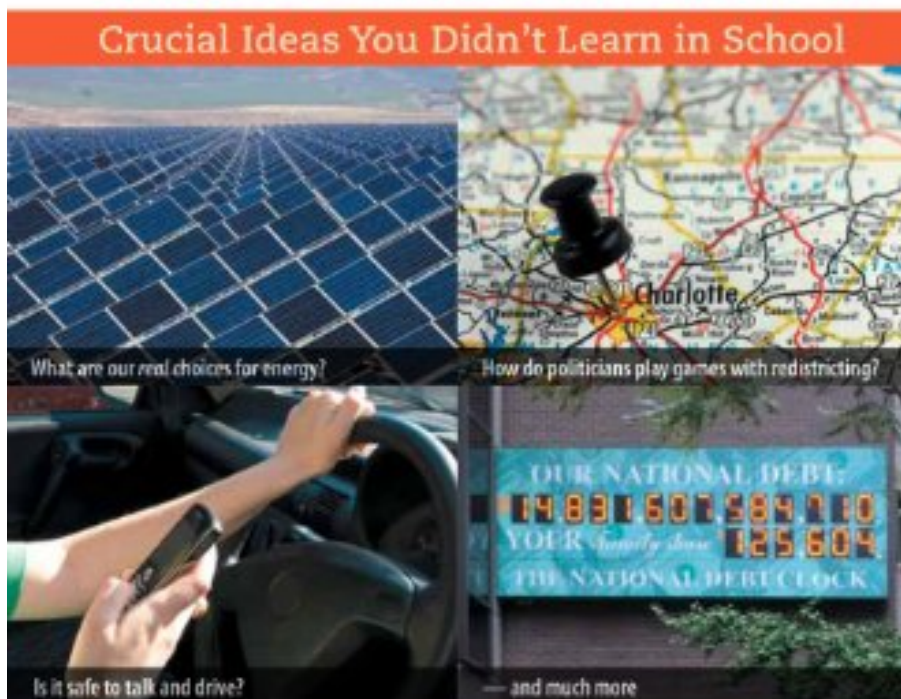


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Review

Winner -- 2012 Colorado Book Award (Best General Nonfiction Book)

An insightful look at the crucial role mathematics plays in today's society, [written with a] pleasant, conversational style... Any reader, but especially parents, politicians, and professional educators, would benefit from reading this book. Highly recommended. All levels/libraries. -- Choice Magazine (Sept. 2012)

Full marks to Jeffrey Bennett for delivering exactly what his title promises. This is not the math your teacher (probably) said you would need in adult life but never did; it s the math you know you need but likely don t have. It s not a traditional textbook; it s a how-to manual for clear thinking about the quantitative aspects of everyday life, bursting with intriguing, practical, real-life examples. I recommend it. --Keith Devlin, Ph.D., Stanford University, author of *The Man of Numbers: Fibonacci s Arithmetic Revolution* and *The Math Gene*, and the Math Guy on National Public Radio.

Sprinkled with illuminating examples, Math for Life presents issues critical to personal and national security even survival in clear and forthright terms. Underlying this important message is the obvious failure of U.S. mathematics education to meet the enormous quantitative reasoning demands of U.S. society. Jeffrey Bennett makes plain how current political and economic crises stem from this failure. --Bernard L. Madison, Professor of Mathematics, University of Arkansas

Should be required reading for every American. There's no more powerful way to equip yourself for our increasingly complex and quantitative world than to read Math for Life. Every concept is presented in a clear and engaging way. --K. Shane Goodwin, Professor of Mathematics, Brigham Young University Idaho

About the Author

Jeffrey Bennett served as the first director of the program in Quantitative Reasoning and Mathematical Skills at the University of Colorado, where he developed the groundbreaking curriculum that became the basis of his best-selling college textbook in mathematics. He holds a PhD in astrophysics and is also the lead author of top-selling college textbooks in statistical reasoning, astronomy, and astrobiology. Math for Life is his

third book for the general public, following the critically acclaimed *On the Cosmic Horizon and Beyond* and *UFOs*. He is also the author of award-winning children's books about science, including *Max Goes to the Moon*, *Max Goes to Mars*, *Max Goes to Jupiter*, and *The Wizard Who Saved the World*.

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How can we solve the national debt crisis? Should you or your child take on a student loan? Is it safe to talk on a cell phone while driving? Are there viable energy alternatives to fossil fuels? Could simple policy changes reduce political polarization? These questions may all seem very different, but they share two things in common. First, they are all questions with important implications for either personal success or our success as a nation. Second, they all concern topics that we can fully understand only with the aid of clear quantitative or mathematical thinking. In other words, they are topics for which we need math for life--a kind of math that looks quite different from most of the math that we learn in school, but that is just as (and often more) important. In *Math for Life*, award-winning author Jeffrey Bennett simply and clearly explains the key ideas of quantitative reasoning and applies them to all the above questions and many more. He also uses these questions to analyze our current education system, identifying both shortfalls in the teaching of mathematics and solutions for our educational future. No matter what your own level of mathematical ability, and no matter whether you approach the book as an educator, student, or interested adult, you are sure to find something new and thought-provoking in *Math for Life*.

