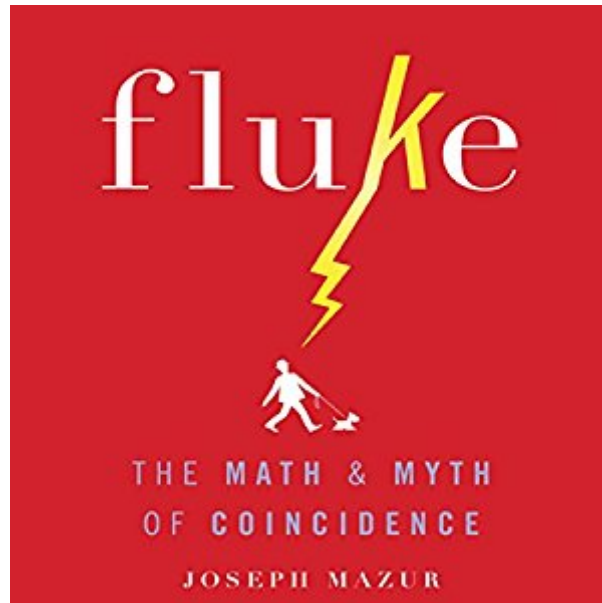# Fluke: The Math And Myth Of Coincidence

Synopsis

What are the chances? This is the question we ask ourselves when we encounter the strangest and most seemingly impossible coincidences, like the woman who won the lottery four times or the fact that Lincoln's dreams foreshadowed his own assassination. But, when we look at coincidences mathematically, the odds are a lot better than any of us would have thought. In Fluke, mathematician Joseph Mazur takes a second look at the seemingly improbable, sharing with us an entertaining guide to the most surprising moments in our lives. He takes us on a tour of the mathematical concepts of probability, such as the law of large numbers and the birthday paradox, and combines these concepts with lively anecdotes of flukes from around the world. How do you explain finding your college copy of Moby Dick in a used bookstore on the Seine on your first visit to Paris? How can a jury be convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that DNA found at the scene of a heinous crime did not get there by some fluke? Should we be surprised if strangers named Maria and Francisco, seeking each other in a hotel lobby, accidentally meet the wrong Francisco and the wrong Maria, another pair of strangers also looking for each other? As Mazur reveals, if there is any likelihood that something could happen, no matter how small, it is bound to happen to someone at some time. In Fluke, Mazur offers us proof of the inevitability of the sublime and the unexpected. He has written a book that will appeal to anyone who has ever wondered how all of the tiny decisions that happen in our lives add up to improbable wholes. A must-listen for math enthusiasts and storytellers alike, Fluke helps us to understand the true nature of chance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The â œmath and myth" subtitle is intriguing, but the book is somewhat disappointing. One part

discusses the basic math of probability theory, and another part covers probability-related topics (DNA forensics, chance scientific discoveries, ESP experiments, stock markets), but all this has been discussed in many other "popular science" books. The "myth" part discusses Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and other fiction, but the author's point is unclear to me: we all know that fiction often relies on coincidences or other unlikely events.What part is interesting to me? Well the standard rationalist explanation of coincidences is simply that there are gazillions of possible coincides that might happen, so even if each has only a 1-in-a-gazillion probability, then some will happen "purely by chance". This is explained at length in the book The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every Day by an academic statistician. However, such books rely on very simple "small universe of possibilities" models, such as the birthday paradox, which are quite different from what we perceive as remarkable coincidences in everyday life. To me, the interesting and novel part (about 50 small pages) of this book is the following. In chapter 2 the author devises 10 classes of coincidences -- for instance "chance meetings" -- and gives a true historical story to fit each class -- for instance "In Miami a woman got into a taxi, and recognized the driver as her taxi driver from Chicago on one occasion 3 years earlier".

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