

A Series of Fortunate Events: Chance and the Making of the Planet, Life, and You

Sean B. Carroll

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A Series of Fortunate Events is a lighthearted exploration of the roles that chance and coincidence play in human existence.

That there is life on Earth at all, let alone human life, is a happy accident, Sean B. Carroll writes. Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid destroyed three-quarters of life on the planet. In the subsequent era of climate variation, only the most resilient creatures, including semiaquatic animals, burrowing animals, and hominids, endured. Since then, genetic mutations (which, like typos, seem small) have led to useful adaptations. For example, woolly mammoths thrived in the Ice Age because their hemoglobin was better at releasing oxygen at low temperatures.

From these foundations, the text moves toward considering the causes of everything from cancer to casino wins. Carroll illustrates his concepts through apt, surprising situations that all come down to chance. For instance, in a case of “dumb luck,” television comedian Seth MacFarlane and actor Mark Wahlberg were scheduled to be on one of the airplanes that hit the Twin Towers on 9/11, but both happened to miss their flight out of Boston.

Acknowledging that humorists are as likely as scientists to mock notions of determinism, the book culminates in a brief imagined dialogue about chance between six comedians, two writers, and a Nobel Prize-winning biologist. Sarah Silverman tells how she survived a freak bout of epiglottitis, while Kurt Vonnegut recounts multiple lucky shaves during World War II. The voices, recreated from the figures’ writings and interviews, are convincing. The novelty of this playful finale makes up for familiar material on natural selection and DNA.

Golf games, coincidental immunity, and pandemics: *A Series of Fortunate Events* ranges from examining trivial events to sobering ones, but remains relevant throughout, revealing how chance affects everyday life.

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