

Random Walks: Pursuing the American Dream

Irwin Miller

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Irwin Miller suffered through his father's beatings, his unaffectionate mother's habit of locking him in closets, and—like the other Jewish kids in his neighborhood—attacks from Catholic playmates who falsely believed that the Jews killed Jesus. He vowed to “some day, get out of this trap that life had condemned” him to inhabit. And he did.

The title of Miller's book, *Random Walks*, refers to chance in probability theory and in life, a subject the retired statistician knows well. He writes that, for humans, choice also plays a role in life. Miller uses his own life experiences to express his ideas about choice and chance. Mistakes and bad luck interfered with many of Miller's plans, but didn't stop him from having a fulfilling life. For example, the mistake of indicating that he was in a master's program when his real objective was a Ph.D. resulted in receipt of a draft notice upon completing his graduate degree. Later, he accepted an offer for an assistant professor position at Rutgers University, but budget cuts eliminated the position, which was simply bad luck. Nonetheless, he became a successful professional. And he has owned homes and vacation residences and has had marriages to two wonderful women.

With a Ph.D. in statistics from Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Miller worked as a statistical consultant for U.S. Steel's Applied Research Laboratories and Arthur D. Little, Inc., an international consulting firm, and served as CEO of Opinion Research Corporation. He taught mathematics at Arizona State University and Wesleyan University. And he co-authored several books, including *Algebra and Trigonometry* and *Manual of Experimental Statistics*.

Random Walks is well organized, with the places where Miller lived or attended school used as chapter titles. For example, “West Lafayette, IN” is the chapter about his graduate study at Purdue University. Well-chosen black-and-white photographs depict Miller throughout the stages of his life. Periodically, Miller uses clever language. For example, he writes that his powerful station wagon “would pass anything on the road except a gas station.”

Telling the reader about his experiences rather than showing those experiences in an expressive manner is the book's biggest problem. However, Miller does succeed in showing his reaction to his first wife's death: “I felt that I had been struck by a poleax. I went completely numb, my mouth so dry I could hardly speak.” The birth of his twin brother Howie followed by the surprise birth of the author would have made a more interesting beginning for chapter one rather than the detailed description of New York City. Readers will notice many typos, grammatical errors, and sentences with missing or extra words.

Miller was successful in spite of his bad luck and mistakes. His experiences can inspire readers to face obstacles with renewed determination, especially those who are struggling with setbacks as they attempt to reach their goals.

NORMA D. KELLAM (April 27, 2011)

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