Once Upon A Number: The Hidden Mathematical Logic Of Stories

By John Allen Paulos

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What two things could be more different than numbers and stories? Numbers are abstract, certain, and eternal, but to most of us somewhat dry and bloodless. Good stories are full of life: they engage our emotions and have subtlety and nuance, but they lack rigor and the truths they tell are elusive and subject to debate. As ways of understanding the world around us, numbers and stories seem almost completely incompatible.*Once Upon a Number* shows that stories and numbers aren't as different as you might imagine, and in fact they have surprising and fascinating connections. The concepts of logic and probability both grew out of intuitive ideas about how certain situations would play out. Now, logicians are inventing ways to deal with real world situations by mathematical means—by acknowledging, for instance, that items that are mathematically interchangeable may not be interchangeable in a story. And complexity theory looks at both number strings and narrative strings in remarkably similar terms.Throughout, renowned author John Paulos mixes numbers and narratives in his own delightful style. Along with lucid accounts of cutting-edge information theory we get hilarious anecdotes and jokes; instructions for running a truly impressive pyramid scam; a freewheeling conversation between Groucho Marx and Bertrand Russell (while they're stuck in an elevator together); explanations of why the statistical evidence against OJ Simpson was overwhelming beyond doubt and how the Unabomber's thinking shows signs of mathematical training; and dozens of other treats. This is another winner from America's favorite mathematician.

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- Sales Rank: #1102008 in Books
- Published on: 1999-10-08
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 1.00" h x 10.00" w x 5.00" l, .55 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 224 pages

Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review
Mathematician John Allen Paulos bravely bridges the scientific and literary cultures with this amusing, enlightening look at numbers and stories. If you think those two things go together like a "horse and a paperclip," as Allen wryly observes, you only have to look at phenomena like the Bible codes, the stock market's ups and downs, and the Clinton sex scandal to begin to understand the hidden bonds between them. Put simply, mathematics can describe everything that happens, and everything that happens contextualizes mathematics. In demonstrating this, Paulos continues the noble numeracy crusade he began with *A Mathematician Reads the Newspaper* and *Innumeracy*. Perhaps the most compelling thought experiments in the book are those of the statistics of stereotyping and race relations. Paulos shows, mathematically, that minority status makes achieving equality extraordinarily difficult.

If you want to keep hold of your comfortable worldview, don't read *Once Upon a Number*. But you'll be missing out on an unforgettable reminder of what chance, coincidence, and odds really mean, along with several valuable life lessons that may help you understand lost socks, racism, and mistaken identity. -- *Therese Littleton*

From Publishers Weekly
"This book is not concerned with the history of great theorems, but with bridging, or at least clarifying, some of the gaps between formal mathematics and its applications." This statement of purpose, more clearly than the book's title, best sums up Paulos's goals in his latest work. Paulos (Innumeracy) insists that statistics cannot be disconnected from the stories?or narrative contexts?that attach them to the complexities of the world. He demonstrates this idea through examples including recent controversies over birth order and the so-called Bible codes. Before we can agree on the meaning of statistics about birth order, he contends, we must agree on what the terms involved mean. Is an only child the same as a first-born? What about a baby born to a large family but then adopted by a childless couple? Paulos turns to the Bible codes to demonstrate that it is the stories we tell about seemingly improbable coincidences, rather than the mathematics involved, that make them compelling. Not only are most seeming coincidences of "stunning insignificance," he explains, but in the case of textual analysis, they are easy to generate. Paulos shows this by easily locating the names "Bill" and "Monica" in the U.S. Constitution. The author may occasionally frustrate readers with an indirect approach, and some sections read more like trenchant observations than argument, but his sense of humor is always quite winning. Paulos's insightful and amusing observations on how the truths discovered through mathematics should be applied to our everyday lives will appeal to an audience beyond math and science enthusiasts. Author tour.

From Scientific American
Popularizers of mathematics often rely on a standard collection of tried and trusted tales to illustrate particular topics painlessly, and anyone who regularly reads books on the subject will have had the experience of encountering the same old stories again and again. These stories are often so delightful that we do not mind being reminded of them, but one of Paulos's great strengths is his ability to invent new stories or at least add new twists to old ones.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Bonnie Abramowitz:

The book Once Upon A Number: The Hidden Mathematical Logic Of Stories can give more knowledge and also the precise product information about everything you want. Why must we leave the good thing like a book Once Upon A Number: The Hidden Mathematical Logic Of Stories? A few of you have a different opinion about e-book. But one aim that will book can give many facts for us. It is absolutely proper. Right now, try to closer using your book. Knowledge or facts that you take for that, you could give for each other; you can share all of these. Book Once Upon A Number: The Hidden Mathematical Logic Of Stories has simple shape but the truth is know: it has great and massive function for you. You can appear the enormous world by open and read a book. So it is very wonderful.

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Angela Rodriguez:

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