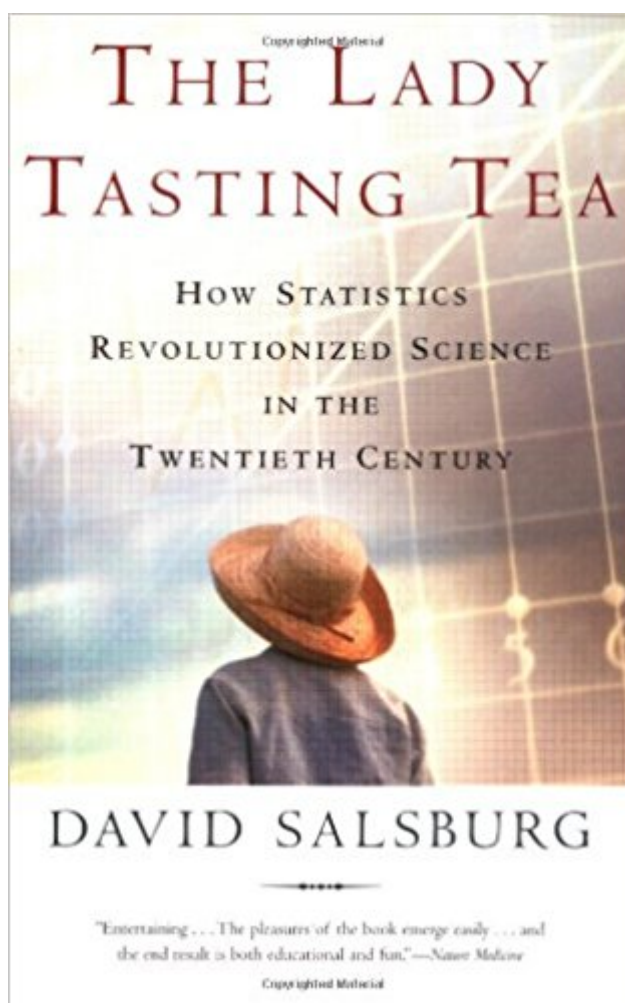


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The Lady Tasting Tea: How Statistics Revolutionized Science In The Twentieth Century



Synopsis

An insightful, revealing history of the magical mathematics that transformed our world. At a summer tea party in Cambridge, England, a guest states that tea poured into milk tastes different from milk poured into tea. Her notion is shouted down by the scientific minds of the group. But one man, Ronald Fisher, proposes to scientifically test the hypothesis. There is no better person to conduct such an experiment, for Fisher is a pioneer in the field of statistics. The Lady Tasting Tea spotlights not only Fisher's theories but also the revolutionary ideas of dozens of men and women which affect our modern everyday lives. Writing with verve and wit, David Salsburg traces breakthroughs ranging from the rise and fall of Karl Pearson's theories to the methods of quality control that rebuilt postwar Japan's economy, including a pivotal early study on the capacity of a small beer cask at the Guinness brewing factory. Brimming with intriguing tidbits and colorful characters, The Lady Tasting Tea salutes the spirit of those who dared to look at the world in a new way.

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Customer Reviews

Science is inextricably linked with mathematics. Statistician David Salsburg examines the development of ever-more-powerful statistical methods for determining scientific truth in The Lady Tasting Tea, a series of historical and biographical sketches that illuminate without alienating the mathematically timid. Salsburg, who has worked in academia and industry and has met many of the major players he writes about, shares his subjects' enthusiasm for problem solving and deep thinking. His sense of excitement drives the prose, but never at the expense of the reader; if anything, the author has taken pains to eliminate esoterica and ephemera from his stories. This

might frustrate a few number-head readers, but the abundant notes and references should keep them happy in the library for weeks after reading the book. Ultimately, the various tales herein are unified in a single theme: the conversion of science from observational natural history into rigorously defined statistical models of data collection and analysis. This process, usually only implicit in studies of scientific methods and history, is especially important now that we seem to be reaching the point of diminishing returns and are looking for new paradigms of scientific investigation. The Lady Tasting Tea will appeal to a broad audience of scientifically literate readers, reminding them of the humanity underlying the work. --Rob Lightner --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The development of statistical modeling in primary research is the underreported paradigm shift in the foundation of science. The lady of the title's claim that she could detect a difference between milk-into-tea vs. tea-into-milk infusions sets up the social history of a theory that has changed the culture of science as thoroughly as relativity did (the lady's palate is analogous to quantum physics' famous cat-subject), making possible the construction of meaningful scientific experiments. Statistical modeling is the child of applied mathematics and the 19th-century scientific revolution. So Salsburg begins his history at the beginning (with field agronomists in the U.K. in the 1920s trying to test the usefulness of early artificial fertilizer) and creates an important, near-complete chapter in the social history of science. His modest style sometimes labors to keep the lid on the Wonderland of statistical reality, especially under the "This Book Contains No Equations!" marketing rule for trade science books. He does his best to make a lively story of mostly British scientists' lives and work under this stricture, right through chaos theory. The products of their advancements include more reliable pharmaceuticals, better beer, econometrics, quality control manufacturing, diagnostic tests and social policy. It is unfortunate that this introduction to new statistical descriptions of reality tries so hard to appease mathophobia. Someone should do hypothesis testing of the relationship between equations in texts and sales in popular science markets it would make a fine example of the use of statistics. Illus. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This book was hard for me to put down. It is not a how-to book. Instead, it addresses the very foundations of statistics. As a practitioner but relative novice in the sophisticated use of statistics, I was stunned and frankly thought it ironic that there is so much uncertainty in the appropriate use, usefulness and meaning of statistics. It played with my mind on what is real in science. The history

