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The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives by
Leonard Mlodinow, Pantheon Books 2008

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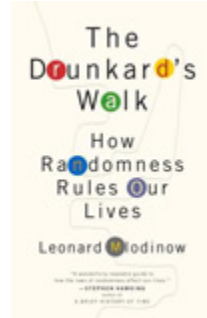
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The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives

by Leonard Mlodinow, Pantheon Books 2008.

Reviewed by Robert Dale

Against all odds, Leonard Mlodinow has written an enthralling book about probability and statistics. Informed that he had tested HIV-positive on a 99.9% accurate test, the author used probability theory (Bayes' theorem) to show that, given his demographic background, the odds were only 1-in-11 that he actually had HIV/AIDS. He provides numerous examples showing how chance holds dominion in medicine, law, business, sports and our personal lives.

For example, he describes the work of David Kahneman and Amos Tversky who spent 30 years, together, studying systematic biases in decision-making. Tversky died at the age of 59, only six years before their work earned Kahneman the Nobel Prize in Economics.

As Mlodinow concludes, "the cord that tethers ability to success is both loose and elastic." His central message is that success does not necessarily come to the smart, the strong or the brave: It favors perseverance. Mlodinow advises readers that, though we may see through a glass darkly, we must keep looking (he shows how) - and be prepared to react to whatever may come.

Mlodinow discusses important concepts, such as the Law of Large Numbers and the Normal distribution, but he also addresses contributors' personal circumstances. For example, a 16th century physician and gambler, Gerolamo Cardano, invented the concept of a "sample space" - the set of all possible outcomes of a random process - and published important work on negative numbers. He was a less successful father: the nicest of his three children was an Inquisition torturer.

- Robert Dale is a professor of Psychology at Butler University.