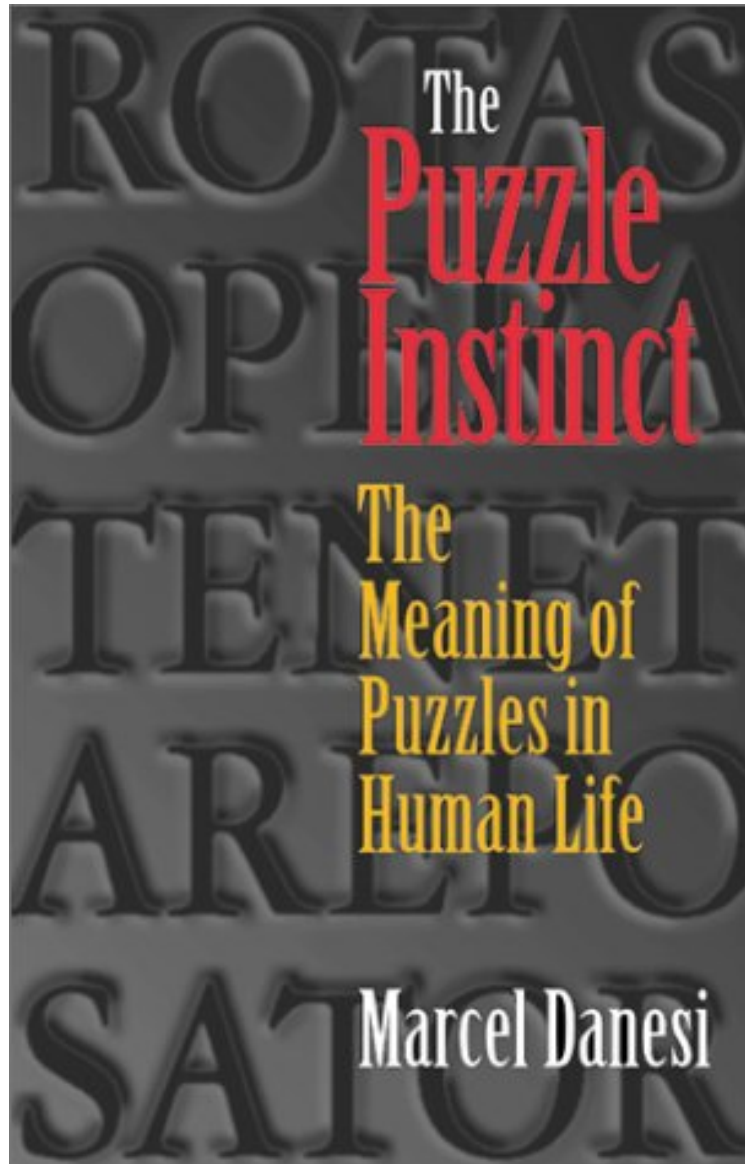


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The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life

Marcel Danesi

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Marcel Danesi : The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life:

30 of 31 people found the following review helpful. The Puzzle Is: Why Puzzles? By Rob Hardy Twenty-five years ago, there was a boom in sales of a fist-sized ingenious contraption of plastic, a fractured cube of multi-colored sides, the pieces of which could be twisted so that all the six faces had different colors (easy) or back to the one

