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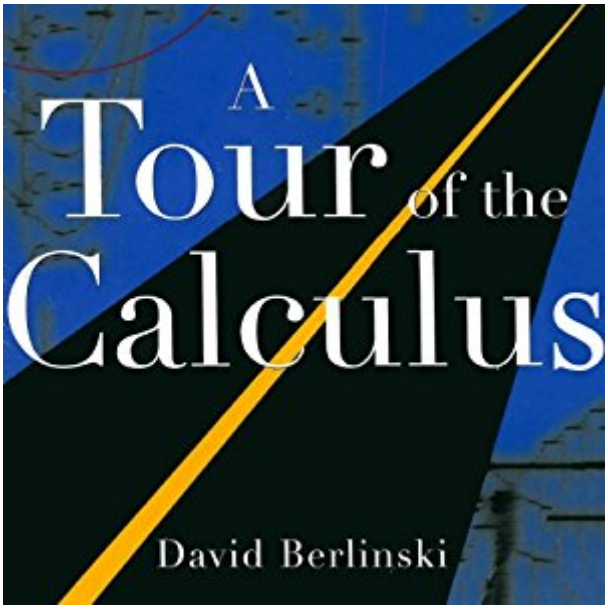
A Tour Of The Calculus



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Synopsis

Were it not for the calculus, mathematicians would have no way to describe the acceleration of a motorcycle or the effect of gravity on thrown balls and distant planets, or to prove that a man could cross a room and eventually touch the opposite wall. Just how calculus makes these things possible and in doing so finds a correspondence between real numbers and the real world is the subject of this dazzling book by a writer of extraordinary clarity and stylistic brio. Even as he initiates us into the mysteries of real numbers, functions, and limits, Berlinski explores the furthest implications of his subject, revealing how the calculus reconciles the precision of numbers with the fluidity of the changing universe.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I seem to be rather in the minority when I say that I actually liked Berlinski’s verbose style; frankly, I don’t really see what was so difficult to understand about it. On the other hand, I approached this book from the position of wanting something fun to read, and that’s what I got, with the welcome addition of what I thought was lovely writing - if I had been searching for something that would give me an in-depth look at calculus, I would have looked elsewhere. Basically, I thought the book was really well-written and exciting (I had just begun calculus when I read it, so I found it really interesting to look at all the stuff we hadn’t yet done.), and I highly reccomend it for a piece of fun reading and a decent overview.

I hoped for an insightful view into calculus. Indeed, there are many deep and interesting aspects of calculus which are generally obscured in a typical calculus textbook (or in a calculus class). This is

not such a book.Most disappointing was the constant distraction of mathematical errors, small and large, throughout the book. For example, there are typos, errors in notation, and misleading or confusing notation. For these problems, I understood the author's intention at these points (being a calculus teacher myself), but to a reader less familiar with calculus, these problems will hinder understanding. When a reader can't understand the mathematical details, much of the meaning is lost.A few errors were utterly irreparable, such as the proof of the Intermediate Value Theorem. In that case, a correct proof would diverge greatly from that of the author. This specific error is unfortunate because it is for this theorem that the author develops the real numbers (which takes chapters), and upon this theorem that all later theorems are based.Finally, I found the author's style annoying, especially the fictional accounts of specific actions taken by historical mathematicians (crossing a river, contemplating calculus while sitting in an overstuffed chair, etc.). The author must enjoy hearing himself wax poetic on any subject which enters his head, but I don't.The book's back cover likens this book to Douglas Hofstadter's classic _Godel, Escher, Bach_, but the comparison is laughable. Hofstadter's book has a direct and clear style of writing, whereas _A Tour of the Calculus_ is unfocused and its numerous errors makes it is mathematically a sham.

By reading some of these reviews, one thing is obvious: anyone who first lists their qualifications as a mathematician or calculus teacher is basically going to nay-say the heck out of the book. And in a way, I'd say this is semi-appropriate: the book is definitely not a math book; I think the grievances arise basically because it's sold as one. Sure, the word "tour" is in the title, but that does little to suggest that this book would be more appropriately marketed as....well....a memoir? Maybe?Don't get me wrong though: the book isn't absolutely terrible. Some commenters have derided the author for using words that are too big, widely unknown, etc. But that's one of the things I enjoyed about the book: a few years back when I read it I underlined every word I didn't know or was fuzzy about and used this book as a way to build my vocabulary. I wouldn't describe myself as a cheery optimist, but I definitely turned the heightened language of the book to my advantage...instead of just whining about it on .As for learning calculus: if you are a new student to calculus, this book won't really help. I bought this book years ago as a supplement to my calculus course and quickly found I was just wasting my time reading it. If you are a non-mathematician and just want a little glimpse into calculus, then this might be a good book. I would laugh at anyone who said they learned calculus from the book though.In other news (finally, my qualifications...bla, bla, bla): since I've bought the book, I've taken all the calc and differential equations courses, abstract and linear algebra courses, analysis courses, graduated with a degree in physics and have completed one year of graduate

school physics. With this in mind: Upon re-reading sections of the book recently, I would say that this is a pretty fun SUMMER READ for super nerds who already know it all, but just want to leisurely read about some elementary calculus by an author who writes in a conversational tone.

I am not a mathematician. I took calculus in college but never really understood it. I have, however, always wanted to understand it.This book got glowing reviews so I bought it without leafing through it. My mistake. Compared to Berlinsky's book, the average college calculus textbook is a model of clarity.Berlinsky is infatuated with words. He's never heard of a simple declarative sentence. One metaphor per sentence isn't enough. Indeed, if there is a literary conceit he doesn't indulge in to excess, I can't think of it.His editor should have required him to read Strunk and White's Elements of Style daily for a year.In short, as far as I am concerned, the other negative reviews I have read here are not only right on the money but not harsh enough.

This book has good potential - explain in a non-technical way the fundamental theorem of calculus, why it is important, and the history of it's development. The mathematicians who discovered and refined calculus are a fascinating lot, and the mathematics itself has proven to be perhaps the most effective engineering tool yet discovered. Sounds like good stuff. Unfortunately, Berlinski choose to shroud this simple theme in page after page of self-important, over-written, pretentious drivel. One of the reviews on the jacket puts this book in the same category as Godel, Escher, Bach - holy smokes! Nothing could be further from the truth. Buy GEB, stay away from this book!I give him 2 stars instead of one because the material underlying the terrible writing is interesting and worth knowing. Hopefully someone will write a readable book on this material!

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