

Correspondence

DEAR EDITOR,

The review of my book *Significant Figures*, MG 102 (November 2017) p. 554, contains three suggestions for mathematicians who might have been included, and suggests that they might meet all of the criteria I stated in the introductory chapter, of which the main ones can be summarised:

- (a) Major and lasting contributions to mathematics;
- (b) No living mathematicians;
- (c) Fascinating people who led interesting lives.

How do the three suggestions stack up in the light of these criteria?

Hypatia is historically significant as a rare example of a woman mathematician in ancient times, but as her wikipedia entry says, she was 'probably more of a teacher and commentator than an innovator'. So, she satisfies (b) and (c), but not (a).

Jnanaraja is known mainly for an astronomy text in Sanskrit verse whose main mathematical content is computational methods for planetary positions and eclipses. He does not appear on the MacTutor website (<http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/>) or in Joseph's *The Crest of the Peacock*. So, he fails (a) and (c).

Maryam Mirzakhani seems to tick all the boxes: female, brilliantly original, first woman Fields medallist, gripping life story, dying tragically at the age of 40. Perfect! So why was she not included?

The reason is all about the dates. My book was published on 10 August 2017 (you can find the exact date on Amazon). Mirzakhani died on 14 July 2017, four weeks before publication. In fact, the book entered production in late 2016 and was printed and being distributed when she died.

Other considerations were to achieve diversity of historical period, nationality, gender, and mathematical area, while telling a reasonably coherent story of the historical development of a significant part of today's mathematics. Combining all this with a strict word limit, the problem facing an author is not who to include, but who to leave out.

Yours sincerely,

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Student Problem Corner Editor

Stan Dolan, who has edited the Student Problem Corner since July 2010, has indicated that he thinks it is time to find a successor. Editing it involves setting the problems, ensuring that they are of an appropriate standard to challenge school pupils, and then assessing the solutions which are received. Any reader of the *Gazette* who is interested in taking over is invited to contact the Editor to receive further information about what is involved.