

# MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

Even a numbers geek can have something in common with Shakespeare

Words: **Andrew Sawers**

By all accounts, *Life of Pi* is an intriguing film. Great special effects. Quixotically philosophical. Nothing to do with  $\pi$  – or  $\pi$  – apart from seeming to go on for ever with no real purpose or pattern. Apparently. As a numbers geek, this put me off going to see it.

I confess, I have friends with whom I share minor excitement about palindromic dates. That isn't a date where you don't know whether you're coming or going (though in my youth I probably went on a couple of those). February has let us down this year: there's no 31/02/2013.

I laughed out loud last December when I read someone's tweet that they'd missed celebrating 12/12/12, but that they'd make up for it on 13/13/13.

In January 1999, I spotted that the dollar was worth €0.866 – almost exactly equal to the cosine of 30 degrees. At the very same time, the pound was worth €1.41 – or the square root of 2. I was thrilled.

A couple of years ago, I worked out that (a) there had never been a National Lottery draw where all six numbers were prime; and that (b) it

was unlikely to have happened more than once since the lottery began in 1994.

So it won't surprise you that I recently picked up a book called *Thinking in Numbers*, by Daniel Tammet. Tammet has high-functioning autistic-savant syndrome. And he not only thinks in numbers, he sees and feels them: numbers

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to him have colour, shape and texture. His autobiography is called *Born on a Blue Day* – not because of any downbeat mood, but because 31 January 1979 was a Wednesday and Wednesdays are always blue to Tammet, as is the number 9. To him, 37 is “lumpy like porridge”; 89 reminds him of falling snow. Wouldn't that make your cash flow forecasts a lot more interesting?

In Tammet's latest book, the chapter on the number zero is eye-opening, even



for a numbers geek. If you don't share my belief that the invention of the 'zero' (or, more properly, the *evolution* of 'zero') is one of the truly great developments in civilisation and technology, then contemplate what your job would be like if you had to do it in Roman numerals (or what the Tudors apparently used to call 'German numbers').

Now, of course, 10 times zero is zero. And zero equals zero. But, as Tammet points out: “The zero in 10 is ten times smaller than the zero in 101.” What a powerful thing that zero is.

The chapter is entitled 'Shakespeare's Zero' partly because Shakespeare would have been in one of the first generations of pupils at King's New School in Stratford to learn about the figure zero, more commonly referred

to then as a 'cipher'. Also, Shakespeare often used the concept of zeroes or ciphers or nothingness: in *King Lear*, in *Cymbeline*, *Henry V*, *The Winter's Tale* and Sonnet 38.

Maybe it's stretching things a bit far, but Shakespeare's Globe Theatre was 'O'-shaped – “an empty cipher filled with meaning”, Tammet says. Turning numbers into powerful, evocative, meaningful words? Maybe that's a subject for another day. ♥



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