

Daniel Rooke was quiet, moody, a man of few words. He had no memories other than of being an outsider.

At the dame school¹ in Portsmouth they thought him stupid. His first day there was by coincidence his fifth birthday, the third of March 1767. He took his place behind the desk with his mother's breakfast oatmeal cosy in his stomach and his new jacket on, happy to be joining the world beyond his home.

Mrs Bartholomew showed him a badly executed engraving with the word 'cat' underneath. His mother had taught him his letters and he had been reading for a year. He could not work out what Mrs Bartholomew wanted. He sat at his desk, mouth open.

That was the first time he was paddled with Mrs Bartholomew's old hairbrush for failing to respond to a question so simple he had not thought to answer it.

He could not become interested in the multiplication tables. While the others chanted through them, impatient for the morning break, he was looking under the desk at the notebook in which he was collecting his special numbers, the ones that could not be divided by any number but themselves and one. Like him, they were solitaires.

When Mrs Bartholomew pounced on him one day and seized the notebook, he was afraid she would throw it in the fire and smack him with the hairbrush again. She looked at it for a long time and put it away in her pinny² pocket.

He wanted to ask for it back. Not for the numbers, they were in his head, but for the notebook, too precious to lose.

Then Dr Adair from the Academy came to the house in Church Street. Rooke could not guess who Dr Adair was, or what he was doing in their parlour³. He only knew that he had been washed and combed for a visitor, that his infant sisters had been sent next door to the neighbour woman, and that his mother and father were sitting on the uncomfortable chairs in the corner with rigid faces.

Dr Adair leaned forward. Did Master Rooke know of numbers that could be divided by nothing but themselves and one? Rooke forgot to be in awe. He ran up to his attic room and came back with the grid he had drawn, ten by ten, the first hundred numbers with these special ones done in red ink: two, three, five and on to ninety-seven. He pointed, there was a kind of pattern, do you see, here and here? But one hundred numbers was not enough, he needed a bigger sheet of paper so he could make a square twenty or even thirty a side, and then he could find the true pattern, and perhaps Dr Adair might be able to provide him with such a sheet?

His father by now had the rictus⁴ of a smile that meant his son was exposing his oddness to a stranger, and his mother was looking down into her lap. Rooke folded the grid and hid it under his hand on the table.

But Dr Adair lifted his fingers from the grubby paper.

'May I borrow this?' he asked. 'I would like, if I may, to show it to a gentleman of my acquaintance who will be interested that it was created by a boy of seven.'

After Dr Adair went, the neighbour woman brought his sisters back. She inspected Rooke and said loudly, as if he were deaf, or a dog, 'Yes, he looks clever, don't he?'

Rooke felt the hairs on his head standing up with the heat of his blush. Whether it was because he was stupid or clever, it added up to the same thing: the misery of being out of step with the world.

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- ¹ dame school: small elementary school, run by a female teacher
² pinny: pinafore, apron
³ parlour: best room where guests are received
⁴ rictus: fixed grimace

What do you consider to be the sources of tension in this passage?