



ing ambassador nensional space

*promoting public understanding of science loves symmetry — he
is pleased the chancellor wants every child to study maths to 18*

enthusiast who has spoken at more of the Serpentine Gallery's annual "marathon" events than anybody except Gilbert and George. Most recently he has co-written and starred in a play about contrasting world views (he ends up being stuffed in a bag). He is also a natty dresser who likes to contrast spots with stripes. What unites all of these is that he "finds beauty in patterns", he explains. Among his many academic achievements he once discovered a new symmetrical object that exists in a nine-dimensional space. I briefly consider asking him about

this and then quickly decide that it may be best not to. Despite the 15 television shows and the four popular books he has produced, he thinks he is an "introvert" who was drawn to the "meditative" quality of maths. It was never the numbers that he liked but the "creativity" and the "imaginative leaps into the unknown". He first discovered these aged 12 when a teacher at his comprehensive school took him out of class and gave him A Mathematician's Apology by GH Hardy, a book that "completely changed" his life. Encouraged by his parents — his

father worked in the computer industry and his mother had left a job at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to raise their children — he won a scholarship to Wadham College, Oxford, left with a first and set his heart on a career in academia. He met his wife, Shani, in Jerusalem while studying for a post-doctorate. Their otherwise happy world was thrown into disarray when the couple's second son, Jonathan, whom Shani had carried to term, was stillborn. Shani spent two weeks unconscious in intensive care. The experience was "very dark and very frightening", he says now.

It wasn't religion that provided solace, but for a while he retreated into the "private" and "solitary" world of mathematics. Eventually the couple "were able to turn the situation into something amazing", he says, by making the decision to adopt twin girls from Guatemala — Ina and Magaly are now 12.

He was particularly thrilled that they were twins. "I study symmetry and here I had genetically identical twins. It almost had to be," he laughs. It has also helped the adoption because "they were able to bring the other part of their family with them".

Du Sautoy thinks his great skill is an "almost autistic ability" to focus on one thing. It drives his wife "mad" but allows him to get on with work as children scream and clothes pile up around him.

He is currently writing a paper on "zeta functions of quasi-split algebraic groups", he says with some pride. Suddenly I realise how annoying it must be to be good at something that so few people can actually understand.

That, he says, laughing (again) is what persuaded him to take on the ambassadorial post: the "slight frustration" that came from knowing that "only 10 people in the world are fully appreciating the nuances" of his work.

He wants people to be able to "get it", at least in a general sense, just as "a composer doesn't expect you to understand how the piece is composed, but at least I'd like people to have a feeling of the music".

His predecessor as Simonyi professor was Richard Dawkins and it is for this reason that although he is a firm atheist, he has avoided the subject of religion until now.

The book he is currently writing is "an attempt at a slightly more nuanced approach of looking at what religion is trying to do".

He wants to explore the idea proposed by the late theologian Herbert McCabe that the concept of God "was always meant to be that there were certain questions that we can't answer and mathematics is one of the most powerful tools to test whether that is the case".

The photographer arrives and du Sautoy suggests they head for the Zaha Hadid-designed Sackler Gallery. "She trained as a mathematician before she became an architect," he says, thrilled with the logic of it all.

"Maths is creative, there are multiple possible directions you can go, there's no reason why everyone shouldn't fall in love with it. Even you."

And, looking into his twinkling eyes, I would dearly love to believe him.

@rosiekinchen