Book Review

Bourbaki: A Secret Society of Mathematicians by Maurice Mashaal (translated into English by Anna Pierrehumbert)

This book is just wonderful. As the title suggests it is about the Bourbaki, who were a group of young mathematicians in France who got together in 1935 and decided to write the definitive textbook on analysis. Membership of this group changed over time, but the group ended up writing an incredibly influential mathematical treatise in the form of 10 books over a period of about 60 years. The group published under the name Nicolas Bourbaki and took somewhat childish delight in pretending "he" existed as a real person.

The book is peppered with wonderful stories of the mathematicians who were part of the group, their relationships and the secrecy in which they shrouded their work – so it reads in part like a rather absorbing soap-opera cum mystery novel. On another level there is no doubt that the Bourbaki had an enormous, and very serious, influence on mathematics and on mathematics education. The parts of the book that address this directly give one a good insight into what the Bourbaki programme was and how it came to be played out both in mathematics and mathematics education. Understanding this part of history (and the continuing influence of the Bourbaki ideas) is important for mathematicians and mathematics educators alike. In addition to the soap-opera/mystery and history there is also a nice overview of some of the key areas of modern mathematics that the Bourbaki turned their attention to.

The book is well-illustrated with photographs so you get a real sense of the people behind the mathematics. It is also presented in such a way that one can read sections at a time or simply skip over some of the mathematics if you're just in the mood for a good story!