

The Tree of Knowledge

Daniel G. Miller

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The Tree of Knowledge is a funny and engaging mystery novel whose academic antiheroes regard logic as a training strategy, a weapon, and a cause.

In Daniel G. Miller's cozy mystery novel *The Tree of Knowledge*, an Ivy League professor combats an ominous plan to divide the country.

A security guard confronts a burglar at the Bank of Princeton and manages to snatch a game tree written on a scrap of paper before being killed. Police ask fastidious Professor Puddles, whose specialty is logic, to decrypt the cipher. Together with his assistant, Ying, and a colleague, Professor Turner, Puddles is drawn into a fascinating plot involving the Tree of Knowledge: a system into which people's goals and actions can be downloaded to guess at, and manipulate, outcomes. Meanwhile, Eva, a math genius who once knew Puddles, is involved in a secret society that tasks her with getting rid of him.

Though not all of the characters grow in noticeable ways, those who do find their confidence tested. Eva—who's beautiful, ambitious, skilled at combat, and generally ambivalent—is torn between memories of her frustrated teenage years and her present assignment, especially because of her sympathetic feelings toward Puddles. Puddles, meanwhile, is fussy and stuffy; he longs for heroics instead of abstractions. And Ying defuses tension with her relentless bonhomie, while Turner is wily and full of surprises.

Detailed about the cat-and-mouse relationship between its leads, the three-act plot draws humor from its over-the-top characters, and from the amusing incongruity between their picturesque setting and the dangerous capers that befall them. It trades between Eva's reflections of her past and Puddles's present experiences with satisfying verbal puzzles, diagrams, and facets of logic to result in a twisting, tongue-in-cheek adventure.

The chapters alternate between Eva's attempts at subterfuge and the Princeton folks' efforts to brace themselves for a confrontation. When events call for Puddles and Ying to learn self-defense with Turner's help, the result is a delightful sequence that highlights their mental acuity. Cliffhangers and witty dialogue contribute to the book's sense of suspense and momentum, while chapters involving a gubernatorial race hint at the Tree of Knowledge's power. The splashy finale incorporates all of these factors well; it also makes use of a charismatic villain who's looking to achieve domination.

The Tree of Knowledge is a funny and engaging mystery novel in which logic moves out of rarefied halls to become a training strategy, a weapon, and a cause, pulling a band of academic antiheroes together.

KAREN RIGBY (February 19, 2021)

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