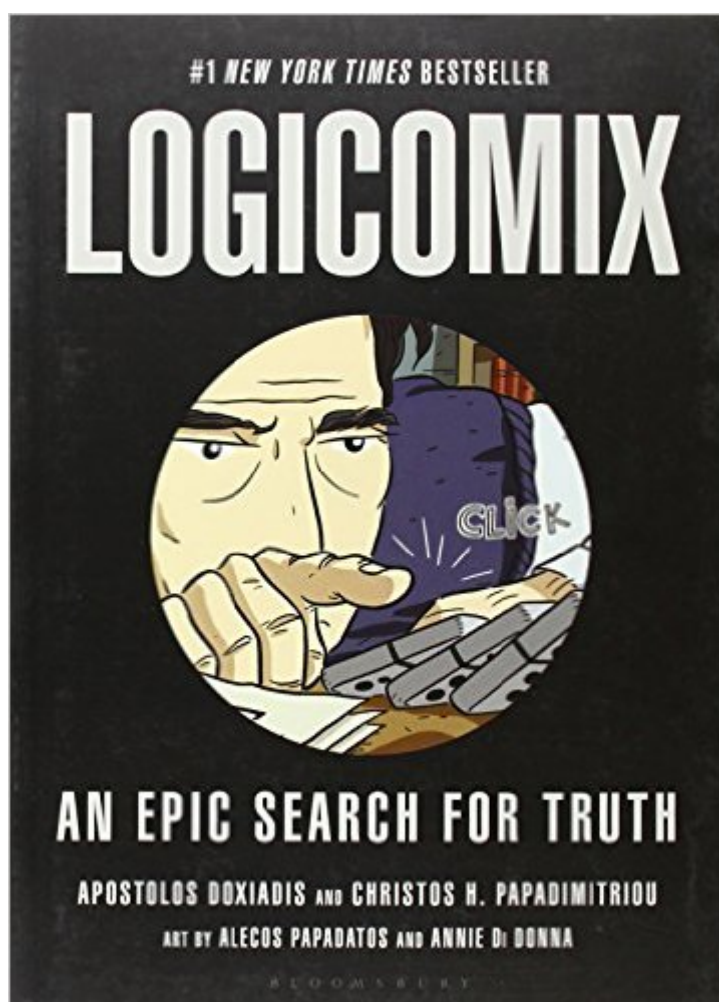


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# Logicomix: An Epic Search For Truth



## Synopsis

This exceptional graphic novel recounts the spiritual odyssey of philosopher Bertrand Russell. In his agonized search for absolute truth, Russell crosses paths with legendary thinkers like Gottlob Frege, David Hilbert, and Kurt Gödel, and finds a passionate student in the great Ludwig Wittgenstein. But his most ambitious goal-to establish unshakable logical foundations of mathematics-continues to loom before him. Through love and hate, peace and war, Russell persists in the dogged mission that threatens to claim both his career and his personal happiness, finally driving him to the brink of insanity. This story is at the same time a historical novel and an accessible explication of some of the biggest ideas of mathematics and modern philosophy. With rich characterizations and expressive, atmospheric artwork, the book spins the pursuit of these ideas into a highly satisfying tale. Probing and ingeniously layered, the book throws light on Russell's inner struggles while setting them in the context of the timeless questions he spent his life trying to answer. At its heart, *Logicomix* is a story about the conflict between an ideal rationality and the unchanging, flawed fabric of reality.

## Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Bloomsbury USA; Original edition (October 5, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1596914521

ISBN-13: 978-1596914520

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.9 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.9 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (200 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #21,474 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #8 in [Books > Comics & Graphic Novels > Graphic Novels > Historical & Biographical Fiction](#) #17 in [Books > Science & Math > Mathematics > History](#) #19 in [Books > Comics & Graphic Novels > Graphic Novels > Educational & Nonfiction](#)

## Customer Reviews

I am a big fan of Doxiadi's book on Goldbach conjecture :*Uncle Petros and Goldbach's Conjecture: A Novel of Mathematical Obsession*. This book is very different, in manifold ways. The previous book was a novel wrapped around a mathematical idea. In the process of telling a story, Doxiadis explained the mathematical problem. It was pretty straight forward - not the problem, the approach.

But this book is a tutorial on logic, a historical review of the most dramatic development in logic, a chronological synopsis of how higher mathematics, philosophy and logic became intertwined and coupled. AND, the book did this in a comic book format. The approach is, of course very ambitious. The question then is: was it successful? This may seem cowardly, but it does echo the book's conclusion: it is really up to the reader. The book poses the question early on: pure logic will lead a rational person to a right conclusion to a difficult moral problem, in this case, whether Britain should enter into WWII against Hitler. The entire book then is predicated upon the literary mechanism to introduce a wide spanning discourse on the development of 20th century logic, the narrative is taken through all of its twists and turns by the narrator in the form of Bertrand Russell, with occasional self referencing vignettes of the writing and drawing teams of this book. Russell is a natural choice, and his life in the higher altitude work in philosophy and mathematics really fits in nicely with the history of the logical arguments. His work, *Principia Mathematica* - Volume One with Lord Whitehead was also seminal in much of the breakthroughs that followed. The narratives are carried on through conversations with some of the most colorful people in the European philosophical, and mathematical intelligentsia: Frege, Cantor, Wittgenstein, the Vienna, Hilbert, Poincare, and Godels. But, relying on the words of these heavy hitters to carry through the dense and complex ideas is a difficult proposition for the reader because the heavy hitters tend also to have heavy and dense writings, so the authors have thoughtfully provided brief respites featuring the comic book counterparts of the actual writers and animators working on the book, and a welcome respite it is, this mechanism saved the readers from some heavy duty mental headaches and gnashing of teeth. So, after all that work, we return to the original question: were the authors successful? I think they were, by and large, but once again, it is up to the reader to decide because the depths to which the message is delivered depends very much on the reader's depths of understanding of the problems described and the reader's familiarity with the literature. The tutorial on the philosophical works, particularly the *Principia* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Routledge Classics) was very good, the authors did manage to explain some very important and dense material very cleanly and concisely. As for resolving the central problem, actually the argument used to present all this philosophy was not so successful, but that is the nature of a philosophical discourse: most of them end without a black and white conclusion. The book is very ambitious, it attacked a very large and complex piece of human thought by using a very untraditional means - the format nostalgically brought back to the days when I was religiously reading Classic Illustrated comic books when I was in my youth- it did a magnificent job of relaying the author's intent.

