

# 2001 JPBM Communications Award

The Joint Policy Board for Mathematics (JPBM) Communications Award was established in 1988 to reward and encourage journalists and other communicators who, on a sustained basis, bring accurate mathematical information to nonmathematical audiences. The 2001 award was presented to KEITH J. DEVLIN at the Joint Mathematics Meetings in New Orleans in January 2001. What follows is the citation for the award, a biographical sketch, and a response from Devlin upon receiving the award.

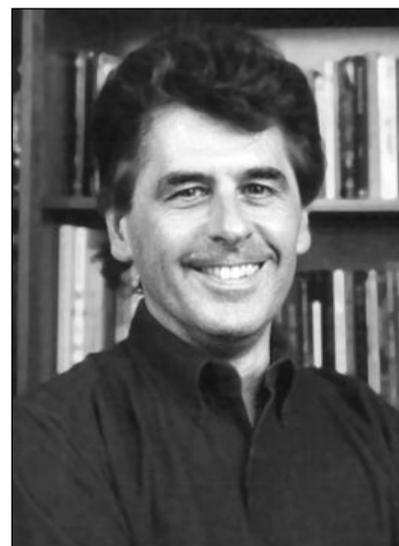
## Citation

The Joint Policy Board for Mathematics presents its 2001 Communications Award to Dr. Keith Devlin for his many contributions to public understanding of mathematics through great numbers of radio and television appearances; public talks; books; and articles in magazines, newsletters, newspapers, journals, and online. For more than seventeen years, Dr. Devlin's expository powers have furthered an appreciation for the mathematical enterprise. Dr. Devlin generates excitement for mathematical ideas without sacrificing accuracy. He is a regular correspondent on Scott Simon's *Weekend Edition* on National Public Radio, and he regularly appears on radio and television in the United Kingdom. It is most extraordinary for any newspaper, especially a major newspaper, to have a regular column on mathematics. Yet Dr. Devlin's column is a regular feature of the *Manchester Guardian* (England). Of twenty-two books he has written, eleven are devoted to the popular exposition of mathematics. He even wrote a mathematically inspired radio play. Keith can be provocative; he is well known for writing such pieces as editor of *Focus*, the newsletter of the Mathemat-

ical Association of America. We recognize Keith for a preponderance of highly public and very popular work that covers a broad spectrum of topics and has been delivered through a variety of media to a worldwide audience.

## Biographical Sketch

Keith Devlin is dean of the School of Science at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California, and a senior researcher at the Center for the Study of Language and Information at Stanford



Keith J. Devlin

University. His current research work is centered on the application of mathematical techniques to issues of language and information and the design of information systems. He is a member of the Mathematical Sciences Education Board of the National Academy of Sciences and a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He is the author of twenty-two books, ranging from research monographs to textbooks to books aimed at a general audience. He has also written over sixty-five published research articles.

Devlin writes a monthly column, "Devlin's Angle", on the Web journal *MAA Online* and is a regular contributor to the National Public Radio program *Weekend Edition*. He also contributes to various other local and national radio programs in the U.S. and Britain, commenting on advances in mathematics and computing. In addition, he has worked on and appeared in a number of

television programs, including *Life by the Numbers*, a six-part series broadcast on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in 1998, and *GED Connections*, a 13-part series aimed at the adult mathematics learner, to be broadcast by PBS in 2001. His most recent book for a general audience is *The Math Gene: How Mathematical Thinking Evolved and Why Numbers Are Like Gossip* (Basic Books, 2000; reviewed in the *Notices*, February 2001).

### Response

How did I get into this situation? In late March 1983, on the spur of the moment, I dashed off a spoof mathematics article for publication as an April Fool's joke in the British newspaper *The Guardian*. (The spoof was that the mathematics described was correct, although hardly anyone would believe it and would assume it was a fake April 1 spoof!) *The Guardian* didn't publish it, but the editor called to say he liked my style and invited me to send in other pieces. I did, readers liked them, and by the end of the year I had a regular, 750-word math column that ran every two weeks. Unplanned, I found myself a "math popularizer". Being a sucker for flattery, when people said they liked my popular writing, I kept on doing it after I moved to the United States in 1987. The following year my first "popular math book" was published by Penguin Books: *Mathematics: The New Golden Age*.

Despite its accidental beginnings, my side-career as a communicator of mathematics has developed into something I now take great pride in and like to think has value. Certainly, I devote a great deal of time and effort to it. Thus, being awarded the JPBM Communications Award means a great deal to me. My sincere thanks to all concerned, not just to my colleagues at JPBM and in the mathematics profession in general, but to Tim Radford, my editor at *The Guardian*, who encouraged me in the early days and has become a good, lifelong friend; to the other newspaper, magazine, and book editors who have taught me—and continue to teach me—how to reach a wider audience; and to Scott Simon, host of NPR's *Weekend Edition*, and the program's senior producer, Ken Hom, for having the courage to allow me onto their show at regular intervals, where Scott and I can use mathematics to warm up the audience for *Car Talk*.

—From a JPBM announcement