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Some books are just out of this world. *Flatland* goes one step further and creates a whole new world. Picture this, if you will: a land completely flat where only the dimensions of length and width exist. The men of Flatland are polygons and the women are simple lines. The regularity of one's shape, along with number of sides, determines societal status; everyone strives to be as close as they can to the most perfect shape, the circle. It's all very straightforward. This is the story of a humble polygon man, named A. Square, who steps out of his structured two-dimensional world and sees new realms. He dreams about Lineland, the one-dimensional plane, and about Pointland, a land with no dimension at all. He meets the Sphere, who takes him by the hand and shows him Spaceland, a kingdom of three dimensions: width, length and height. This is the story of a simple Square who dares to imagine that since there exist worlds of one, two, and three dimensions, maybe there could exist four, or five, or even six-dimensional worlds! Naturally such absurd, illogical and radical views are not tolerated in Flatland, so the Square is arrested and thrown in jail for daring to think that the world might be a little different than it appears.

*Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* was written by Edwin Abbott Abbott (1838-1926), an English schoolmaster and theologian. His interest in philology and theology is evident from his body of work, with books such as the *Shakespearean Grammar* (1870), *English Lessons for English People* (1871), his book on Francis Bacon, *Bacon and Essex* (1877), and a number of religious writings such as *Philochristus* (1878) and *Onesimus: Memoirs of a Disciple of Paul* (1882). While he is considered as one of the leading scholars of the Victorian period and as a well-respected and innovative schoolmaster, his most famous work to this day remains his whimsical novel *Flatland*. When it was first published in 1884 by Seeley & Co. in London, Edwin Abbott Abbott chose to use the pseudonym A. Square in accordance with the novel's satirical nature. Indeed, the book makes some harsh observations of Victorian society and beliefs but it does so by euphemistically using mathematical and geometrical principles. All of the matters that would concern a scholar of that age—the rigid structure of classes in society, the status of women, and current scientific interest in the nature of dimensions—are very much present in *Flatland*. The first print run of one thousand copies was well-received by the public and enjoyed various favorable reviews in a number of high-profile
journals of the time such as *The Athenaeum*, *Nature*, *The Spectator* and *The Literary World*. However, it was not a great success.

The book was rediscovered in 1926. Ten years earlier, Albert Einstein had published his general theory of relativity and introduced the concept of a fourth dimension, making *Flatland* more relevant than ever. Published by Basil Blackwell, it included a new introduction that highlighted the novel’s connection to new scientific theory. A review in the February 1920 issue of *Nature* essentially pointed the public towards this ‘unnoticed’ piece of fiction that now demanded renewed attention. A quarter of a century later, during the 1950s, the increasing popularity of science fiction was the starting point for yet another look at *Flatland*. Since then, there have been numerous editions of *Flatland* and it has been translated into Dutch, German, Italian, French, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, Hungarian, Hebrew, Greek, Portuguese, Farsi, Polish, Turkish and Finnish. There have been editions that focus on the mathematical nature of the book, such as the recent *The Annotated Flatland* (2002) as well as a number of imitations or sequels like *Sphereland* (1965), *Flatterland* (2001) and *Spaceland* (2002). The variety of its publication history is a good indication of why *Flatland* is so hard to label. To answer the question of what type of book *Flatland* really is, one must take into account its satirical nature, its connection to geometry and mathematics and its ability to present a new world. It is as much satire as it is mathematical fiction or a science fiction classic.

Without a doubt, one of *Flatland*’s most interesting editions was published at the end of 1980 by Arion Press. This San Francisco-based publishing house specializes in limited edition books with original art. The founder of Arion Press and the creative force behind the house’s fine-press publications is Andrew Hoyem, an established typographer. The 1980 *Flatland* edition has been one of Arion Press’s most successful books. It was published in 275 numbered copies and signed by Andrew Hoyem as well as Ray Bradbury, who wrote the introduction. Naturally, it is no coincidence that one of America’s most acclaimed fantasy and science fiction authors was commissioned to write the book’s introduction. Hoyem’s edition has many distinct and unique features. It is bound in aluminum covers and features a hinged and clasped aluminum container. The original illustrations by Edwin Abbott Abbott in the first edition of *Flatland* were ‘retouched’ and hand-coloured by Andrew Hoyem. The text is written in a continuous block with squares marking line breaks and new paragraphs, a playful reminder of the book’s main character. The aluminum case even comes with an instructional pamphlet for the edition’s most special feature. The instructions read: ‘...For display purposes, the accordion-fold can stand up-right spread to zig-zag over large or small areas...’ Indeed, the text pages and illustrations are joined like an accordion with a length of 10 metres (33 feet) printed on each side, making the total length of the book an impressive 20 metres (66 feet). Unfolding the book
gives the reader the chance to experience *Flatland* literally as a two-dimensional plane.

In essence, the 1980 Arion Press edition of *Flatland* not only celebrates a classic work of fiction but also elevates the book beyond the literature sphere and shapes it into an aesthetically pleasing and quite inventive object. It is an innovative tribute to a novel that has been continuously in print since it was first published in 1884 and has been a source of inspiration in fiction, science and film. *Flatland* is a book about multiple dimensions, and like any true classic it has many.

**Further reading**