While it's a pleasant and quick read, this book's execution hardly lives up to the promise of its brilliant and appealing concept (nor to its "epic" subtitle). Rather than a tightly structured comic-book intellectual biography of Bertrand Russell, this is a scattered mess of a book with too many (albeit quite promising) ideas and much too little successful execution. The book is simply trying to be too many things at once: First, and most successfully, it wants to be an introduction to the "foundations" of mathematics, the early-20th-century efforts by philosophers and mathematicians to provide a firm axiomatic ground on which to establish a base for the higher-flown efforts of mathematics, which resulted in the development of mathematical logic and thus eventually led to the digital computer. The book gives even a lay reader enough little nuggets of this field to pique their interest, though often it doesn't explain in much depth. And the exposition does sometimes come off a bit condescending, as if the authors didn't trust us to follow them into a truly complex field like set theory. And, furthermore and far worse, the book often doesn't even try to take advantage of its format by developing the ideas in image form -- instead it gives page after solid page of hastily-drawn panels of Russell (or the authors themselves!) lecturing the reader in massive word balloons, wasting all the opportunities afforded by its comic-book form. Still, had the book remained on the level of a "Russell for Beginners"-type introductory comic, it would have been a fair piece of work. Second, the book is an intellectual biography of Bertrand Russell, the story of his life and of the development of his ideas. The problem here is that the authors are not very good at either part of the biographer's project, as they are neither experienced storytellers nor historians. They have consciously fudged many historical details, but have also (apparently unconsciously) introduced many small but glaring anachronisms of tone, language, and thought, making it difficult to suspend disbelief and to find their evocation of Russell's historical moment credible. And their psychological portrait of Russell, as well as of the supporting characters, tends toward condescending simplicity rather than interesting complexity or ambiguity, vastly oversimplifying even when they momentarily allude to the complications of Russell's several marriages, his pacifist politics, or his troubled relationships with family and with colleagues. And, as soon as each of these issues is raised, the book quickly marches on, usually with a dismissive remark about its irrelevance to Russell's ideas. A bit more credit should have been given both to the reader's intelligence and to the complexity of the biographical material; as it is, this scattered story could not even be recommended as a children's biography of a man as complicated as Russell. Third, the book is a nonfiction "graphic novel," a *nouveau* comic book for smart people. But it is on this level that it fails the most completely, failing to integrate word and image or to use its comic form to any advantage. Despite

the competent simplicity of Alecos Papadatos's art, the book shows its origins as a committee product with page after page of drawn talking heads below mammoth word balloons. The images often distract from the material being covered more than they illustrate it. And the authors' frequent self-insertions -- we often cut away from Russell's life to inserted scenes of their discussions about writing the book and about Russell -- are ham-fisted and annoying despite the authors' apparent conviction that this is clever and self-reflexive. When Art Spiegelman wrote himself and his own writing process into *Maus*, the formal innovation answered a necessity in the content -- the need to represent the remembering of his father's story rather than assuming a deceptive immediacy and a false transparency in its telling. Here, instead, the narratorial interventions distract from the book's content rather than meditating on it, and the interpretive disagreements among the committee of authors simply emphasize the book's scrambled, unfinished nature. Instead of a worked-out, formally coherent narrative about Russell, we get a series of snatches of his life, punctuated by inconclusive discussions of where to go next; it's like reading a first draft punctuated by notes from its editor. (Speaking of editing, the book's words badly need help from a stronger English writer; they are rife with Unnecessary Capitalization, "scare quotes," ellipses... and other signs of amateur writing. And Russell himself often speaks in glaring Americanisms, puncturing any suspension of disbelief.) The less said of the philosophical side of the book, the better; its "expert" author-character is a theoretical computer scientist rather than a philosopher, and this shows through everywhere in its account of the importance of Russell and his colleagues, particularly in its ridiculously trivializing treatment of Wittgenstein. (E.g. the book's endnote on Wittgenstein claims that his *Tractatus* was somehow "vindicated" by the emergence of the digital computer, a truly bizarre and philosophically illiterate remark.) There are biographical and conceptual notes in the back of the book, a mini-encyclopedia that would be more appropriate in a For Beginners/Dummies-style textbook than this ostensibly story-driven piece, and while they're often interesting they seem unedited, un-peer-reviewed, and sometimes goofy and idiosyncratic in their account of the material. This makes it hard to recommend this book as an introduction to the basics of logic or the foundations of mathematics. In short, the book tries to be too many things at once, and succeeds as none of them. It is neither a strong introduction to Russell's ideas, nor a worthwhile biography in condensed form, nor a successful piece of historical comic art. It's a pleasant enough read, but considering its ambition ultimately a disappointing one.

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