“An innovative, charming, and mysterious study about puzzles. Bret Rothstein’s book provides readers with unusual and unexpected insights into the enigmatic world of people who make puzzles and those who aspire to solve them.”

—Branko Mitrović, author of Rage and Denials: Collectivist Philosophy, Politics, and Art Historiography, 1890-1947

What is it about puzzles that drives us to figure them out? In this unique and innovative book, Bret L. Rothstein explores how mechanical problems delight and frustrate us, distracting our attention from recognizably “useful” activities and directing it toward something that may be even more important.

All too often puzzles can seem like some kind of cruel test to be beaten or passed. But according to Rothstein, they really want nothing more than for us to drop what we are doing and play. In that way, they can actually enhance consciousness, as we are perhaps never more aware than when we grapple with an object that refuses to satisfy our expectations. The Shape of Difficulty is an ode to and exploration of these “unruly objects”—Rubik’s cubes, geometric dissections, secret-opening boxes, string disentanglements, and so many more—that bring interpretive failure out of the shadows and allow it to take center stage in physical ways. While many puzzles may offer perceptible expressions of mathematical concepts, logical propositions, and logistical problems, this book urges readers to dwell for a while with objects that, built specifically to be misunderstood, demand that we reconsider our approaches to understanding—and, in the bargain, how we conceive of the interpretive self.

Drawing on landmark theories of play, Rothstein’s richly illustrated meditation on our fascination with objects reveals the lasting allure of puzzles while underscoring the intellectual worth of doubt, failure, and idle time.

Bret L. Rothstein teaches at Indiana University, where his courses address the cultural work of images and objects. He has published extensively on early Netherlandish devotional culture, sixteenth-century humanist wit, and the sociocultural ramifications of ludic objects.