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Most helpful customer reviews

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

A mixture of very good and very flawed

By GrumpyOldGuy

This is a tough book to rate. The topic (getting folks comfortable with real-world, everyday-useful math and some of its implications) is important, and Bennett's general approach is both sensible and potentially effective. I really wanted to like this book. Unfortunately, while some sections are excellent, there are just too many (easily avoidable) problems: too much carelessness, too many opportunities for insight missed, too much that misleads. I wavered between 2 and 3 stars, but finally went with 3: while there are serious flaws, some of the discussions are very good.

My slightly sour take on this book began with the discussion of the bubble in median housing prices on page 4. The term "median" was not even defined; it was simply equated with "average", which tends to reinforce the mistaken notion that when someone says "average" they always mean "typical." This would have been a great place to start untangling the differences between the common-language meaning of "average" (which always means typical) and the various math-language meanings of "average" (mean, median, mode, which may or may not correspond to "typical"). The difference between median and mean are clarified much later (p. 44-46), but I was very grumpy 'til I got there.

The sloppy accuracy/precision discussion on p.21 didn't help. That discussion involves two scales that measure weight, an analog scale that reads weight to the nearest pound, and a digital scale that reads out to the nearest 0.01 lb. Bennett goes on to say "This means that the digital scale is more precise." That isn't correct; in the scale context precision refers to the repeatability of measurements of the same weight, not how many digits there are in the readout. He knows that; he was just careless.

Obviously, a book of this type must simplify many things. But there is a line between simple and simplistic, and too often this book veers into simplistic and outright misleading. An example of the latter: in his discussion of the impending financial problems with Social Security, he says (p117) that "... during the 20th century, life expectancies in the US rose an average of 3 years per decade. If that trend continues..." The 3 years/decade is more or less true, but it refers to the life expectancy at birth (with much of that gain due to a reduction in infant mortality early in the century). What matters to SS is life expectancy at retirement age. That has not grown at anything like 3 years/decade (if it had been, we would all expect to live well past 100).

His discussion of the US debt/deficit problem is also simplistic and misleading. For example, a bar chart on p108 shows the annual federal gov't deficit and debt (not inflation-adjusted; a terrible choice) from 1970 to 2013, and in absolute terms rather than as a % of GDP (the standard and much more informative way to display that data). Clearly, his purpose was to create a maximally-scary plot rather than a more informative

plot (which would have been scary enough).

In general, as Bennett's discussion topics move away from the scientific/technical (his sweet spot) and wander into "softer" areas (such as economics), the discussions become increasingly simplistic, sloppy, misleading, and error-prone. Based on just this book, the answer to the question "Does Bennett have any clear sense of what he knows and what he doesn't know?" would have to be a resounding "No."

One of the better examples of that (one of many) is found on p145: "The bottom line is that global warming is real and poses a great threat to our future, and anyone who claims otherwise is either very bad at math or deliberately distorting the facts." That last part is simply absurd. Bennett evidently has no understanding of the psychology/sociology of belief formation; he needs to read "Don't Even Think About It" by Marshall. Climate change denial isn't primarily about math and data, it's about the ways the brain works and the social/political/ideological influences that conspire to produce particular beliefs.

There is a much to admire in this book, but it is very sloppy and misleading in spots; it could have benefitted from better pre-pub readers. His attempts to teach everyday math and its connection to real-world problems are laudable and often instructive. Bennett's hopefully more rigorous textbooks (dealing with real-world math, statistics) might well be interesting and informative reads. But like all textbooks these days, they are too darn expensive.

So, a reluctant 3-star rating. I am sorry I have to rate such an error-filled and often misleading book so high, and sorry I have to rate a book with both great intentions and some excellent discussions so low. But there it is.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Digestible Math - an enjoyable primer on mathematical concepts

By gary108

This is really a must-read for, well... everyone. It is so common for people to feel that many of the issues being debated in our society are simply too technical for them to understand. Or worse, not really understanding an issue, to simply take the word of politicians they want to believe, who sadly seem not to really understand the issues themselves. I wish every politician were REQUIRED to read this book before taking office! Each of us has the responsibility to be an informed citizen, and this book gives you the mathematical foundation to understand so many important issues, and to feel confident in your grasp of the salient mathematical underpinnings. Moreover, the book manages to teach these ideas in a way that anyone can understand and enjoy. It also gives you necessary tools to manage your own life! It is truly satisfying to feel your grasp of these important concepts. There is seldom a book that has so much to offer to so many, especially in such a delightfully satisfying way!

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Great Book!

By C. R. Coulston

Saw the author speak over the weekend at a conference I attended. This should be required reading for anyone serious about applying mathematics and mathematical thinking to the problems facing the world today. I could not give a book at higher recommendation.

PS - This is the first time I have ever felt inclined to write a review for any product on any website. BUY THIS BOOK!

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