

The little essay I could not write

A month ago, I read inside the back cover of the Communications of the ACM, Vol. 26, nr. 12 (Dec. 83) an amazing advertisement of Reston Publishing Company, Inc.. A book titled "The Programmer's Craft" is recommended as follows:

"A practical book that explores the theory and techniques that lie behind programming. Informal and easy-to-read, the mathematical rigor is kept to a minimum in favor of covering as many concepts as possible."

As you may believe, I was shocked by the profound misunderstandings reflected in that last sentence, so shocked, in fact, that I tried to devote a little essay to its analysis. In that essay I described how ease of reading is served by clarity and precision and how "mathematical rigor" has been designed to provide just that. And I wanted to explain how your programs become better, the fewer programming concepts you use. And finally I should point out how misled a society is when it considers "mathematical rigor" - its most helpful friend - the pinnacle of user-unfriendliness.

But my efforts failed, and after several trials I gave up. I could do nothing but belabour the obvious! So the only thing I can do is to draw your attention to the quoted blurb and to ask

you to analyse it yourself: for the rest of your life, the would-be recommendation "easy-to-read" will instantaneously fill you with grave suspicion.

* * *

Now I have not written my essay, there is still room on this page to quote two theses recently stated by Michel Sintzoff. They provide a nice contrast.

"The software industry is the first intellectual industry in history."

"The software industry is to become a precision industry based on scientific methods (much more so than the watch- or airplane industries)."

To which I can only add "Amen".

Plataanstraat 5
5671 AL NUENEN
The Netherlands

13 January 1984
prof. dr. Edsger W. Dijkstra
Burroughs Research Fellow