

# The Drunkard's Walk

I've just started a book called The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives. It's quite interesting. Very early on, there's a discussion about whether yelling at people when they do badly or praising them when they do well works best. The people who do the yelling or praising are under the impression that yelling works better. After all, if someone does something they should know how to do but does it exceptionally badly and then gets yelled at for it, the next time they do it, they are almost always better at it. On the other hand, if someone does something they should know how to do but does it exceptionally well and then gets praised for it, the next time they do it, they are almost always worse at it.

Having worked with training dogs much of my life, I'm very clear that yelling when you are trying to train does not actually help, so it surprised me to see this, at least until I read on a bit. People vary around a mean, generally. On average, they get better with practice, but they will have good days and bad days as the skill level slowly increases. The average will increase very slowly, though, so very good days or very bad days are unusual.

Why does yelling seem to work and praise seem not to work? Because people will generally go back to their normal skill level, whether it's above or below the notable performance. If they have a really bad day, whether or not someone yells at them, the next day is likely to be better. If they have a really good day, the same applies – praise them or not, the next day will probably be worse.

One of the ideas in the book is that human brains aren't set up to handle random events. We try to see patterns even where there aren't any. We're back to "correlation does not indicate causation". We may see something that seems to indicate that

yelling at people improves their performance, but it doesn't. The person being yelled at is simply coming back to what is normal for them.

If someone has a daughter, what is the likelihood that the second child will be a daughter? I would have answered 50%, but it isn't. It's 33%. The possible arrangement of children if one is female is girl-girl, girl-boy, and boy-girl. Once you know that one child is female, it changes the odds.

We aren't good at randomness, and intuition doesn't help us when we are looking at random events. It can hurt us, even, by giving us information that, if we could lay out problems mathematically, doesn't make sense.

I'm enjoying the book. It's making me look at the world in a different way, which is always interesting, and in some ways it is calming. I worry about things I can't control, and this is helping me remember that I really don't have any way of predicting things. It's a little scary to think of the world as a random place, but I know it is; I just haven't wanted to face up to it.

The concepts aren't necessarily easy at times, since they are counterintuitive, but the book is written so it is easy and fun to read.

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## [My addiction](#)

I have an addiction to books. I've loved to read for as long as I can remember. Well, almost – I have a very early memory of leaning over the back of a couch, watching my older brother read and desperately wanting to know what was so fascinating about words with no pictures. I figured it out fairly quickly,

and I haven't stopped since.

I stopped reading for a little while in my first year of college. I kept getting headaches that got pretty awful. My sinuses and teeth were checked. Finally I went to an eye doctor and discovered that I needed glasses. During the time that I couldn't read, when the headaches were really bad, I felt like I was in withdrawal. I was irritable and easily upset, off balance, and unhappy with everything. As soon as the headaches stopped, I was back to reading again.

Books have been a lot of things to me. For a while, they were a means of escape. I loved libraries because no one cared who I was. Librarians were invariably kind to me, especially when they found out that my passion for reading matched theirs. When I went back to public school, the library was the place I felt safest. I wasn't out of place there.

For much of my life, though, books have been freedom. My imagination was set loose, not just in the amazement of this world, but throughout the cosmos and the full breadth of time. I loved learning odd little facts that most people didn't know. Did you know that the male platypus is venomous? Or that a crocodile can't stick out its tongue? I was introduced to science fiction, fantasy, and Shakespeare at about the same time, and they, in turn, shaped my world, sometimes subtly, sometimes not. Heinlein's The Puppet Masters gave me nightmares for years, to the point that, when I was younger, anyone with a hunchback made me worry. I loved Robin McKinley's The Blue Sword, which I found in a library the same year it came out, when I was seven, and it fed my love of horses and gave me a strong but believable female character to emulate, at least a little bit. I tried to write sonnets, learned that, while I enjoy poetry, it was not exactly my strong suit. I learned to enjoy punning from my family and then overdosed on it through Piers Anthony's Xanth series, when I read three of them in a day. Time travel made my head hurt. Still does, sometimes. I really love The Time Traveler's

Wife, though. I read the Modesty Blaise series, which had a heroine who was dangerous. She fascinated me. She made me want to be powerful, strong, scary. I never quite managed that, but, between Modesty Blaise and Harry Crewe, I never thought women should be meek little creatures, either, so I did get something useful out of them. Spider Robinson pushed empathy, even for the terrible and terrifying people in the world, and then his wife let me dream of beauty dancing among the stars. I've wanted to go to space, to float and be free, for much of my life.

I worry about kids who aren't raised with a love of reading. I feel like they are missing out on so much. Given a choice between watching, for instance, a Hannah Montana rerun that they've already seen and curling up with a book, even the kids I know who love to read will generally pick the rerun. They might read during the commercials, but they won't turn off the TV. The television tells stories, but they are dripped through an IV, not made to draw people in and make them imagine their own pieces, their own visions of the stories.

