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Don’t be put off by the unfortunate title. This short novel is an excellent piece of work from any point of view.

Firstly, in the popular parlance, it’s a “good read” – one wants to know how it progresses and ends, so the pages turn, and as a narrative, it is very well crafted, so there are no slow patches, and no fruitless by-ways. Secondly, the whole story is believable, the psychological underpinnings are convincing, and the background history seems accurate. Thirdly, the two main characters are well enough realised to fully engage the reader’s sympathy and interest, and the “minor” characters given just enough attention to elucidate their influence on the action. They are not just decorative cameos. Incidentally these minor characters include Carathéodory, Hardy, Littlewood, Ramanujan, and Gödel, as well as some less familiar to a mathematician. The mathematically educated will also recognize some familiar technical characters as well. Just as war novels include strategy, politics and machinery as de facto springs of action, so here the mathematician will be aware of methods, collaborations and conjectures.
The theme of the book is obsession. The narrator is Petros’s nephew, who observes obsession in his uncle, experiences it himself, and reacts to, and survives both partial success and failure, all in the context of obsession in mathematical research.

But this is not a dry consideration of such matters; in fact, it starts with a very human family puzzle. Why do Petros’s brothers consider him a failure, and both a danger to the young and a salutary lesson to them? Does our developing picture of Petros accord with this view? What will be the devastating effects (on Uncle and Nephew) of the nephew’s probing? And, as things progress, larger matters loom. I am sure that this book will be enjoyed by any reader of novels, especially since any necessary technical stuff is brilliantly and succinctly explained, at least as well as in any top-grade spy thriller or political romance. There is no clumsy didacticism here; it all flows naturally with the narrative, as in Le Carré or Deighton or Price.

(Why do I mention these “espionage” writers? Well, because of the reader-catching opening pages, a teasing move they often use. Here, the Nephew asserts that Petros’s life story is bounded by a letter written in 1724, and the content of pages 183 to 198 of issue 38 of *Monatshefte für Mathematik und Physik*. That move, which sets up what needs explanation, is a favourite tactic of those writers. Of course, in the event, it turns out that quite a few other things will need explanation first, and that is the case in this novel, too.)

However, to the mathematician, there must be a deeper appreciation and enjoyment than to the layman. It is clear from the writing that the author has himself engaged in mathematical research, and has subjected his experience to much more perceptive introspection than is usual. I would say that he succinctly conveys the flavour of that experience to the general public through this novel, perhaps better than professional mathematicians such as Hardy or Hilbert, and that just as part of a wider aspect of human behaviour! Also, for the mathematician, there are quite a few sly quips and enjoyable comments on the profession and its icons, and cogent observations about proofs, claims, publication priority, appointments. There is even a whiff of gunpowder and *realpolitik* about the reasons the British invite Petros to Cambridge.

Although the human story of the protagonists comes to a reasonable conclusion by the last page, for the mathematician the reverberations continue. In the context of elementary number theory, should we read Gödel’s theorem as a timely warning, or as just another challenge to our ingenuity? Political novels often end with just this sort of sting in the tail, and in this case, it is this little bit of spice that makes this novel so satisfying.

Incidentally, the wrapper delivers the information that the author was born in Australia, raised in Athens, entered Columbia at age 15 on the grounds of his original research, did postgraduate work in Paris, and still has had a life as a prize-winning film maker, theatre director, translator of plays, and novelist. (This is his fourth novel). As a matter of fact, now I think of it, this would make a gripping movie. I can imagine some of the scenes: the German-educated intense and passionate Petros against the foil of the essentially English Hardy (“The Queen of Number Theory” Petros calls him), or the awful revelations in
the Petros-Turing interview in Petros’s rooms in Cambridge, the symbolism of
the beans on the floor (You’ll have to read it to see that one), not least, the
figure of Gödel drifting into insanity at the I.A.S. The author has set them up
in just a few succinct words, but they are visually bright.

You can gather that I really enjoyed this novel. Thank you, Apostolos
Doxiadis!