

Brief Autobiographical Statement by Douglas Hofstadter



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I was born in Manhattan in 1945, and spent the years 1947–1950 with my parents in Princeton, New Jersey. In 1950, our family moved to Stanford, California, where I grew up. We spent one year (1958–1959) in Geneva, Switzerland, which revolutionized my life, giving me a mastery of French and a love for other cultures and languages. I attended Stanford University in 1961–1965, receiving my B.S. with Distinction in mathematics. I obtained my Ph.D. in theoretical solid-state physics from the University of Oregon in 1975. I have held faculty positions at Indiana University, Bloomington (1977–1984 and 1988–present) and at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor (1984–1988). Today at Indiana University, I enjoy the honor of being called “College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Comparative Literature”.

As a math undergraduate at Stanford in the early 1960s, I explored many kinds of integer sequences, including a family that recently was dubbed “meta-Fibonacci recursions”, and which has been carefully studied by a handful of number-theorists around the world. A few years later in math graduate school at Berkeley, I was shocked to discover that I had hit my abstraction ceiling in math, and as a consequence, I wound up taking a pretty risky leap into particle physics at the University of Oregon in Eugene. After some five years of intense struggle in that area of physics, I bailed out in despair, this time riskily leaping to solid-state physics. Thanks to several great strokes of good luck, I eventually had the enormous pleasure of discovering the first fractal ever found in physics (now usually known as the “Hofstadter butterfly”, though I always have called it “Gplot”). Also while a graduate student, I devoted two to three hours every day to playing the piano, and I passionately composed several dozen short pieces for that instrument, mixing romanticism with counterpoint and humor. Though small, these pieces are among the creations of which I am most proud.

As a cognitive-science professor for the past three-plus decades, I have tried very hard, with my graduate students, to get computers to approximate the astonishing, gurgling stream of effortless, fluid analogy-making that constitutes human thought (as is explained in my books *Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies*, co-authored with the Fluid Analogies Research Group, and *Surfaces and Essences*, co-authored with psychologist Emmanuel Sander). Though I see mind and thinking and consciousness as consequences of physical law, I am also a great believer in their profound subtlety, and therefore I am extremely relieved that, despite all our best efforts, my research group’s models have always fallen far short of reaching anything like the human level.

Most of my scientific ideas have been published in books rather than articles, because I really love writing, crystal-clarity being my religion. Aside from having penned a monthly column (“Metamagical Themas”) for *Scientific American* in the years 1981–83, I have explored the elusive concept of “I” in my books *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (Pulitzer Prize, 1980), *The Mind’s I* (co-authored with philosopher Daniel Dennett) and *I Am a Strange Loop*. I have also plunged myself into literary translation (most notably an anglicization of Alexander Pushkin’s magical novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin*), and I have written two books on the art of translation (*Le Ton beau de Marot: In Praise of the Music of Language* and *Translator, Trader*).

I have a lifetime love for languages (their sounds, their symbols, their grammars, and their idioms, as well as their poems and songs), and an endless fascination with speech errors, puns, and the nature of humor. With a little wink but quite truthfully, I call myself “pilingual”, my two strongest foreign languages being French and Italian, and with several other languages having small to tiny fractional values. I have patiently struggled for decades to make my way up the towering mountain of Mandarin Chinese, my proudest moment being the time, a few decades ago, when I won a Chinese tongue-twister competition for non-native speakers.

My teen-age intoxication with the marvelously curvilinear alphabets of India led me to improvise hundreds of script-inspired line drawings that my sister Laura humorously called “Whirly Art”, and I later explored the mysteries of calligraphy and alphabetic style through an art form that I called “ambigrams” (first explored by my childhood friend Peter Jones, then by Scott Kim, John Langdon, and myself, and now practiced by hundreds of people around the world), as well as “gridfonts” and “jazz scribbles”. In the past 30 years, I have had exhibitions of my artworks in Geneva, Genova, Milano, Calgary, Bloomington, New York, and one or two other cities.

I have two wonderful children — Danny and Monica — with my late wife Carol, who died very young in Italy in 1993. In 2012, I had the joy of marrying Baofen Lin, who grew up in China (Hangzhou and Xi’an), and whom I met in a chacha class. Among my current passions is salsa (the dance, though I am also quite fond of the sauce).

