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In 2006, an eccentric Russian mathematician named Grigori Perelman solved one of the world's greatest intellectual puzzles. The Poincare conjecture is an extremely complex topological problem that had eluded the best minds for over a century. In 1998, the Clay Institute in Boston named it one of seven great unsolved mathematical problems, and promised a million dollars to anyone who could find a solution. Perelman will likely be awarded the prize this fall, and he will likely decline it. Fascinated by his story, journalist Masha Gessen was determined to find out why.

Drawing on interviews with Perelman's teachers, classmates, coaches, teammates, and colleagues in Russia and the US_and informed by her own background as a math whiz raised in Russia_she set out to uncover the nature of Perelman's genius. What she found was a mind of unrivalled computational power, one that enabled Perelman to pursue mathematical concepts to their logical (sometimes distant) end. But she also discovered that this very strength has turned out to be his undoing: such a mind is unable to cope with the messy reality of human affairs. When the jealousies, rivalries, and passions of life intruded on his Platonic ideal, Perelman began to withdraw_first from the world of mathematics and then, increasingly, from the world in general. In telling his story, Masha Gessen has constructed a gripping and tragic tale that sheds rare light on the unique burden of genius.