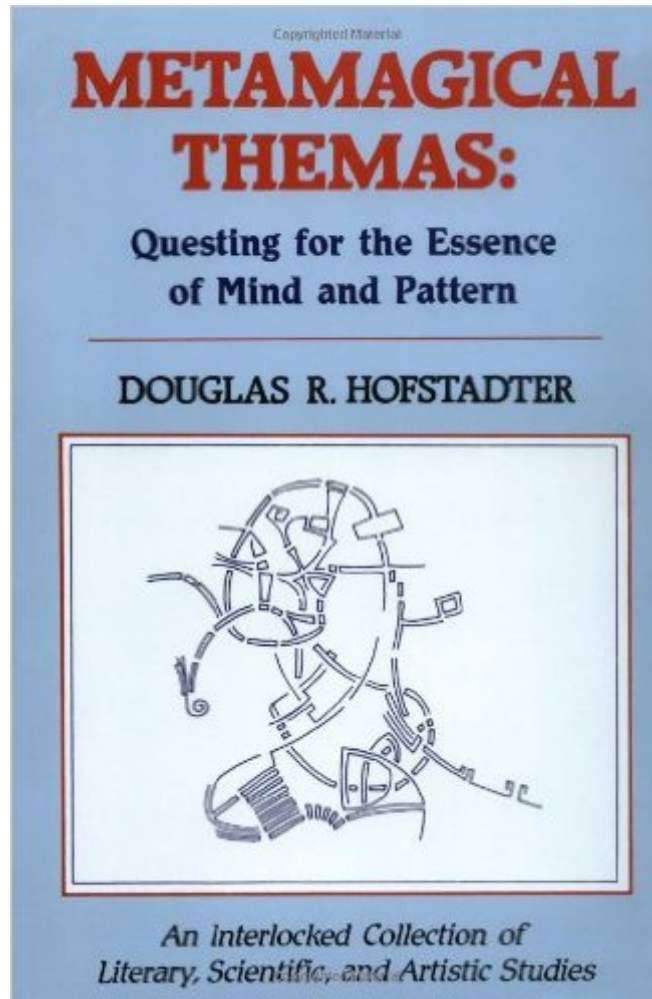


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Metamagical Themas: Questing For The Essence Of Mind And Pattern



Synopsis

Hofstadter's collection of quirky essays is unified by its primary concern: to examine the way people perceive and think.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When I was in high school I discovered the joys of reading Martin Gardner's "Mathematical Games" column in Scientific American. After a few years of pleasure he was replaced by someone else who (among other things) wrote on the joys of Rubik's cube and I found myself wasting weeks of time and filling notebooks with my quest to explore and solve the cube. That columnist was Douglas Hofstadter, who brought the same skill at sharing his enthusiasm for his topic that created the amazing, mind shattering 'Godel, Escher, Bach'. His column, that occupied the same place as "Mathematical Games", was called "Metamagical Themas" (looking closely at those two names will tell you a lot about Douglas Hofstadter) and lasted for 13 issues. This book is a compilation of those columns, each with a new endnote by Hofstadter and some letters received by the magazine and his reply. Together they cover a large range of topics while keeping to the central concerns of most of Hofstadter's work; consciousness, patterns, music, language and computer systems. The combination works superbly. This volume is much more easily approached than 'Godel, Escher, Bach' while raising similar questions in the mind of the reader. For those that have read the earlier work there is not just the joy of more of Hofstadter's writing on diverse topics but the sheer pleasure of discovering another dialogue involving Achilles and the Tortoise. I find it hard to define the set of

people who would enjoy this book, but it would be a large and varied one.

Perhaps it is sacrilege, or stretching things a bit, but in my view this book tops GEB. Admittedly, I have read GEB several times, so maybe somebody who hasn't read GEB won't get the full benefit of *Metamagical Themas*. Here are my reasons for my opinion: 1) Hofstadter doesn't spend so much time being cute. Sure, all the jokes in GEB were funny, but they can get old, especially when you're going through the book a second time trying to delve deeper into an idea. 2) The variety of topics. Everything from Chopin to self reference to nuclear proliferation. Yet as the title might suggest, a common thread runs through all the topics. Hofstadter emphasizes this with his addendums to the original articles; he also has several new essays. 3) A great summary of Hofstadter's views on AI. If you read GEB and weren't really sure what he's about, reading the new Achilles and Tortoise dialogue, "Who shoves whom around in the careenium?", will clear things up. It did for me. Also, there's an article on Hofstadter's criticisms of the approaches that have been taken by AI experts (up to 1985, when the book was written). In summary, GEB was an amazing work that was diluted to make it more palatable to non-technical people. *Metamagical Themas* is Hofstadter at full strength.

Douglas Hofstadter is obsessed with the meaning of meaning and has been thinking about thinking for most of his life. His first book won a Pulitzer Prize, but for those of us who share his obsession with thought, meaning, pattern, and creativity, this one is even better. The words in this book could be read in a week. The concepts Hofstadter explores will keep your mind busy for months. You will find yourself reading for fifteen minutes, and then thinking and speculating for hours. I have never seen a book that does so much to spark the creativity and curiosity of the reader. The focus of the book is broad, almost maddeningly so -- Hofstadter jumps from Art to Logic to Science to Pattern with a speed and grace that leaves most people gasping. But as you read it, you will begin to see a common thread -- It is about how people think, and what the fundamental processes of thought and creativity might be, explored through as many manifestations of thought and creativity as Hofstadter can manage. And Hofstadter, lucky for us, can manage quite a lot. If you are interested in thought and creativity, in mind, soul, and pattern -- if "effing the ineffable" is one of your hobbies, as it is mine -- and you are going to buy one book this decade, then buy this one.

This collection of Hofstadter's columns from *Scientific American* provides wonderful reading. One of the gems is his simple, but brilliant analysis of the Prisoner's Dilemma. The usual analysis notes that the Nash equilibrium is for both players to defect. Hofstadter notes (correctly) that if both

players are rational, then because the game is symmetrical, both players will choose the same strategy. So, the only choices are for both to cooperate or both defect. Since both cooperating has a higher payoff than both defecting, the rational strategy is to cooperate. The Nash equilibrium isn't relevant because it considers pairs of strategies which are impossible if both players are rational, i.e., the pairs where one player defects and the other cooperates. Hofstadter notes that many people when presented with the above argument still say that they would defect. His descriptions of his attempts to reason with his friends and the results of the lottery he conducted (he told readers of his column they could send in entries for the lottery, but the more that entered, the smaller the prize would be) are, as he says, amusing, disturbing, and disappointing.

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