Reading is active. It makes me think, puts me inside other peoples' heads, forces me to see the world in different ways. I know some people don't like reading, but I wish I could give them a book that changes how they see the world, gives them even a glimpse of the amazing things I've seen in through simple words on a page.

This is my addiction, my welcome need, my bit of wonder whenever I want it. This is how I regroup at the end of a long day. This is how I remember joy, by reading Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Ursula LeGuin, and so many others. This is how I center myself, how I put the pieces back together when the world finds ways to shatter me.

My drug. My addiction. My books.

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## Children's books

I have worked with kids off and on for much of my life. I love books. The combination of these two things means that I have read a lot of children's books. Some I have memorized because I love them, like *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown and *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. A few others have been memorized because the kids love them, including *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* by Eric Carle. I really like some of Eric Carle's books, especially *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, but some of his books just don't stand up to quite as many readings as I've had to give.

I like having a copy of the books I love and an extra copy so I can share them. One of my favorites is *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch. It's a princess and a dragon story, but for once the princess doesn't have to be rescued by anyone else. She's strong, smart, and brave, and she recognizes stupidity when she sees it. She is an amazing role model. She stands on her own, does what she needs to do, and doesn't put up with anything she doesn't have to.

I grew up hating princesses. Not actual princesses, since I never met any, but Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and their ilk irritated me no end. They were useless. When I was very little I wanted to know why they hadn't just told Sleeping Beauty about the spindle problem so she could avoid it. It didn't make sense to me that someone didn't at least mention it. She never saw a spindle and no one ever warned her, so when it came time for her to prick her finger, she was clueless. That wasn't completely the princess' fault, but it seemed like a very bad idea to me. I never much liked happily ever after, either. Perhaps the princes were just as dim as the princesses, but I couldn't imagine finding things to talk

about with someone who couldn't think well enough to realize that the dwarves might actually have a reason to tell the princess not to take things from creepy old ladies. Especially once the princess had already done it once. "Oh, it's a different creepy old lady. It will be fine this time!" Really? "It's my birthday and a terrifying person wants to take me away from everyone I know to give me a present. I'll go!" I know four year olds with more sense than that. I have enjoyed some rewritings of fairy tales, especially Robin McKinley's, because the princesses are people I can understand. I like smart, strong women, not simpering people who can't or won't do anything to protect themselves.

I've been reading the Pinkerton books to some kids lately. I hadn't seen them before, but they are about a Great Dane named Pinkerton who gets into all kinds of interesting trouble. The kids love the books, especially when they get to read them to Nyx. They like telling her that Pinkerton is just like her except that she's better at not knocking people over. That definitely amuses me!

I like reading with kids partly because I like seeing them get involved in the stories and think about the characters, partly because they are learning, partly because it's a comfortable, good way to be close to someone, and partly because I love watching when they figure out that the things I'm pointing at and the words I'm saying are the same, and they can read them. One of the kids I'm around a lot right now is eight years old. She can just recently learned to read, and she's gotten excited about it. It's more fun for me when they are interested.

Anything by Graeme Base is on my list of books I love. Not only are the pictures amazing, the stories can hold the attention of almost any age. There are puzzles and things to look for in every book, but the basic stories are accessible for very young readers. I have spent hours poring over these books, working through the puzzles, and I have spent even more

hours with kids curled up next to me, fascinated, as we read each book.

The most recent children's book that made an impression, though, was *Ian's Walk: A Story about Autism* by Karen Ritz. The narrator is Ian's sister, Julie. She and her older sister take Ian, who has autism, for a walk to the park. Being a sibling of a person with a disability, I can identify with the discomfort that Julie feels at times, but I can identify even more strongly with the love that is clearly evident. The autistic behaviors are very well done and not overdone, which was good to see. The book doesn't preach or expect the reader to feel sorry for Ian. I really appreciated that. It explains autism in ways kids can understand. I think it would be an excellent book for helping children understand differences. It doesn't show all facets of autism, of course, but it is a very effective tool for teaching and it hits exactly the mixed feelings that can come from loving someone deeply and still being a little embarrassed by them. *Ian's Walk* shows one person's differences and reactions to them very well, honestly, and carefully. I usually felt anger at the world's responses rather than embarrassment about my little brother, who has Down Syndrome, but there were a few moments, like when he was terrified of a ceiling fan and ended up sitting under the table at a restaurant, that it was hard for me not to feel a little embarrassed, even as I glared at the people who had the temerity to stare. I love my brother dearly and I am fiercely proud of who he is. I will get a copy of this book for our ever-expanding library.

I'm sure I will come up with other books that I feel you should know about, but that's all for the moment.