



Book Reviews

Random facts

|David Jager

THE DRUNKARD'S WALK: HOW RANDOMNESS RULES OUR LIVES by Leonard Mlodinow (Pantheon), 272, \$27.95 cloth.

Rating: NNN

This newest entry in a crowded field of books dealing with statistics and probability (Struck By Lightning, The Black Swan) does an admirable job of covering the basics.

It helps that as a science writer, Leonard Mlodinow has a PhD in physics and did a stint writing for Star Trek: The Next Generation.

He follows the roots of mathematics in Greek and Persian philosophy to the Enlightenment work of Jakob Bernoulli, Blaise Pascal and Carl Friedrich Gauss, inventor of what's now known as the bell curve. These sections, though, are a little dry.

Mlodinow really shines when he takes the theorems and ideas these thinkers described and recasts them in modern-day terms. He uses the work of Renaissance thinker Gerolamo Cardano, the first to apply mathematical rigour to games of chance, to explain the "Monty Hall problem," a probability brainteaser based on the popular 60s game show Let's Make A Deal.

The next time you drink a hot cup of coffee, look at the tiny whorls of particles on the surface of the hot liquid. Mlodinow describes their distribution as analogous to the way a drunk weaves his way home from the bar.

As humans, we're hard-wired to find patterns in data, even if our data set is small. We create pictures out of the random scattering of stars to help us navigate, and search for trends in data on everything from baseball statistics to rises in violent crime.

Mlodinow argues that it's difficult for us to recognize truly random phenomena when we see them, which can lead to misinterpretations of data in science, the justice system and social policy. Recently, Apple had to reprogram the random function on the iPod because people were unnerved when it played the same song twice. According to Steve Jobs, "We had to make it less random to make it feel more random."

