

Gregory J. Chaitin

*Conversations with a Mathematician: Math, Art, Science and
the Limits of Reason*

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REVIEW

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In April of 2004 an American mathematician auctioned his services as a co-author on e-Bay. More specifically, as far as I can make out, he offered to help someone research and write a mathematical paper for a scholarly journal. Since he has an Erdős number of 4, he guaranteed that the highest bidder would achieve an Erdős of 5. I laughed. But the situation does raise a number of interesting questions, some of which are: Do mathematicians ever have a sense of humor? How high does an Erdős number have to be before it is meaningless? How many times can I write “Erdős” in a single paragraph? What does research in mathematics amount to? Chaitin answers the first and last of these questions (sometimes simultaneously) in this little collection of his recent lectures and interviews.

Gregory Chaitin, a mathematician at the IBM Watson Research Center, is best known for his formation and exploitation of what he has termed Algorithmic Information Theory (AIT). He has produced a string of important papers and books on AIT, the foundations of mathematics, and randomness. *Conversations with a Mathematician* brings together three of Chaitin’s public lectures and a number of TV and newspaper interviews, all from the last fifteen years. In virtually all of these pieces Chaitin demonstrates a clear affirmative answer to my first question above. He is funny, witty, and delightfully informal and irreverent. He makes it obvious that he believes mathematics is fun and that he is having fun doing it and talking about it. During one of the interviews Chaitin is directly asked the question about humor and mathematicians. In response he laughs and says, “Well, I don’t think we have as much of a sense of humor as physicists do, but I think we **ought** to have a sense of humor” (p. 151). But, in addition to being