

# Booklist

Advanced Review – Uncorrected Proof

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★ **Genius at Play: The Curious Mind of John Horton Conway.**

Roberts, Siobhan (Author)

Jul 2015. 480 p. Bloomsbury, hardcover, \$30. (9781620405932). 510.92.

Famous for pioneering a dozen branches of mathematics, the British-born Princeton professor John Horton Conway interprets life with disarming candor: “I’m confused at various times. In fact, I’m confused at all times. It’s a permanent state.” Yet in this engrossing biography, readers see this genius repeatedly turn perplexities into breakthroughs. As Roberts has already shown in her prizewinning biography of geometer Donald Coxeter, she can elucidate mathematical conundrums for general readers, demonstrating her skills here by explaining in nontechnical terms how illuminating confusion can become when Conway probes symmetry groups, plumbs quantum free will, and formulates his Monstrous Moonshine Conjecture. Roberts even escorts readers into a momentous meeting between Conway and the iconic logician Kurt Gödel, where surreal numbers spend 10 minutes suspended in infinity. Yet the personality that emerges from this freewheeling narrative responds to even deep confusion with an irresistible playfulness, manifest most remarkably in the Game of Life that Conway developed to give theoreticians fresh insights into how the cosmos evolves. To be sure, free-spirited playfulness has so tangled Conway’s personal life that he once attempted suicide. But luminous episodes outnumber dark ones in this chronicle of invincible confusion. Who, after all, can resist a prodigy who devoted adolescence to mastering tongue contortions?

— *Bryce Christensen*