



## Fat Chance

A physicist attempts to explain the role of randomness in our lives, and the results are mind-bending. **BY DANIEL OKRENT**

**L**ET ME BE DIRECT: If you're strong enough to have some of your favorite assumptions challenged, please read **The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives**, by Leonard Mlodinow, a history, explanation, and exaltation of probability theory. The book is not remotely as daunting as that sounds, nor remotely as remote. Much of it is so immediate that it will take those assumptions of yours and leave them bloody, whimpering, and covering under the covers.

I don't mean to suggest that Mlodinow is either cruel or unrelenting. A physicist and writer who has collaborated with Stephen Hawking, he is so intimately familiar with the laws of probability and chance—and with the work of the authors of those laws, among them Galileo, Pascal, Bernoulli, and Monty Hall—that your whimpering assumptions will end up grateful for the assault. Relieved too: When Monty opens a door and there isn't a new Beemer there, your odds of guessing right from the remaining two choices are

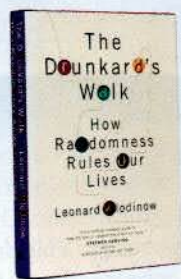
substantially better than fifty-fifty. Don't argue with me; read pages 43 to 45 and 54 to 56, then marvel at the wondrous workings of something called the law of the sample space. And if this makes you feel stupid, take comfort: Another law, regression toward the mean, suggests that your children will be smarter than you are.

Probability theory and the science of statistics, Mlodinow demonstrates, establish that the randomness controlling human (and animal and geologic and interplanetary) existence produces not disorder, but order. This orderliness explains why apparent exceptions are not what they appear to be. "Cancer clusters" gathered around certain neighborhoods or communities are almost inevitably bogus. Only hindsight could have made the intelligence gathered before Pearl Harbor (and probably 9/11 as well) appear predictive. Any wine critic who thinks there's a genuine difference between a bottle he rates 89 and one he rates 90 is either a liar or a fool. And there isn't a mutual fund manager on the planet who is provably more successful than the average

mutual fund manager. In fact, in the funds business, not only is past performance not indicative of future prospects, but sometimes it's not even indicative of past performance.

I confess that Mlodinow lost me at one or two points in his 218 pages. But do not be discouraged if I've left anything unclear

myself. Mlodinow, who thinks in equations but explains in anecdote, simile, and occasional bursts of neon, is a better writer than I am. I'd like to think that's an accident, but probability theory suggests it's not. ■



### WHAT I'M READING

WHOLE FOODS CEO  
JOHN MACKEY

**MISES: THE LAST KNIGHT OF LIBERALISM**, by **Jörg Guido Hülsmann** Ludwig von Mises, in my opinion, was one of the greatest economists of the 20th century.

**SHANTARAM**, by **Gregory David Roberts** The most incredible autobiographical novel I've read in 20 years! It tells of Roberts's life in Bombay in the '70s and '80s.

**IN DEFENSE OF FOOD**, by **Michael Pollan** A sequel to *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, focusing on what we should eat to maintain good health and a good environment.