

Standing up in flatland

This week, after [listening to a podcast](#) on rational (and not quite so rational) morality, I was reminded of a strange, skinny little book called *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* by Edwin Abbott Abbott.



By Bronwyn Williams 15 Mar 2021

Flatland follows the adventures and enlightenment of A. Square, who lives in a strange two-dimensional society (the “Flatland” of the title) after being visited by a three-dimensional sphere.

Flatland itself is a hierarchical society with strict gender and class rules. Shapes with more sides are considered superior to those with less sides; with circular males at the top of the proverbial social pyramid (or in this case, triangle) and single-lined females at the bottom. (That said, for the feminists among us, it should be noted that female lines of Flatland can easily kill the male shapes by accidentally or deliberately piercing them with an end point. As such, the female lines are treated as dangerous and subject to strict rules and restrictions. For their own and everyone else’s safety, of course.)

In the story, the mysterious Sphere eventually helps poor two-dimensional A. Square to comprehend the extra dimension of height. After his awakening to the reality of greater space of light and shade beyond the flat plane of his existence, he attempts to explain this new deeper reality to his fellow flat peers and superiors. However, the ruling class of circles understand that A. Square’s new ideas are a danger to the order and stability of their society (what superior circle could tolerate the existence of a perfect sphere?) a sentence him to perpetual imprisonment for his thought crimes and hearsay.

Flatland was written in 1838 by a clergyman, who intended his fable as a commentary on spiritual awakenir social intolerance and the persecution of those who believe in an existence greater than their own.

However, there are also lessons we can draw from Flatland, which can also apply to the secular business world of today.

We live in a complex society, there is much we do not know about the way the world works, or the experiences other people have lived through. It is all too easy to dismiss ideas that shatter our world views as heresy, rather than engaging with them and changing our own world views. It feels safer and simpler to shut down uncomfortable conversations and censor dangerous ideas that threaten our society or our place in it. However, by ignoring inconvenient realities or suppressing progress that forces us to change, we limit ourselves and our own potential.

Progress is uncomfortable. Change is frightening. Changing one's mind and admitting we were wrong is often the hardest of all.

However, staying in our safe spaces might actually be the most dangerous place to be.

If the rest of the world is opening up to a new dimension (or a whole new [parallel universe](#)), while we remain trapped by our own choices and refusal to expand our horizons or embrace new ideas in our present, limit existence; well, we are only harming ourselves.

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