Conned Again, Watson! Cautionary Tales of Logic, Math, and Probability

Colin Bruce
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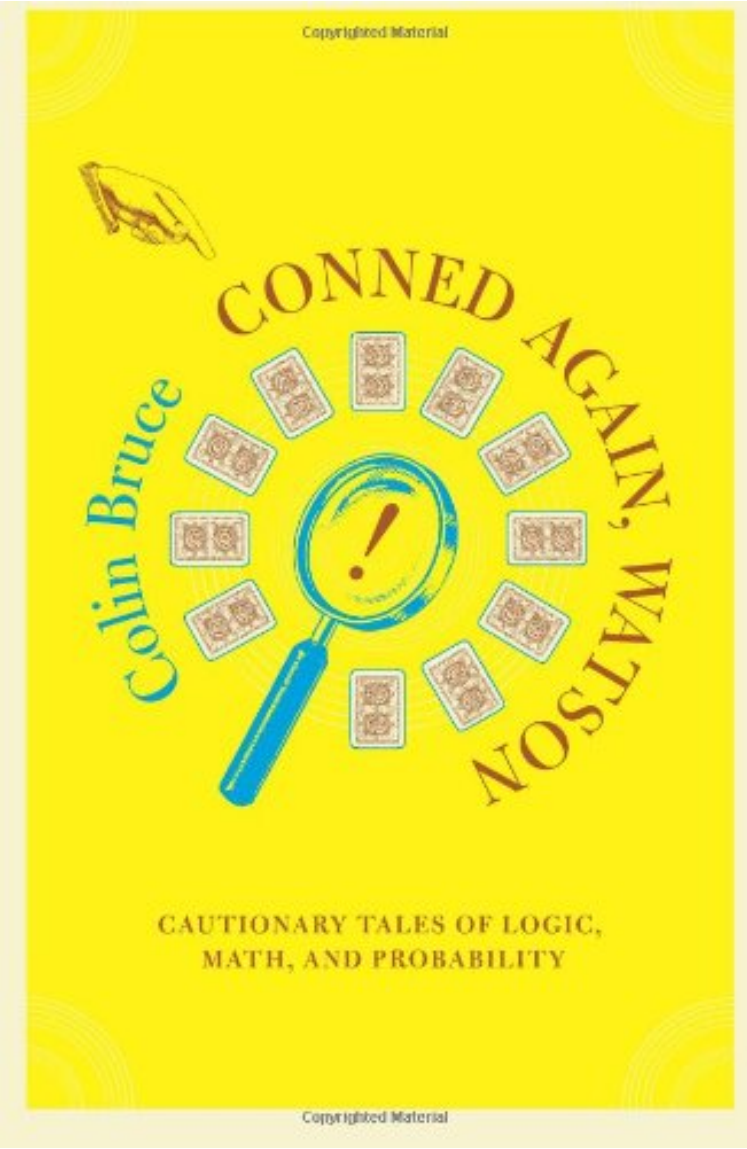

#942465 in Books Colin Bruce 2002-01-15 2001-12-06Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 8.00 x .75 x 5.38l, .73 #File Name: 0738205893304 pagesConned Again Watson Cautionary Tales of Logic Math and Probability | File size: 52.Mb

