Perelman’s Refusal: A Novel
by Philippe Zaouati

In June of 2006 IMU president John Ball traveled to St. Petersburg to convince Grigori Perelman to accept the Fields Medal at that summer’s ICM. Ball promised Perelman that their conversation would remain confidential, so we can only imagine how it went. Or, we can read how Philippe Zaouati imagines it proceeded. Zaouati interviewed Ball to get some broad strokes of how the meeting went, but the book is a piece of fiction. It would have been easy for Zaouati to make Perelman out as a kind of bizarre, impenetrable, other-worldly freak, but he resisted that temptation. Both Perelman and Ball come across as deeply thoughtful, interesting, and sympathetic. And they come to, on some level, a kind of mutual understanding. At one point the topic of Grothendieck’s 1966 boycott of the Fields ceremony comes up and the novel’s version of Perelman says:

If you say so. I’m afraid I’ll be something of a disappointment by comparison. In my case, refusal means nothing beyond my refusing. To borrow Grothendieck’s vocabulary, my ‘no’ is autological. I’m asking you, John. I’m begging you, please don’t try and give it a political, philosophical, or even a scientific dimension. It would make you no better than the apparatchiks who distribute these baubles without understanding a damn word of the work they are rewarding.

The novel is not about mathematics, it is about the philosophical duel between Ball and Perelman. It is also a satisfying novel of ideas that beautifully evokes the environment of midsummer St. Petersburg. It is, perhaps, the perfect airplane read for your flight to next summer’s ICM.

Testimonios: Stories of Latinx and Hispanic Mathematicians
Edited by Pamela E. Harris, Alicia Prieto-Langarica, Vanessa Rivera Quinones, Luis Sordo Vieira, Rosaura Uscanga, and Andrés R. Vindas Meléndez

On the one hand testimonio is simply the Spanish word for testimony. On the other hand, it is a technical term used in social science for a first-person narrative, in particular a narrative of political or social struggle. According to Reyes and Rodriguez [1] testimonio is intended to expose a societal wrong, to give voice to a point of view, or to be an urgent call to action. This book is, to some extent, all of the above. First and foremost it is a collection of autobiographical essays by Latinx and Hispanic mathematicians intended to inspire the next generation of such mathematicians, and it should get wide distribution to high school and college-age math students to perform that function. Student readers should hear the book’s message that a mathematical career can be rich, interesting, and fulfilling. We all should hear the stories of the power of supportive families and mentors. But the aggregation itself has an additional collective power. Those of us in positions of influence should hear, and heed, its message that access to a mathematical career can be unnecessarily challenging.

The AMS and the MAA recognize that these stories ought to be widely heard. You can read a sample chapter on page 1336 of this issue of Notices. Complimentary copies of the e-book version are being distributed to members on the websites of the AMS and the MAA. Once each month, for the next two years, a chapter will be released on both the AMS website and the MAA’s Math Values blog (mathvalues.org). You really ought to buy a print copy, or three, to leave in your departmental lounge for your students (and your colleagues) to stumble across.

References