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MSUrbanSTEM
Book Review
14-November-2014

Book Review – *A Certain Ambiguity*

A Certain Ambiguity was a great recommendation – the math content in the novel was relevant and became progressively more difficult and demanding as the story line progressed as well. Within the first few pages of the novel I was hooked. Ravi's grandfather, Bauji, grabs Ravi's and the reader's attention with a quick number trick: "Enter a three-digit number in your calculator and do not let me see it... Now enter the same number again, so you have a six-digit number... Now I do not know the number you have in there, Ravi, but I do know that it is evenly divisible by 13... Further, it is even divisible by 11... And finally, also divisible by 7. What do you get? Your starting number!" As Ravi describes this magical moment he is experiencing with Bauji, I cannot feel anything but memories shooting through my mind about how mathematics and number tricks peaked my interest as a child, and I suddenly felt it again.

As opposed to reading on, I quickly found myself putting down the book and trying to work through the number trick. Although a rather simplistic trick, it was one that I had never seen or heard. I found it interesting that Bauji just left Ravi hanging there – no explanation, no guidance, nothing. Bauji hooked Ravi, and then let him struggle and grapple with this number trick. This enjoyment and curiosity in mathematics was instilled in Ravi at a young and early age, and through this, he developed perseverance.

As the story line progresses, the mathematics gets deeper, and Ravi's desire to connect with Bauji seems to get stronger and stronger. Ravi faces a difficult decision; should he make his family proud and do what his family sent him to America to do, or should he make himself

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happy and go down the path that is most desirable and rewarding for him? His quest to connect with Bauji and search for an answer leads to many more questions. Through Ravi's quest, he re-opened my eyes to how philosophical math can be – for example, the constant discussion around infinity, infinitesimals, and the idea of how do we know, what we think we know.

On the surface, this novel seems to be about mathematics and a young man looking everywhere he possibly can for the “right” answer. However, after discussing the book with a colleague and the author, Gaurav Suri, I believe that the mathematics chosen and used in the novel was meant as a philosophical vehicle pushing the reader to ask the question, what do we know and how do we know it?