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# Don's diary



*David Tong is Professor of Theoretical Physics  
and a Fellow of Trinity.*

## My room your room

With reference to the interview with Michael Portillo (CAM 69), I believe that Noah's Ark was so called because all the sets were shared (the animals went in two by two).

**Richard Fleet** (*Peterhouse 1972*)

## Sporting times

In your article on ultimate frisbee (CAM 69), a current member of the University team, Strange Blue, confessed to being unsure of the origin of the team name. I suspect it is probably a pun on *Strange Brew*, a song by 1960s heavy rockers Cream.

*Strange Brew* still gets a certain amount of radio play to this day, but I suppose it just goes to show that today's amusing cultural reference is tomorrow's source of bewilderment.

**James Mobbs** (*Christ's 1994*)

## Pleasing puzzles

Please congratulate Schadenfreude on a wonderful instruction – the symmetrical placing of the Jewish month was especially impressive – and a crossword that was great fun to solve. Recognising 'Tammuz' was the key to understanding how the grid worked, the mysterious title confirming. Excellent stuff.

**Teynnon Powell** (*Caius 1968*)

This was a very tough puzzle, the hardest ever in CAM, I think. Thanks to Schadenfreude for, once again, devising something as elegant and enjoyable!

**Robert Eastwood** (*Trinity 1967*)

Most graduates have pretty vivid memories of exam term in Cambridge. In fact, many graduates have pretty vivid nightmares about exam term. It's an intense time.

For me, it's a time when I'm forced to put aside much of what I enjoy most about teaching in this place. With exams just around the corner, there's little appetite for intellectual exploration. Supervisions no longer have the spontaneity of previous terms. There are no random digressions built on random digressions, no curveball questions from smart students that I struggle to answer. In short, there's no fun. It's all replaced by hard work and rigour. It's probably for the best, but I miss the fun.

In College, I've taken a group of first year mathematicians under my wing. Most of them nailed the basics weeks ago. Now it's all about honing, polishing, perfecting. It's about repetition. Serious repetition. I feel like Mr Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*: I've got them all waxing on and waxing off. I'm training an army of calculus-based ninja warriors.

Meanwhile, there's little fun to be had back in the department either. Sitting on the other side of the fence, I'm part of a team writing the final exams for the third years. It's a gruelling process. One person comes up with a question and two others solve it before we enter a hellish round of checking that lasts for months. Long after we're sure there are no actual mistakes, we fret about possible ambiguities. We rephrase questions and squabble over commas before rewriting them yet again. In our desperate search for typos, we resort to reading the questions out loud: equations, Greek letters and all. It's a comic scene: me standing in the middle of the room, half Euclid, half Homer Simpson, intoning: "Arr-mu-nu minus one-half arr gee-mu-nu equals eight pi tee-mu-nu." In front of me, a row of distinguished professors follow along, their fingers tracing the symbols on the page like five-year-olds learning to read.

By the end we have a maths exam to be proud of. In terms of its breadth, depth and difficulty, it's probably unrivalled in the world. A set of about 120 questions, each designed to take a smart student 30 minutes to solve. On a good day, I could probably get through about 20% of them. If you're ever feeling nostalgic, you can download

our masterpiece from the internet and relive those cold sweats you felt when you heard the words: "You may now turn the page."

The exams themselves go by in a flash, for students and faculty alike. Within two weeks the marking is done and the team of examiners is sitting in an airless room, drinking stale coffee and making our final decisions. What level is needed for a First? What about a Third? Only after everything is finalised are the anonymous candidate numbers replaced with names and we pore over the list to see how the chips have fallen. Then it becomes real. Among the names are students that I interviewed as nervous 17-year-olds and many more that I've since supervised, lectured and mentored. Among the names are people I care about.

There's one thing that surprises me afresh each year when I see the exam results: how very fair they are. The idea that students should spend three years studying, only to be tested on a single week of exams is surely medieval (OK, it's actually Georgian). Yet I've never seen an egregious miscarriage of justice. The students nearly always get what they deserve. The high fliers are sitting there at the top as expected; those who had better things to do than study are further down the list.

Having checked that there are no shocks, my eyes go to the borderlines where the outcome is less certain. I'm looking for the names of two of my favourite students (of course we have favourites). After two years of near misses, I'm willing them to be among the Firsts. When I see their names, I give a little fist pump of joy. I don't know if any blood went into their results, but I'm pretty sure there was a whole lot of sweat and tears. And I couldn't be more thrilled for them. There may not be much fun in exam term in Cambridge, but it still carries its own rewards.

**Professor Tong is a 2013 Pilkington Prize winner.**  
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