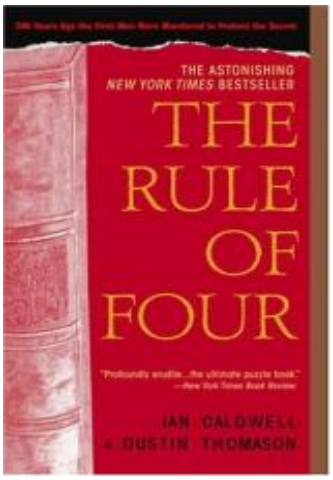
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The Rule of Four

by Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason



About the Book

An ivy league murder, a mysterious coded manuscript, and the secrets of a Renaissance prince collide memorably in **The Rule of Four** -- a brilliant work of fiction that weaves together suspense and scholarship, high art and unimaginable treachery.

It's Easter at Princeton. Seniors are scrambling to finish their theses. And two students, Tom Sullivan and Paul Harris, are a hair's breadth from solving the mysteries of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili--a renowned text attributed to an Italian nobleman, a work that has baffled scholars since its publication in 1499. For Tom, their research has been a link to his family's past -- and an obstacle to the woman he loves. For Paul, it has become an obsession, the very reason for living. But as their deadline looms, research has stalled -- until a long-lost diary surfaces with a vital clue. And when a fellow researcher is murdered just hours later, Tom and Paul realize that they are not the first to glimpse the Hypnerotomachia 's secrets.

Suddenly the stakes are raised, and as the two friends sift through the codes and riddles at the heart of the text, they are beginnning to see the manuscript in a new light--not simply as a story of faith, eroticism and pedantry, but as a bizarre, coded mathematical maze. And as they come closer and closer to deciphering the final puzzle of a book that has shattered careers, friendships and families, they know that their own lives are in mortal danger. Because at least one person has been killed for knowing too much. And they know even more.

From the streets of fifteenth-century Rome to the rarified realm of the Ivy League, from a shocking 500 year-old murder scene to the drama of a young man's coming of age, **The Rule of Four** takes us on an entertaining, illuminating tour of history--as it builds to a pinnacle of nearly unbearable suspense.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the most unique aspects of this novel is its ability to take the reader directly into the lives of the student-heroes Tom and Paul (as well as Gil and Charlie), and then in a sentence place readers in the middle of Renaissance intrigue. Did you think tensions among the Princeton students and their mentors and rivals mirror those of the men centuries ago protecting the secrets? How were the conflicts similar, or different? Did you find that these character relationships drove the narrative as much as the decoding of the fascinating book, the **Hypnerotomachia Poliphili** (pronounced Hip-ner-AH-toe-mak-ee-a Poh-LI-fi-ly)?

2. The authors, Caldwell and Thomason, have been close friends since they were eight-years-old. Why is this important to the book?

3. What are Tom's and Paul's motivation for pursuing the secrets of the **Hypnerotomachia**? In what way is Tom fulfilling his own needs by alternately obsessing himself with and then ignoring the messages of the text? Did you find the father/son story moving, and in what way do the relationships we have with the people we love or admire drive our ambitions or destroy our dreams? How is Paul different from Tom?

4. In what ways are the worlds of Paul, Tom, Tom's father, his old colleagues and foes as cut-throat and deadly as that of the anonymous writer of the **Hypnerotomachia**? How does the conflict of ideas become deadly? Why is the Robert Browning poem entitled "Andrea Del Sarto" that is slightly misquoted by one character, and later referenced by Paul in a critical scene, a statement about motive?

5. After the first death on campus, did you suspect who the murderer was? Were you correct?

6. What part of the code-breaking did you find most interesting? Did you "beat" Paul or Tom to a conclusion as they unraveled some of the mystery? Did you agree with the characters' conclusions? Could you understand the mesmerizing effect that a book or work of art could have on a person? Have you ever felt this pull? In what way is it exhilarating?

7. Tom's and Katie's relationship suffers as the mysteries come to a head. Did this seem natural to you? Did you find the resolution of their relationship realistic?

8. At a critical moment in the novel, Paul says "I don't want to do this alone." What does this say about the nature of his specific quest, and intellectual puzzles in general? Why is the sharing of the result so important to him?

9. The action of the novel begins on Good Friday; three days later, on Easter, it ends (saving the postscript). Is this important? What might the authors be saying using this specific timeframe?

10. At the heart of the **Hypnerotomachia** may be a crusade to save works of art and literature from the ancient, mostly pagan world --- a world considered infidel by some of the zealous contemporaries of the anonymous author. Why would the cause have been important? What was at stake? And if such a covert rescue operation had occurred, is it possible that it could have been kept secret for 500 years? How so? If you could uncover something in an undisturbed crypt, hidden away for centuries and untouched, what would you most want to discover?

11. In early praise for **The Rule of Four** admirers have compared the authors' work to that of F.Scott Fitzgerald (**The Great Gatsby**, etc.), Dan Brown (**The Da Vinci Code**, etc.) Umberto Eco (**The Name Of the Rose**, etc.) and Donna Tartt (**The Secret History**, etc.). Are these comparisons apt? How? What other works of suspense and literature did this

novel call to your mind? Could you see it as a film?

12. What is the rule of four?

Author Bio

Ian Caldwell is the coauthor of THE RULE OF FOUR, which spent 49 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, sold nearly two million copies in North America, and was translated into 35 languages. He lives in Virginia with his wife and children.

Critical Praise

"A marvelous book with a dark Renaissance secret in its coded heart ? Profoundly erudite ? the ultimate puzzle book."--- *The New York Times Book Review*"Think Dan Brown by way of Donna Tartt and Umberto Eco ... There are murders, romances, dangers and detection, and by the end the heroes are in a race not only to solve the puzzle, but also to stay alive. Readers might be tempted to buy their own copy of the Hypnerotomachia and have a go at the puzzle."--- *Publisher's Weekly*"As much a blazing good yarn as it is an exceptional piece of scholarship. A smart, swift, multi-textured tale that both entertains and informs."--- *San Francisco Chronicle*"An astonishingly good debut ... Academic evil stalks the campus and no one is safe ? Intricate, erudite, and intensely pleasurable."--- *Kirkus*

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