Colin Bruce : Conned Again, Watson! Cautionary Tales of Logic, Math, and Probability before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Conned Again, Watson! Cautionary Tales of Logic, Math, and Probability:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. I like this bookBy Greg WiszkowitzI like this book. I find the writing both entertaining and informative. A few years ago, when it seemed that the book was going out of print, I managed to create a small stash of these so that I can give them as gifts to people who I believe would enjoy reading it.This being said, I read all the negative reviews, and I must say with all honesty that the criticisms leveled at the book are legitimate. If you are expecting a book of Sherlock Holmes detective stories of the original Conan Doyle's kind, you will be disappointed. In fact, this is not at all a book of detective stories and mysteries. Also, if you are an expert in mathematics, you will find most of the discussion rather shallow and unnecessarily protracted.However, if you understand well what this book isn't, there is no reason why you shouldn't enjoy the book for what it is.In this book Colin Bruce offers a nice mix of tidbits from mathematics, probability, and game theory, all presented in a belletrized form. The Sherlockian atmosphere is meant just as an entertaining backdrop. The first chapter is, I think, well written, but does not offer much substance. There are a lot more interesting bits and pieces spread throughout the rest of the book.The book is not perfect, and there are some things that I found irritating. Chapters 5 and 6 seem to be unnecessarily drawn out, with an excessively long and insipid background story. In Chapter 3, Watson says: "1 January 1900. We had entered the twentieth century!" He makes a similar remark earlier in Chapter 2. Yet, in both cases, Holmes doesn't catch on to say that actually, the twentieth century does not start until January 1, 1901.The stories in the book are meant to be happening around the year 1900. In this setting, a bunch of "historical" figures make an appearance: Lewis Carrol, Karl Marx, Lenin... But in reality, in 1900 both Karl Marx and Lewis Carrol had been dead for some time. He also plays loose with the history of aviation and technology in general. So, while the author aims to clear some confusion about matters of logic, probability and statistics, he confuses the reader with historical inaccuracies. And, as it becomes clear in the afterword, deliberately so. Also, I find distasteful the way he describes Lewis Carrol.Overall, however, I find the book utterly enjoyable, and I hope that other people will like it too. Each chapter is a small self-contained story and there is no unifying plot line, so you can possibly read the book from any place, without losing anything of the story.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Clever and well executed, but who should read it?By David J. Aldous5 stars for a creative idea and a well executed book; 3 stars for likelihood of attracting readers who will enjoy and benefit from reading it. The author has written twelve 20-page stories featuring Sherlock Holmes, each intended to illustrate a common logical error. There is a nicely wide-ranging choice of such errors, many but not all from my own field of Probability (e.g. the gambler's fallacy, birthday paradox, Prisoner's Dilemma, Bayes calculations). The author largely succeeds in copying the tone of the Holmes stories (definitely a tribute, not a satire or pastiche) though unsurprisingly his prose is somewhat more "flat" than Conan Doyle's. And there is an extremely well written afterword giving further analysis of the logic.But who should read it? To me, we read fiction for pleasure in the moment (like playing a game) whereas in reading non-fiction we hope some of it will stick in our mind. So while this book is entertaining and informative "in the moment", it's not clear if these logical points will stick -- the contrived stories may be more of a distraction rather than an aid.Moreover the reason we make logical errors is not because we are arbitrarily stupid, but because we confuse a given setting with another, superficially similar, setting in which the argument would be correct. To my taste, a more interesting and informative general account of the psychology involved is given in the Predictably Irrational style of book. And as for the specific errors, to fully internalize a point you need to understand not only examples where the error is made but also superficially similar examples where the error is not made; this is hard to do via fiction.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. You might want to re-think that last bet you made!By Paul WeissTalk about niche marketing! "Conned Again, Watson" is a pretty difficult book to categorize. Perhaps the sub-title does a fair job of letting a potential reader know what it's all about - "cautionary tales of logic, math and probability".It's not a pastiche in the typical sense. What author Bruce does is simply use the characters of Watson and Holmes and some very light-hearted mysteries to probe typical ignorance and common misunderstandings about probabilities, statistics, game theory and so on. Bayesian conditional probabilities, the drunkard's walk, probability distributions, the cab driver fallacy, gambling fallacies and other topics of interest in decision theory are touched upon and explained in a fashion that even the most math-phobic reader could hardly fail to understand.That said, I expect this is the kind of book that would appeal only to that specific niche market I referred to earlier - past readers of the Sherlock Holmes canon who also had an interest in popular mathematics. That interest needn't be deep or at a university level but "Conned Again, Watson" is unlikely to succeed on the basis of an interest in Sherlock Holmes alone.Recommended.Paul Weiss

In Conned Again, Watson!, Colin Bruce re-creates the atmosphere of the original Sherlock Holmes stories to shed light on an enduring truth: Our reliance on common sense-and ignorance of mathematics-often gets us into trouble. In these cautionary tales of greedy gamblers, reckless businessmen, and ruthless con men, Sherlock Holmes uses his deep understanding of probability, statistics, decision theory, and game theory to solve crimes and protect the innocent. But it's not just the characters in these well-crafted stories that are deceived by statistics or fall prey to gambling fallacies. We all suffer from the results of poor decisions. In this illuminating collection, Bruce entertains while teaching us to avoid similar blunders. From "The Execution of Andrews" to "The Case of the Gambling Nobleman," there has never been a more exciting way to learn when to take a calculated risk-and how to spot a scam.

.com Some people who think they hate math are lucky to learn that they actually just can't abide its often dry, abstract presentation. Physicist Colin Bruce turns math teaching on its head by using conflict, drama, and familiar characters to bring probability and game theory to vivid life in Conned Again, Watson! Cautionary Tales of Logic, Math, and Probability. Using short stories crafted in the style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, he lets Sherlock Holmes guide Watson and his clients through elementary mathematical reasoning. This kind of thinking is growing more and more important as poll numbers, economic indicators, and scientific data find their way into the mainstream, and Bruce's gambit pays off handsomely for the reader. Delving into such arcana as normal distribution, Bayesian logic, and risk taking, the stories never dry up, even when presenting tables or graphs. Holmes's quick wit, Watson's patience, and their various friends' and clients' dubious decisions unite both to entertain and to illuminate tough but important problems. Even the cleverest numerophile will probably still find a nugget or two of hidden knowledge in the book, or at least a few new ways to explain statistical concepts to friends and students. The rest of us can relax, enjoy the tales, and come away a little bit tougher to con. --Rob LightnerAbout the AuthorColin Bruce is a physicist and science writer living in Oxford, England. He is an expert in mathematical paradoxes and a lover of mysteries.