

In the Dark on the Sunny Side: A Memoir of an Out-of-Sight Mathematician (Spectrum)

By Larry Baggett

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Misfortune struck one June day in 1944, when a five-year-old boy was forever blinded following an accident he suffered with a paring knife. Few people become internationally recognized research mathematicians and famously successful university professors of that erudite subject, and not surprisingly a minuscule number of those few are visually impaired. In the Dark on the Sunny Side tells the story of one such individual. Larry Baggett was main-streamed in school long before main-streaming was at all common. On almost every occasion he was the first blind person involved in whatever was going on the first blind student enrolled in the Orlando Public School System, the first blind student admitted to Davidson College, and the first blind doctoral student in mathematics at the University of Washington. Besides describing the various successes and failures Baggett experienced living in the dark on the sunny side, he displays in this volume his love of math and music by interspersing short musings on both topics, such as discussing how to figure out how many dominoes are in a set, the intricacies of jazz chord progressions, and the mysterious Comma of Pythagoras.

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Editorial Review

Review
This book tells the story of a young American boy blinding himself by accident and ending up an internationally well-known expert on harmonic analysis and wavelet theory. Born in 1939 and becoming blind in 1944, the author experiences being one of the very first blind students main-streamed through the public school system, college, and university. The story is by and large a happy one and we are given many examples of relatives, friends, teachers, and strangers helping the blind boy, the blind adolescent or the blind man with all these practical things that are so self-evident to us seeing persons that we just take them for granted: how to find your way from one classroom to another in a school full of children running around, how to match the colors of your clothes, how to order from a menu, ow to find an empty seat in a seminar room, or how to travel to a conference. All these important details of life are commented on in a positive spirit. The author lives in a friendly world, even if that world is arranged for seeing people by seeing people.

All in all this is a nice book to read. It gives a hint at what it was like to grow up blind in America during the second half of the last century. It also gives a picture of how it is possible for a blind boy to become a world-famous expert in mathematics. Finally, it shows how one may enjoy life in spite of being blind in a very much visually designed world. --Mathematical Reviews

Baggett's writing style is skilled but unpretentious resulting in a book that is a very easy read. The reader becomes comfortable with the author as a regular person who is experiencing life in an unusual manner. He keeps the technical mathematics to an absolute minimum. As a result, the book can be enjoyed by anyone interested in the process of succeeding at a high level in spite of a major handicap. --Keith F. Taylor CMS Notes

Many will know Professor Lawrence (Larry) Baggett for his work on harmonic analysis, wavelet theory and unitary representations of groups. He is a world leading mathematician and has been for many decades. However, there is something you might not know about Larry, he is blind.

This book serves as Larry's memoirs, describing everything from his musical exploits and mathematical pursuits, to his personal life. Many of these moments, feelings and activities have been experienced by each of us, and often he describes a professional environment that lots of us are familiar with. However, Larry talks about them from a completely different, and in many cases, unique position.

Larry lost his sight after an accident with a paring knife at the age of five. But this did not hold him back; he went on to be the first blind student in the Orlando public school system, the first admitted to Davidson College, and the first taken on a a doctoral student in mathematics at the University of Washington. Larry is a teacher, and this exudes throughout the book, he never misses an opportunity to educate. Whether this be description and explanation of fun, classic, maths problems that crop up in anecdotes or some of the remarkable connections between mathematics and music. There is also considerable explanation of how Larry actually accomplishes a number of 'everyday' tasks, such as how Braille works and he reads, and writes music.

The book is written for the layman, and as such does not really delve into Larry's own research in any great detail. There are a couple of paragraphs of basic description towards the end but it is more of an autobiography of a blind man growing up in mid 20th century America, pushing boundaries, than that of a

world class mathematician.

Throughout, this is a heart-warming and humorous book which I would recommend to all those who enjoy (auto) biographies. Larry's passions and interests are clear -- music, maths and his family --Sean Alvidge, Institute of Mathematics and Its Applications

This is a fascinating book. The author tells, in a very spontaneous way, about his life, both personal and professional. An accomplished and internationally renowned mathematician, Larry W. Baggett tells about vague memories of early childhood, before becoming blind after an accident when he was five years old. He tells about the adaptation to a new life and hs successful struggle to learn how to "see" being totally blind. He recalls the experience of riding school buses, of moving from one class to another during the school days. He mentions some teachers that marked his school years and vividly describes the growth of his pleasure and involvement with music, particularly jazz. He tells about his decision to go to the prestigious Davidson College in North Carolina. Very interesting his comments on the undergraduate mathematics courses, about the good professors he had and his decision for majoring in mathematics. Also about his decision to go to the University of Washington for graduate studies and his experiences as a teaching assistant. Then he tells about the early steps as a research mathematician, which culminated in a doctoral degree granted by the University of Washington after defending a thesis on "A description of topology on the dual spaces of certain locally compact groups." Then he comments on his successful academic career. Each step is described with interesting and critical comments on the trajectory of someone different in an established group of individuals. He tells about some attempts to recover his vision with high technology. Especially his experience with Optacon, an optical-to-tactile converter. All this is mixed with an account of his personal life, from the first marriage, of which he parented two girls, to the divorce and to the successful second marriage. We understand, reading the various chapters, why he dedicates the book to his second wife, using a brief but very strong sentence: To Christy, my light. Particularly moving are the description of his visits to museums and art galleries and how he describes colorful pictures, classic sculptures and architecture. The two final chapters, with very suggestive titles, 12. " The Rennaissance" and 13. "So how'd that all work out for you?", are a vivid narrative of his personal life and feelings. Impossible to synthesize, in a review, the emotions of reading this book. --Ubiratan D'Ambrosio, Zentrallblatt MATH

About the Author
Larry Baggett received his PhD from the University of Washington in 1966 and was a faculty member at the University of Colorado, Boulder, from 1966 until 2006. He is the author or co-author of three books and over 60 research papers.

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