configuration where each face had only its own color (hard). The ubiquitous Rubik's Cube came and went (well, it is a puzzle classic in its simplicity; you can still buy it, but the fad is gone), but there will be some other puzzle fad not long from now. The urge to figure out puzzles seems to be as ingrained in human personality as the urge to make language or art. In *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life* (Indiana University Press), Marcel Danesi, a professor of semiotics and anthropology, tries to figure out the meta-puzzle: life has lots of mysteries and complications. Why should we want to manufacture more? Danesi's book turns out to be a spirited review of puzzle history, and the history is a long one. The *Ahmes Papyrus*, nearly four thousand years old, is one of the earliest surviving documents of civilization anywhere, and is essentially a series of mathematical puzzles. It is significant that its title is *Directions for Attaining Knowledge of All Dark Things*. Charlemagne, the founder of the Holy Roman Empire, had a puzzle-maker on staff, and King Louis XIII of France had a Royal Anagrammatist. A description of Rubik's Cube is included, of course, as well as many other puzzle fads. The popularity of crossword puzzles is undimmed since they were introduced in the *New York World* in 1913; the original one is reproduced here. Crosswords became an overnight sensation, and many people still have to do their crossword puzzle every day. Anyone familiar with puzzle literature will find much familiar here; classics like the Towers of Hanoi, magic squares (the best one is by Benjamin Franklin), the River-Crossing Puzzle, and various optical illusions are all included. The puzzle that gives us the exhortation "Think outside the box" is here, as is the four-color map theorem, Archimedes's Cattle Problem, cryptograms, and tangrams. No one reading this book could deny that making and solving puzzles is a universal human trait. But why? Danesi finally comes to no certain conclusion, but there are some good reasons that he presents. One is that all of us enjoy the "Aha!" experience, the inexplicable flash of insight that can present an answer to something the likes of which we have never before encountered. Puzzles are escapism, but of a peculiar form invoking anxiety and curiosity after the puzzle is presented and pleasurably relieved only by finding the solution (or looking in the answer section). The most satisfactory answer is that like pure science, solving puzzles has been good for us. It is certainly true that working on puzzles is pleasurable, and can be instructive for the individuals trying to figure them out. In a larger sense (and this is a theme presented repeatedly here), puzzles have sparked mathematical revolutions. When Euler set out to solve the Königsberg bridge problem (citizens had known they could not walk around the river town crossing each bridge once and only once), he invented networks, and this eventually became topology. The paradoxes of Zeno (such as the runner being unable to reach the end of a race because he first has to go halfway, and then half of the remaining course, and then half of that, ad infinitum) were a spur for developing the concepts of limits and calculus. When Bertrand Russell tried logically to resolve his barber paradox (If a village barber shaves all and only those villagers who do not shave themselves, does he shave himself?), the resolutions themselves had paradoxes, and only Gödel's famous Incompleteness Theorem showed that full resolutions would be forever impossible. Puzzles are good for us, and this collection provides plenty to think about.

0 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Other BooksBy averageThis is an overview of the origins of the puzzle in human history, as well as a more detailed look at the various types in existence, complete with some examples. It also mentions some of the famous puzzle makers of history, and the influence of puzzles on mathematics and science and vice versa.

One of the most famous anagrams of all time was constructed in the Middle Ages. The unknown author contrived it as a Latin dialogue between Pilate and Jesus. Jesus answer to Pilate's question "What is truth" is phrased as an ingenious anagram of the letters of that very question: Pilate: Quid est veritas? ("What is truth?") Jesus: Est vir qui adest. ("It is the man before you.") The origin of anagrams is shrouded in mystery. One thing is clear, however in the ancient world, they were thought to contain hidden messages from the gods. Legend has it that even Alexander the Great (356-323 b.c.) believed in their prophetic power. from Chapter Two The most obvious explanation for the popularity of puzzles is that they provide a form of constructive entertainment. But in *The Puzzle Instinct* Marcel Danesi contends that the fascination with puzzles throughout the ages suggests something much more profound. Puzzles serve a deeply embedded need in people to make sense of things. Emerging at the same time in human history as myth, magic, and the occult arts, the puzzle instinct, he claims, led to discoveries in mathematics and science, as well as revolutions in philosophical thought. Puzzles fill an existential void by providing "small-scale experiences of the large-scale questions that Life poses. The puzzle instinct is, arguably, as intrinsic to human nature as is humor, language, art, music, and all the other creative faculties that distinguish humanity from all other species."

"Danesi, a professor of semiotics and anthropology (Univ. of Toronto), explores why puzzles, having arisen in earliest human history at the same time as mystery cults, are an intrinsic part of human life. Will Shortz, crossword puzzle editor of the *New York Times*, has suggested enigmatology as the study of the relationship between puzzles and culture. This book, which explores the puzzle genres that have survived over the years, is a contribution to that rubric. After first asking the question Why puzzles? (and developing several possible answers, among which is that they provide comic relief from unanswerable larger questions), Danesi devotes chapters to each of several types of puzzle. These include language puzzles (e.g., riddles and anagrams); pictures (e.g., optical illusions and mazes); logic (e.g., deductions and paradoxes); numbers (e.g., mathematical recreations); and games (e.g., chess). A final chapter

synopsizes the discussion. A detailed list of references is included, as are solutions to the specific puzzles posed. The book is well written, has no mathematical prerequisites, and is quite suitable for a general audience as well as lower- and upper-division undergraduates." D. Robbins, Trinity College (CT), Choice, December 2002 (D. Robbins, Trinity College (CT) Choice 2002-01-00)About the AuthorMarcel Danesi is Professor of Semiotics and Anthropology at the University of Toronto and Director of the Program in Semiotics and Communication Theory. His books include Increase Your Puzzle IQ and Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics. He lives in Toronto.