

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Dave Henson's, "2 + 2 = Goldfish," is not for English majors. As soon as he mentioned the laws of nature are dependent upon math, I had to readjust what I was getting myself into. Not in any bad way, math is a language that I don't understand, but one that is merely based upon a different way of viewing the world – a world without the flourish of words is quite practical (all be it not for me). What I'm reminded of when I read this story is the old adage of humanity, we've the memory of goldfishes – which, if you're not familiar, is about 3 seconds (a number more than likely disproven since the anecdote). A lovely metaphor for the current state of our humanity. The crux of this tale lies within a world where math has left us, the laws of what we know, nature, have left us. The rest is a hypothetical what if, if the concept of math evaporates before us. Some people would live some would not, but we would adjust accordingly. I think that the strongest point that Henson makes in this piece is to materialize the what if. If we were stuck without math how do we justify trade, the price of one thing for another, the price that we would pay and/or be able to talk ourselves out of after one of our laws and measurements dissipates. I was going to say something else, but for some reason I've forgotten...Read and hope you can remember.*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

People tried to resurrect math. Groups, more like cults if you ask me, worshipped the various branches of mathematics — geometry, trigonometry, calculus ... even lowly arithmetic.

The arts got in on the act, too. Although the day the math died, music did, too, poets were inspired. *"I think that I shall never see / a heaven lovely as the number seven."*

2 + 2 = Goldfish

When it first happened, I thought I was getting dementia even though I was only ... What comes after 34? Nothing does anymore, I guess.

Scientists and philosophers used to debate whether humans discovered or created mathematics. I never understood why anyone could believe the latter considering birds, dinosaurs and all life that preceded humans couldn't have evolved without math.

Nowadays everyone agrees humans discovered math. But a number of years ago — I can't say how many because things don't work that way anymore — some rogue scientists took things further. Mathematics, they reasoned, begat the laws of nature from which everything else sprang. Math was a creator. Math, they said, was alive.

“Pish posh and bullshit” said other scientists and theologians. After an initial splash, the rogue theory sunk into the mud and muck at the bottom of the pond of prevailing wisdom and was largely forgotten. Until strange things began happening to everyone.

In my case it had been an ordinary day. I was checking out at a grocery store. After paying in cash, I tried to calculate in my mind how much change I had coming. Couldn't do it. I noticed the cashier staring at the register.

“It's not telling me how much you're due.” She read the receipt dangling from the register. “It says Mississippi for subtotal, tax of purple, and grand total of antlers.” She whacked the register.

I opened the calculator app on my phone. “How much did I give you?”

The cashier stared at the bills in her hand and held them up for me.

My mind blanked. I fought through the confusion and tapped $2 + 2$ on my phone. The display showed a goldfish emoji. I tried several other calculations and got nonsense answers every time.

I told the cashier to keep the change, bagged my goods and left.

Driving home, my car started sputtering and clanking. The gauge showed the tank was half-full, but thinking it could be broken, I stopped for a fill-up. As I pumped, the dials spun at random.

People everywhere were having similar experiences. Folks came to realize the rogue scientists were right. Mathematics *was* alive. But it had died.

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Despite all the prayers and praise, humanity couldn't roll the stone from mathematics' tomb. Cash registers and computers lost their coherence. The stock market either crashed or set an all-time high; we couldn't tell the difference.

But even though the mortar was gone, the laws of nature didn't come tumbling down. The changes were gradual and irregular. The speed of light diminished by a fraction then increased by a whit. On average, it remained the same. The planet's orbit drifted outward. But the physics that determine nuclear fusion were jumbled so our sun generated more warmth, and our world didn't become a snowball. Offsetting changes in the physics of gravity kept humanity's feet planted firmly on the ground.

Over the years, people adapted to our altered reality. We've become an agrarian society because machines, which depend on math, went kaput. Folks play ball for fun and exercise, but there are no winners or losers because there's no score. Clocks don't work. Most people use the position of the sun. I've found my stomach is pretty reliable. Turns out, I prefer time without numbers.

We trade based on barter. When I offer my neighbor a few eggs for ears of sweet corn, we don't base the transaction on numbers. We agree on what looks fair.

All things considered, life without mathematics isn't bad. The calamities that should have befallen us when math died didn't occur. Does that mean the universe itself is alive and going out of its way to preserve us? That's for smarter people than me to debate. I'm just happy my Leghorns are good layers.

(end)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was inspired to write this story by an article I'd read not long ago. The article, allegedly written for the layperson, discussed how quantum mechanics could have triggered the Big Bang. (Everything came from nothing.) But quantum mechanics depends on the laws of nature, which are based on mathematics. The article said some scientists even believe math could be sentient. That prompted my thinking ... if mathematics were sentient, then it would be alive. And if it were alive, what would happen if it died? From there I had some fun playing the "what if" game writing the story. I added some humor and religious allusions and concluded with the idea of needing smarter people than me to figure out (which is how I felt after reading the article!). My main stylistic and literary influences are Hemingway and Kafka.*

AUTHOR BIO: David Henson and his wife have lived in Brussels and Hong Kong and now reside in Illinois. His work has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes, Best of the Net and Best Small Fictions and has appeared in various journals including Fleas On The Dog, Moonpark Review, Literally Stories, Gone Lawn and Fiction on the Web. His website is <http://writings217.wordpress.com>. His Twitter is @annalou8.