



# This Is Improbable: Cheese String Theory, Magnetic Chickens, and Other WTF Research

*Marc Abrahams*

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## **This Is Improbable: Cheese String Theory, Magnetic Chickens, and Other WTF Research** Marc Abrahams

Often, thinking seriously about outlandish problems is the only way to make progress in science. The rest of the time, it's hilarious. Marc Abrahams, the founder of the famous Ig Nobel prizes, offers an addictive, wryly funny exposé of the oddest, most imaginative, and just plain improbable research from around the world. He looks into why books on ethics are more likely to get stolen and how randomly promoting people (rather than doing it based on merit) improves their work. He also shares the findings of weird experiments, from whether Vegas lap dancers earn higher tips at a certain time of the month to how mice were once outfitted with parachutes to find a better way to murder tree snakes. Abrahams' tour through this strangest of strange science will first make you laugh, and then make you think about your world in a completely new way. Marc Abrahams, the founder of the Ig Nobel prize, offers an addictive, wryly funny exposé of the most improbable research from around the world, from why one psychologist insisted it was better to promote people randomly to whether Vegas lap dancers get higher tips at certain times of the month. As you travel from the bizarre to the profound, Abrahams will make you laugh, and then think about the world in a completely new way.

## **This Is Improbable: Cheese String Theory, Magnetic Chickens, and Other WTF Research Details**

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# From Reader Review This Is Improbable: Cheese String Theory, Magnetic Chickens, and Other WTF Research for online ebook

## Alaina Sloo says

This collection of some of *Annals of Improbable Research* editor Marc Abrahams' favorite *unusual* research is lots of fun. Whether he's describing studies about an Australian beetle's mating behavior with beer bottles, the effect of saliva flow on the perception of custard flavor, or sheep personalities, Abrahams has a gift for explaining the research in a way that's humorous and also can't help making you think. For most people it will feel like an uneven collection: some will be hilarious and some won't be even remotely interested in, but it's a strength of the book that there's almost certainly something for everyone. Since it's a fairly large collection of short research descriptions, it's a book best read in bits and pieces. I'm putting in my bathroom. And I mean that as a compliment.

The book isn't written for teens, but many high school students with a sense of humor and a love of science will enjoy it. Not only that, it also will open up a view of science to them they've probably never seen: one that shows the practice of science isn't really about tackling big questions, but rather about lots of people tackling lots of little tiny questions that over time can add up to big answers -- as odd as some of those questions might be.

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## Eurethius Pällitièr says

This is highly unfunny and should not leave small passages in newspapers

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## Ints says

Šo gr?matu nopirku pirms p?ris gadiem, jo amazon? vi?ai bija liela atlaide. Atsauksmes un nosaukums š?ita pietiekami interesanti, lai manu uz š?du pirkumu pamudin?tu. Gr?matas autors ir paz?stams ar? k? Ig Nobel Prize nodibin?t?js, un tas vien liecin?ja, ka noteikti neviens cits lab?k par vi?u nep?rzina d?vainos zin?tnes p?t?jumus.

Reiz?m zin?tnes att?st?ba notiek p?t?tot visd?vain?k?s probl?mas. Vienm?r atrodas k?ds zin?tnieks, kuru uztrauks t?di jaut?jumi, par cik alus d?rdz?ba samazina noziegumu skaitu, vai ar pudeli var p?rsist galvu, k? pareizi nomest ar izpletņi beigtu saind?tu peli, vai las?šana var izrais?t epilepsiju, cik liela varb?t?ba ir govij apgulties p?c ilgstošas st?v?šanas, k? pludmal? teritoriju apz?m? apmekl?t?ji, k?p?c iepirkumu maisi?i sapl?st pusce?? uz m?j?m, k? smadzenes rea?? uz naudas izn?cin?šanu un cit?m tikpat svar?g?m liet?m. Šaj? gr?mat? autors apkopojis savus rakstus, kuri gadu gait? public?ti av?z? the Guardian.

Ideja nenoliedzami ir interesanta, reti kura lieta ilustr? lab?k to, ka zin?tne ir ne tikai lielais hadronu pa?trin?t?js un NASA ra?šu programma. Zin?tnieki ikdien? p?ta visnieiedom?jam?k?s lietas. Autors šaj? t?m? ir iedzi?in?jies, un vi?a atrast?s p?rles ir diezgan spožas. Ta?u ir viens liels BET. Gr?mata p?c b?t?bas atš?iras no raksti?a av?z?. Av?z? ir norm?li izlas?t p?ris rindkopas garu st?sti?u pasmieties un nolikt av?zi mal?. Ta?u, ja gr?mat? ir simts š?du mazu st?sti?u, tad las?šana k??st par murgu. Katru reizi las?t?js tiek iesviests pavisam jaun? t?m?, kurai nav nek?da sakara ar iepriekš?jo rakstu, un tas nojauc las?t?ja

koncentr?ciju.