of the statistical revolution he describes is fascinating as personalities, perceptions and interpretations clash across the years. It should provide valuable insight to those whose work depends on the appropriate use and interpretation of statistics. But the book must cause them pause as the author concludes in the final paragraph, "the statistical revolution in science stands triumphant...[but]...it stands triumphant on feet of clay."

A wonderful romp through the statistical methods and their practitioners of the twentieth century. There is a concerted effort to NOT include math notation or heavy lifting - this will not replace a stats textbook, it is decidedly and avowedly not meant to. Instead, intuition and philosophy of these advances are summarized. I am sure that my familiarity with the math helped, but I don't think it was necessary to understand the book. In fact, the Confidence Interval being process not number is the best way I have ever heard that put. I have a way to say it and I can only say it that way to be sure that I haven't flipped the meaning. This was a great example of how Salsburg takes big concepts with lots of math and explains them in intuitive ways. More than that though he makes these names from tests and bootstraps and whatnot and makes them real live people with stories and ambitions. There is also a great sense of the personal - statisticians need to interact with their data - you cant make a good valid clear model if you have no idea what the data really mean. Great lesson for everyone.

Mostly useful for the biographies of these historical figures. Do not expect full explanations of the mathematics. I found the descriptions of the relationships between the characters to be very useful. Also, at times the author recounts anecdotes from meetings he had with the mathematicians (e.g., Chester Bliss). These are interesting and revealing, but do not expect sociological rigor here (the author isn't from that field, after all). I've read some sections several times and was able to use some of these anecdotes in class.

As a professional statistician, I gained a deeper understanding of underlying philosophical aspects of probability and how it affects our everyday decision-making process. I also learned that applied statistics was one of the suppressed research fields in the country of Kolmogorov where I grew up, and how it affected the future development not only of other scientific disciplines, but the economic prosperity, or should I say lack of it. It is disheartening that the country with enormous intellectual potential and talent was not able to capitalize on it. The most captivating part of the book were stories of great scientists who contributed to the field. It is humbling and inspiring, at the same time

encouraging to know the immense value of analytical probing and desire to get to the root of things. Statistics' potential is changing so many fields, from baseball to quantum physics - Qbism, or Quantum Bayesianism. I wonder - who and when will write a sequel on how statistics revolutionized science in the 21st century? I hope it'll be in my lifetime.

I'm teaching AP Stats for the first time and heard about this book at one of the training's I attended. Having recently finished reading it, I recommend it highly. It's a survey of the people involved in getting statistics and probability to where it is today, and it includes references to other books like it. I asked our school librarian to add a few copies to the school library, and recently saw it on the "new arrivals" counter.

This book shares some similarity to Leonard Mlodinow's more widely read "The Drunkard's Walk." Though not as entertaining, it is still a very enjoyable and informative read. Salsburg certainly understands statistical analysis more thoroughly and provides insight into its breadth of influence as well as its philosophical limitations. The book is mostly a work of history and philosophy written for non-mathematicians. There isn't a single equation anywhere in it. While the subject may sound dry, it's written with intelligence and humor and an impressive amount of background detail. Some of the names I have heard of, Keynes, Demming, and Kahneman but most are new (to me at least). Karl Pearson, R.A. Fisher, Jerzy Neyman and many others. Though these names are not well known, their contributions are just as large as those of Bohr, Einstein, Heisenberg, or Salk. They provided shoulders for so many others to stand upon it's hard to find an area in science that has not been influenced by them. In the afterward David Salsburg writes: "I hope some readers will be inspired by this book to look into the statistical revolution more thoroughly. It is my hope that a reader may be inspired to study the subject and join the world of statistical research." I think he succeeds.

When you read that humans developed statistics, and then get to meet them and understand the problems they were preoccupied with, a new layer of intuitions and understanding becomes available. Great book. Too little empathy for Bayesian thought, to my taste. But still a great gift to humans who seek to do statistics.

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