

Review of
On Being a Departmental Head
A Personal View
by John B. Conway
(American Mathematical Society, 1996, 107 pages)
ISBN 0-8218-0615-7 (alk. paper!)

This is a very interesting small book! Especially so for those of us who operate in North America. Even though many of the observations, attitudes, problems and remedies described in this book are particular to a department of mathematics, of which, unlike departments of geodesy, there is one in each university, one can often sympathize with professor Conway and learn a few tricks from him. The title should, however, properly read "On being a head of a larger department of mathematics in the USA".

The most interesting aspect of the book, at least for your reviewer, is the insight into the "American psyche", that the book offers. Being simultaneously endearing and arrogant, displaying imperious tendencies flavoured with political correctness - how quintessentially American! My favourite is the following passage (page 20) that discusses the academic caliber of US students destined for university education:

"We are dedicated to maximizing the amount of time every student spends in school. So when I see a study comparing average test scores of high school seniors in the US with another country or some group of countries, I feel as though I am watching either stupidity or malevolence on parade. This is a comparison between non-corresponding population samples."

Well, precisely!

Do not let the author's obsession with "subnormal operators" detract you from picking some pearls of wisdom from the book, such as (page 99): *"Money has a way of attracting the academic lowlife from under their rock of deserved obscurity."*

Or (page 93): *"[Some] advocate considering the 'student as customer'. Baloney! Customers know what they want. ..."*

There are quite a few of those pearls in this thin book, as well as many quotables such as (page 51):

"Almost all undergraduate courses can be taught by any mathematician."

Go ahead and order your own copy from the American Mathematical Society, P.O.Box 6248, Providence, Rhode Island 02940-6248, USA. It cannot cost much, even if it is printed on acid-free paper.

Petr Vaníček