Kaitina ar? autora izkl?sta strukt?ra, t? ir palikusi nemain?ga k? av?z?. S?kum? mums tiek pazi?ots zin?tniskais p?t?jums ar intri??jošu nosaukumu, tad ?sum? tiekam iepaz?stin?ti ar autoriem, tad divos teikumos seko p?t?juma saturs, tad autora v?rdu sp?le, kas reiz?m ir smiekl?ga, bet bieži ne p?r?k un beig?s izmantot? literat?ra. Es k? las?t?js tom?r b?tu autoram pateic?gs, ja autors nedaudz izv?rst?k past?st?tu par pašu p?t?jumu, kaut ko nedaudz vair?k k? tikai nosaukumu. Piem?ram, par iesp?jamo pielietojumu tautsaimniec?b?, k? vi?i dab?juši finans?jumu. Viet?m vi?š to dara, un tie ir izcili st?sti?i, kuri mani notur?ja pie gr?matas las?šanas.

Kopum? visšvak?k? popul?rzin?tnisk? gr?mata šogad 4 no 10 ball?m. Gr?mata izlas?ju vair?k aiz sp?t?bas nek? aiz intereses. Ar popul?rzin?tniskaj?m gr?mat?m man š?da lieta praktiski negad?i. Galvenais iemesls tam ir – gr?mata nav paredz?ta, lai vi?u las?tu visu uzreiz no v?ka l?dz v?kam. Iesp?jams, ka vislab?k vi?u b?t las?t? doz?jot, katru dienu pa vienam rakstam. Ta?u st?sti?i nav tik kvalitat?vi, lai es k? las?t?js sp?t?tu pietur?ties pie š?da las?šanas rež?ma. Visticam?k, ka gr?mata p?c div?m dien?m paliku neaiztikta un nelas?ta.

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### **Pedro Plassen says**

Something missed regarding the author's sense of humor. Too many postulates, too shortly described. A bit tiresome at the end of the day.

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### **E says**

The problem with reading a book of "WTF research," as the subtitle calls it, is that you're reading an entire book of WTF research. Not nearly as funny as a good comedy, and not nearly as scientific as a typical science book, this book falls in a canyon between the two. I think the conceit works much better in its original form--a weekly column in the *Guardian* newspaper.

And this truly is "WTF research." Each entry is 1-1.5 pages on weird articles the author found in scientific journals--"Leftovers from the Ham Sandwich Theorem," "Designing and Testing an Improved Packaging for Large Hollow Chocolate Bunnies," "Psychoacoustics of a Chilling Sound," "Artists' Suicide as a Public Good," "Eye-witnesses Should Not Do Cryptic Crosswords Prior to Identity Parades," "The Leadership of Ronald McDonald: Double Narration and Stylistic Lines of Transformation," and so and so on, ad nauseam. The author is funny, but I wish he had better material to work with.

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### **Manuel says**

Fun review of quite strange scientific articles/papers

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## **Christopher says**

Never judge a book by its cover... this fits this book for sure. It sounds from the description an interesting read. In reality it is a haphazard mix of articles that didn't make it into a newspaper column because they were either boring or not very well explained. There were some interesting pages in this book that could give the reader something to talk about during lunchtime or something like that. Most of the book was dull to me and I admit I skipped many pages just to find a half attractive heading. This book is going straight to the charity shop....

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## **Diann says**

Nowhere as good as the Journal of Irreproducible Results or the original inspirations behind the IgNoble awards. Even though the author was involved with both from way back when.  
2.5 stars with an occasional flash of brilliance. But, hard to find when you want to.

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## **Kam Yung Soh says**

A brilliant book that will definitely make you laugh; and make you think.

Marc Abrahams has documented some of the most unusual papers, thoughts and experiments conducted in the name of science on people, animals and objects. Quite a number may seem trivial and make you wonder just why people would actually want to publish work on it. But others studies will make you think, and reconsider what the study shows about the world around you. Some, well, they appear to be there just to give Abrahams a chance to show off various puns about the study.

And, as the prologue states, "There are no homosexual, necrophiliac ducks in this book." It contains lots of other things that are considerably stranger than ducks.

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## **Brian Clegg says**

The Ig Nobel Prize has become something of an institution in the science world. Year after year, respected scientists turn up to have their leg pulled about the topic of an academic paper they have had published (or occasionally a patent application). The man behind the Ig Nobels, Marc Abrahams, writes a column on 'improbable research' and this book is a collection of these articles, though often enhanced for the book form.

The tag line of the Ig Nobels is that it is for research that makes you laugh... then makes you think. This is true, although you often think 'I don't know how they ever managed to get funding for that research,' or 'How could they have the front to present that as science?' A classic example of the latter is a piece where the incidence of wearing high heeled shoes is correlated with the rise of schizophrenia. It's hard to start on what's wrong with this paper – particularly the Science 101 error of confusing correlation with causality. It really is excruciating.

Others are just hilarious in the phrasing. My overall favourite was one on the mechanical properties of cheese. I nearly fell off the chair when reading that research 'reported a change in the stress-strain behaviour of Gouda cheese when plates were lubricated with oil as opposed to when they were covered with emery paper.' Boggle.

