Fluke: The Maths and Myths of Coincidence

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Imagine this: you are browsing used books in a bookstore hundreds of miles from home when you come across a copy of Moby Dick, which you remember reading as a child. You open it and find your own name on the inside cover.

What are the chances? This is the question we ask ourselves upon encountering seemingly impossible coincidences, like the woman who won the lottery four times. But from clairvoyants to financial markets, and from unique scientific discoveries to DNA evidence, if there is any likelihood that something could happen, no matter how small, it is bound to happen to someone at some time.

Coupling lively anecdotes with the principles of probability, Joseph Mazur balances the fun of a great coincidence with the logical thinking of a mathematician. With a lightness of touch and a witty turn of phrase, Mazur sweeps aside pseudoscience and conspiracy theories, proving that there are rational explanations for even the most extraordinary events.

Fluke: The Maths and Myths of Coincidence Details

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From Reader Review Fluke: The Maths and Myths of Coincidence for online ebook

Jennifer says

This was a neither-here-nor-there book for me: a great deal of math, much of which I didn't understand, and moments that tried to be poetic but didn't really work for me. The subject is an interesting one--most people experience strange coincidences in life--and it was instructive to see how likely any particular fluke might be, when observed through the lens of mathematics. But I've read more useful discussions, particularly involving risk and the chances of something untoward happening.

Joseph says

An interesting concept: take events that would seem to be coincidental, or maybe even "one-in-a-million," and show the true mathematics of the probability. Some great true stories of unlikely happenings throughout history, which were fascinating, but I'd already done the math in graduate school.

Daniel Farabaugh says

Large swaths of this book were very good. At the end when it begins to wax poetic about the nature of coincidence in science, etc. it got a little slow. But the sections that explains the math behind the apparent coincidences was very good.

Brucie says

more math and less coincidence than I was looking for.

Brandon Anderson says

Meh. The whole point of the book is that coincidences and flukes aren't quite as mathematically unlikely as they seem. That part is true. The book itself is poorly written. I wished for more stories and less vague math talk.

The math was really a waste of time anyway. To someone that knows math well, it added very little. Yet to someone that doesn't know in depth math, I think they'd get totally lost by all the language and notation here. The math sections- which were like half of the book and the whole point really- just seemed like a waste of time.

Interesting topic but poorly conveyed. It's hard to imagine there's not a better version of this book out there. Ultimately disappointing.

Sarah Lloyd says

Not sure of the point of the last chapter to be honest... and chapter 10 contained some confusing, conflicting statistics from different sources. But I enjoyed it overall and feel like I learned something

Drew Van Gorder says

This book had tons of cool information in it which I am grateful for concerning the math and science behind coincidence. I used to believe more in the magic of the coincidental until this book came along to prove most coincidences are merely rare circumstances which, given long enough, will occur no matter how improbable the chances were in the first place. Well worth my time and effort!

Bastian Greshake Tzovaras says

tl;dr: Have a large enough sample and even rare things will happen, as such your freak coincidences aren't as unlikely as you think.

That could have been all the book, but instead the reader gets some anecdotes of coincidences, along with combinatorics 101. Unfortunately the book ends up neither here nor there: If you've been to high school and have ever heard of Bernoulli, then the combinatorics-part will bore you (and if you haven't been it might be too formalistic to understand). If you came for the anecdotes you'll find that there are too little of those.

recommended: for people who like to philosophize about coincidences without ever having picked up a book on chance.

Bob says

The book has some interesting stories about what is a fluke or what is a coincidence, but it can't decide if it's a math book, a philosophy book, or a literature book. In theory, it's a mathematical look at flukes, but most of the pages are dedicated to telling us what we think are flukes aren't.

I preferred the The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every DayImprobability Principle much more to this one because it set out what kind of book it would be right away and stuck to it.

