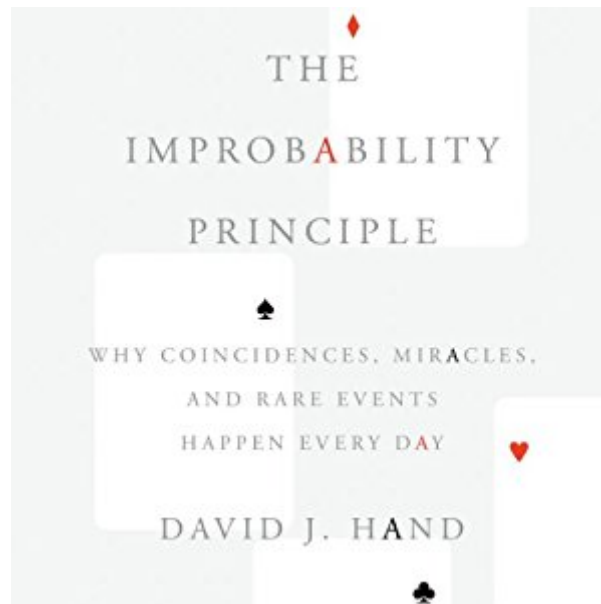


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# The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, And Rare Events Happen Every Day



## Synopsis

In *The Improbability Principle*, the renowned statistician David J. Hand argues that extraordinarily rare events are anything but. In fact, they're commonplace. Not only that, we should all expect to experience a miracle roughly once every month. But Hand is no believer in superstitions, prophecies, or the paranormal. His definition of "miracle" is thoroughly rational. No mystical or supernatural explanation is necessary to understand why someone is lucky enough to win the lottery twice, or is destined to be hit by lightning three times and still survive. All we need, Hand argues, is a firm grounding in a powerful set of laws: The laws of inevitability, of truly large numbers, of selection, of the probability lever, and of near enough. Together, these constitute Hand's groundbreaking Improbability Principle. And together, they explain why we should not be so surprised to bump into a friend in a foreign country, or to come across the same unfamiliar word four times in one day. Hand wrestles with seemingly less explicable questions as well: What the Bible and Shakespeare have in common, why financial crashes are par for the course, and why lightning does strike the same place (and the same person) twice. Along the way, he teaches us how to use the Improbability Principle in our own lives - including how to cash in at a casino and how to recognize when a medicine is truly effective. An irresistible adventure into the laws behind "chance" moments and a trusty guide for understanding the world and universe we live in, *The Improbability Principle* will transform how you think about serendipity and luck, whether it's in the world of business and finance or you're merely sitting in your backyard, tossing a ball into the air and wondering where it will land.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Years ago my wife was looking through the books at a Goodwill store, and for a gag gift for my birthday she bought me a volume of poems by Rod McKuen, whose work I do not like. Helen brought it home and was going to wrap it when she looked inside. There was a dedication in the book signed by the author himself: "To Rob - May you always sleep warm. --Rod McKuen."

Now I have a volume of McKuen's poetry I cannot throw away, but more to the point, how is it possible that completely by chance that she should pick up such a book bearing a dedication to someone of the same name? It just does not seem that such a thing could happen. It's the sort of story told many times in *The Improbability Principle: Why Coincidences, Miracles, and Rare Events Happen Every Day* (Scientific American / Farrar, Straus and Giroux) by mathematician David Hand. Hand knows that it is tough to write about mathematics for the layman, perhaps even more so for probability which he says is renowned for its counterintuitive nature, more than any other area of mathematics. Even the most eminent mathematicians have been tripped up by it. Yet there are few equations here, there are many astounding stories, and many of Hand's explanations are drawn from tossing a humble die. The book starts with its main contradiction, only a seeming contradiction and one of many explained away within these pages: How is it possible that extremely unlikely things happen, and not only happen, but happen over and over? Hand gives satisfying answers, but besides being a book about extraordinarily improbable events, this is also a book that explains probability in general. Take the law of inevitability: Something has to happen.

The Improbability Principle begins by recounting what David Hand calls the simply unbelievable coincidence of three unrelated events: (1) In November 1971, author George Peifer gives an annotated copy of his novel *The Girl from Petrovka* to a friend. (2) His friend loses the copy in Bayswater, London. (3) In the summer of 1972, actor Anthony Hopkins waiting for an underground train at Leicester Square tube station, sees a discarded book lying on the seat next to him. It is Peifer's annotated copy of *The Girl from Petrovka*. Hopkins had been unsuccessfully searching London bookstores for the book. As if that was not coincidence enough, more was to follow. When he had a chance to meet the author, Hopkins told him about his find. A quick check of the annotations in the copy Hopkins found showed that it was the very same copy that Peifer's friend had mislaid. Hand explains that these and similar coincidences are explained by the "improbability principle", which he elaborates upon in the book. He asserts that extremely

improbable events are commonplace; a consequence of a collection of more fundamental laws which all tie together to lead inevitably and inexorably to the occurrence of such extraordinarily unlikely events. According to these laws, and the improbability principle, the universe is in fact constructed so that these coincidences are unavoidable: the extraordinarily unlikely must happen; events of vanishingly small probability will occur. In *The Improbability Principle* Hand endeavors to resolve the apparent contradiction between the sheer unlikeliness of such events, and the fact that they nevertheless keep on happening.

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