My only concern is that these things work better on an occasional exposure rather than a whole bookful at once. I found myself in overload reading the thing end to end – it meant that I found some topics a bit dull. I think this would be a book that is better dipped into (kept in the obvious location, I guess) than devoured in one sitting.

Inevitably Improbable makes for a good gift book – excellent for anyone of a scientific bent – or just to keep yourself amused in spare moments. I am assured that Abrahams didn't make any of these papers up – but you will find it hard to believe.

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### **Todd Stockslager says**

Review title: Outtakes from the Journal of Irreproducible Results?

The above named journal, an inside parody of the density and denseness of hyper serious scientific journals, was one of my favorite finds when I worked at the University of Maryland Engineering and Physical Sciences library back on the late 1970s. This book reads like a virtual index of the kinds of articles the journal published in jest--with the difference that these are apparently real. And thanks to the magic of the Internet, I quickly find that the journal is alive and well at <http://www.jir.com> and had nothing to do with this book.

In chapters ranged roughly by scientific topic, Improbable provides brief tongue in cheek recaps of some of the oddest of real science, with plenty of punnage included: these are, as Abrahams describes one study, "all things that grate and are small." (p. 151). Think that was a stretch? How about this, in reference to a study on laundry drying times: "that was the first time that drying laundry had been aired in public." (p. 233) And there are more of these in every 1 or 2 page synopsis, which have been pulled from the author's weekly column in the *Guardian* newspaper.

There are a few good laughs here, and some of the puns are subtle and sly enough to bring a smile to the attentive reader's face, but nothing here will change your life or even do more than pass a few minutes pleasantly enough. Unless of course you need to know, at random here, about the economics of suicide (p. 226) or the air conditioning capacity of the human nose (p. 46).

Sometimes, pleasantly enough is just enough to make a book worthwhile.

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### **Amira says**

As an easily amused person, i find this book as extremely amusing. A collection of highly improbable , Ig Nobel Prize winning research and others (several quirky research were even published in Nature journal!). I

can't quite get the book's structure and I would love the discussions be made longer, but oh well, maybe the length is adequate to prove one point ; masses may wonder why scientists bother to investigate certain seemingly unimportant subjects (e.g contagious yawning among tortoise, imperial officers level of boredom in the 19th and early 20th century, wearing high heels cause schizophrenia) , but scientists are afterall, highly optimistic people who believe their research is of utmost importance (always)... And do have some sense of humor ! So if you're looking to find the fun side of science, read this book.

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### **Emma says**

A popular science book from the creator of the Ig Nobel Prizes. Marc Abrahams takes us through some of the most unusual, funny and imaginative pieces of research ever performed. It's witty and actually really interesting- One example that caught my attention was a group of scientists parachuting poison-laced dead mice into the jungle, to kill off a group of tree dwelling snakes, without affecting the crabs that lived on the jungle floor.

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### **Odette Knappers says**

I REALLY love the IgNobel prices. It is a great way to entertain people and show them science. the research awarded with an IgNobel price makes people laugh, but then think because the value for science or society is explained.

That last thing, that is what I'm missing in this book. That is why this book is disappointing for me, or at least, not meeting my expectations. But it is really funny at some times. I do have to admit I skimmed or even skipped some parts because it did not sound very interesting to me. All the pieces are really short like 3 pages or so, so it was not a big part of the book I skipped.

Maybe the short article-style bits in this book is the problem, or maybe the author just wants to be funny and lost touch with the science communication value of the IgNobel prizes.

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### **CuteBadger says**

Marc Abrahams, founder of the Ig Nobel Prizes which reward achievements which make people laugh and then make them think, brings us a collection of strange, funny and just plain amazing scientific research.

This is the kind of book that makes you want to read out snippets to whoever is near. I did this so often that my husband quickly became exasperated and took the book away from me. However, within 10 minutes of him starting to read it, he was doing exactly the same thing.

The research presented in the book covers a wide range of scientific disciplines so there's truly something for everyone. For example, a mere handful of the things I learned from reading This Is Improbable are:

- you can't Bend It Like Beckham on Mars;
- loud noises wake you up;
- strapless dresses have inherent engineering challenges;

- you can teach a tortoise to pretend to yawn; and
- some scientists have too much time (& money) on their hands.

If I were to think really hard about this book I suppose I'd say that it does have a tendency to the puerile and laddish in its interest in sport, underwear, poo and certain physical activities. However, in my experience, scientists (and I've known a few) tend to be big kids at heart and so have this sense of humour. Nothing in the book is offensive in any way, just amazing and funny.

This is a book to dip in and out of - if you read too much at a time you forget what you've read as the last weird fact is pushed out of your brain by the next weird fact - perhaps someone should do some research on this. It's a bit like looking at paintings in a gallery - no matter how much you want to look at them and how beautiful they are you soon reach overload and diminish the experience. It's also wise not to rush through it as pacing yourself means you can enjoy it for longer.

Reading a few pages a day will keep you interested and amused for months - not to mention anyone sitting near you.

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