Hank Mishkoff says

About two-thirds of the way through the book, Mazur seems to run out of things to say about flukes and

coincidences. I get the feeling that he rounded up a few previously written essays about marginally related topics, made a half-hearted effort to tie them to his subject, and tacked them on to the end of the book. It didn't ruin the book for me, but I kept waiting to see how he was going to tie everything together -- and when he didn't bother to do that, I was both puzzled and disappointed.

Mary says

Math professor tries to use probability to illustrate how some unlikely coincidences are not as unlikely as you may think (e.g., there is a 50% chance that 2 people out any random group of 23 people will share the same birthday). While some of the examples are interesting, I think he stretches it a bit thin when he tries to give probabilities to such situations as finding a book one was looking to buy on a subway bench, or having a golden beetle at the window while someone is describing a dream about golden beetles (e.g., assume that there were x copies of the book published that year, y book stores within 2 miles of the subway stop in question, etc. or that the golden beetles come out in June, there are 30 days in June (with x hours of day light (assuming the story was told during the day in June....), then calculate what percentage of that time is 1 hour, etc.)). For those interested, the odds are 1:74,427 and 1:714, 285, respectively, for the above examples.

Laura says

Final review: Yeah, definitely not super impressed. The book really doesn't seem to have a thesis. The math section was kind of a fun thought-experiment but didn't really "prove" anything, in my opinion. I did enjoy the totally random passionate treatise on the Innocence Project and problematic incarceration rates in the US though. And there are definitely some fun tales told in the book.
It kind of feels like the syllabus for some kind of second-year elective that would be really fun to take but at the end of the term when you're reviewing for the exam you realize you're just left with an assortment of facts and stories; you didn't really learn anything substantial.

Interim review: I'm currently halfway through this book, and here's what I think so far. It's definitely an interesting topic, and it's reasonably well-written (even the math parts are easy to follow), but I have some problems.
1) In the first section he defines flukes and coincidences as different things (a distinction I agree with in this context), and then proceeds to use examples of flukes as illustrations of coincidences, so what was the point?
2) He seems to imply that until Cardano's Liber de ludo aleae was published in the 17th C, no one had ever even thought about the math behind chance, probability, and gambling. Just because no one else had published a paper on it doesn't mean some clever tavern-keeper hadn't spent hours idly doing sums while watching people play dice, I think.
3) He obviously talks a lot about odds, probabilities, etc. He also explains the weak law of large numbers, whereby in a large enough sample every possibility, no matter how improbably, is "bound to occur." And then he also points out that every thing that happens is governed by physical laws and can actually be predicted if we have fine enough tools. And he doesn't seem yet to see that these things seem to contradict each other.
Basically, at this point I don't know what he's trying to prove, and I feel like at the halfway point I should have a sense of where it's all going. I don't know if he's trying to prove that there's no such thing as coincidence, or that everything is just random chance, or what. I'll get back to you when I finish the book.

Melissa says

One of my favorite authors once wrote that there are no such things as coincidences. I realized after years of reading stories of coincidences he was actually right. This book though goes beyond that statement by showing the mathematics of probability for a few of the more well known coincidences. I really enjoyed this book but it was a bit too much math for me to read without breaks.

Kevinjwoods says

The main problem is the way that he changes the stories in order to make the math work, for example in the Anthony Hopkins tale the actual coincidence is that a person who knew the author found a specific book that he was looking for and it was specifically owned by a the author, instead he does the math for ANY book being left in any park for someone to find, these include factors that are irrelevant to the story for example any book would include bestsellers that would have a greater chance of being left, for example more James Pattersons would be abandoned than Isaac Asimovs, add in the fact it was published 3 years before and the odds of that particular book being abandoned go up, so in all respects the chance of this book being found are different from the odds of any book being found by someone looking for it.
There are similar problems with each of his examples, he explains in great detail the various coincidences but has too often expanded the tales to the point where they are reliant on items that have no bearing or has done very little research (how often are 4 time lottery winners reported for example).
On the whole a good idea badly executed.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Uses coincidence as the hook to looking at probability and statistics. Could have had more meat on the bone.