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The End of Ignorance

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Simple equation

Brett Hooton

Some people - well, John Mighton anyway - get to have it both ways

Most of us have to choose. After high school, I went the arts route, even though I enjoyed math and science. John Mighton, however, gets to have his Shakespeare and his knot theory too.

He was already one of Canada's most famous playwrights when he completed his PhD in mathematics in 1999. At about the same time, he founded JUMP - Junior Undiscovered Math Prodigies - where he tutors struggling students in the ways of pluses and minuses. His new book, *The End of Ignorance*, explains the program's underlying philosophy and details its many astonishing success stories.

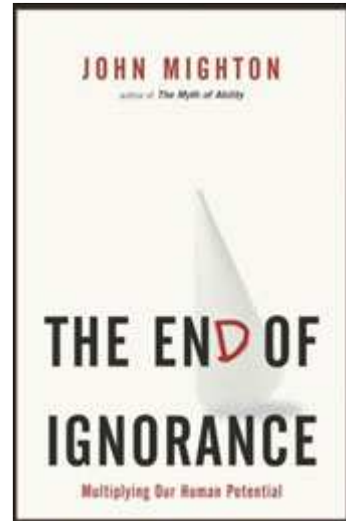
Mighton recently sat down with Hour to discuss why math is like a lush countryside, why writing this book scared him, and why he blames himself when a child doesn't understand something.

Hour What is it that draws you to math?

John Mighton People might find this hard to believe, but it's an incredibly beautiful subject. It has all the complexity of the natural world. We find incredible beauty in the visible world. There's also incredible beauty in the invisible laws that underlie everything. For me, it's as visceral as looking at a beautiful landscape. It's addictive almost. And kids feel that.

Hour What were some of your fears in writing this book?

Mighton Well, it's so easy to start wars or have a destructive influence on things, and the school system often swings back and forth wildly from one fad to another. So I wanted to retain a sense of balance even in things I don't necessarily



The End of Ignorance: Multiplying Our Human Potential, by John Mighton (Knopf Canada), 312 pp.



agree with, because there's usually something true or good about almost everything that's being done in education.

Hour In the book you say that JUMP is about fidelity to the methods and not a teacher's individual skills. What role does a teacher's personality play in the program?

Mighton By breaking down lessons into tiny increments, we're giving teachers a technique that will only help them express their personalities. You might think that learning scales on the piano is not very creative, but one day you'll compose and you'll bring something of your own soul into it. But you'll never get there if you don't have the scales. And it's the same with teaching. If you don't have the means to assess what students know, you can have all the personality on earth, but you're still going to leave kids behind.

Hour You write repeatedly that you don't think you're the best teacher. Why is that?

Mighton I don't have many of the most basic skills. There's a lot of teachers who are more charismatic than me, who are faster on their feet. Sometimes I'm really on, but sometimes I'm a bit dense. The only thing I do have is a belief that I can help a kid move forward if I keep asking, "What did I do wrong? Why didn't they understand this?" I have a real passion for helping kids succeed, and if I have any abilities as a teacher, they come out of that.