

Emerson Books, 1982.

Introduction by **Karen Feiden**

Open these pages and embark on an absorbing adventure through a two-dimensional world of lines, triangles, squares and circles. *Flatland* is a compelling science fiction tale of a society whose characters know nothing of the third dimension — height — yet live much as earthlings do, studying, working, bearing children and obeying the rules of their society.

Written in a descriptive and anecdotal style and illustrated by hand-drawn sketches, *Flatland* convincingly places the reader within the framework of two dimensions. In doing so, he ensures *Flatland* a place among the great classics of literature.

A broadminded square with considerable powers of logic guides us through this strange land. We see how Flatlanders distinguish geometrical shapes and how they maintain their bearings without the compass markings familiar to three-dimensional creatures. We glimpse the special universities that train upper-class polygonals and learn how seditious behaviour among triangles is suppressed. We meet the high priests, circular figures who forbid all Flatlanders from discussing a third dimension, and learn the sorry fate of the few geometrical figures who defied this prohibition. Our narrator presents this all quite matter of factly, of course — he has experienced no other dimensions and thus has no reason to believe that his horizons are limited.

Then, abruptly, our square is burdened with enlightenment. He is briefly transported into Spaceland, the magical realm of three dimensions, and peers astonished into his two-dimensional homeland. “I looked,” he says, “and behold, a new world.” Under the tutelage of a sphere he gradually comes to understand the nature of light and shade and perspective and suddenly there is no end to his craving for more knowledge.

But alas, his insights are short-lived. Plunk! Our hero is dropped back into Flatland, only dimly able to remember his powerful vision of Spaceland. Like a vivid dream that vanishes upon awakening, his crystal-clear revelation turns murky, but he cannot shake it from his memory altogether. The haunting recollection of another world lingers, and he wonders again and again: Three dimensions... could that be possible?

At first *Flatland* seems simply a clever and entertaining yarn. But there are deeper messages here too. When Edwin Abbott wrote his book, only mystics and madmen — and perhaps a few mathematicians and scientists engaged in highly esoteric studies — dared whisper about a fourth dimension. Yet Abbott, a classics scholar who dabbled in higher mathematics as a hobby, hints that just as two-dimensional characters cannot easily grasp the concept of a third dimension, so are we three-dimensional characters limited by our own perspective and dangerously intolerant toward those who imagine worlds as yet unexplored. In *Flatland* Abbott urges his attentive readers to question their assumptions and to think the unthinkable, and in doing so suggests that perhaps we can penetrate the mysteries of our universe.

Yet for a man exploring the limits of human knowledge, Abbott's perspective is not always as broad as we would like. His women — “the Frail Sex wholly devoid of brain power” — are portrayed as straight lines whose end points easily wreak great destruction. Of less stature than an isosceles triangle, the lowest creature in the highly stratified Flatland society, that are shown as stupid, irrational and subject to fits of temper, and their movements are stringently regulated.

Equally insulting to the enlightened reader is the condescending portrayal of the vast underclass as “wretched rabble who lived in monotonous squalor.” Those few triangles who rebel against the confinements of their caste are quickly intimidated or co-opted into subservience and the masses are simply considered expendable.

But Edwin Abbott is a subtle satirist and we don't always know when he is poking fun at society's prevailing mores. Our three-dimensional world is at least slightly more egalitarian than the two-dimensional realm of Flatland, and Abbott suggests that perhaps on higher plains true equality may be reached at last. In many ways he ridiculed the restrictive mores of the society that existed in his time and still exist now a century later.

When our narrator returns to Flatland he tries to keep silent about his vision, aware of the iron-clad rules that bar him from even speculating about a dimension. But he is unable to remain silent.

In the end he pays a high price for his knowledge. But he is not the first visionary to suffer because he challenged the assumptions of his society. Throughout the history of the human race, wise and brilliant people have been ridiculed, excommunicated, imprisoned and executed because they refused to remain ignorant and docile.

The ways of the universe are complex, indeed, but the search for knowledge is no less compelling because it is arduous. Accept not the limits others impose on you, pleads our narrator. Dare to imagine. Dare to dream.

*Flatland*, then, is dedicated “to the race of rebels who refuse to be confined to limited dimensionality.”