On Coincidences in Academia and Fiction

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Abstract
Coincidences captivate people's attention in real life and in their reading of literature. Several academic studies concerning the perception of randomness and methods of studying it deal with coincidences as well. This article focuses on a variety of coincidences that have been published, partly in academic writings, and mostly in fiction. Many examples of literary excerpts, collected over years from various sources, are presented side by side with attempted elucidation of their significance and their commonalities and differences. Obviously, the issue of chance pops up time and again. Some coincidences are portrayed in fiction as only haphazard events and others, conversely, as denials of mere chance. Here and there, a coincidence plays a meaningful role by hinting at the denouement of the plot. And on several occasions a coincidental story is a source of fun or delight. The secret of the spell that coincidences sometimes cast on the reader, and the reason for the attraction of synchronicity, have still to be better understood.

Keywords: chance, novel, plot, quotation, surprise

1. INTRODUCTION
Reading fiction has always been my favorite pastime. Growing up in Israel, I first read only Hebrew and I started paying attention to coincidences much later while reading English, particularly for my PhD thesis on randomness (supervised by the late Amos Tversky). One chapter of my dissertation (Falk, 1975) is devoted to that topic. This was followed by two articles on coincidences: Falk (1981-82) and Falk (1989). Later on came a book (Falk, 2016) that deals with randomness and partly (e.g., in pp. 16-20) with coincidences.

All in all, the subject haunts me. I got sensitized to coincidences and I keep running into them time and again (also in professional reading and sometimes in the real world). At a certain stage, I started marking and collecting coincidences (undoubtedly missing many instances). The question is how to make sense of that plethora.

I'll quote an assortment of excerpts from fiction and refer to several others from nonfiction academic texts. One goal would be to note commonalities and differences. In addition, we'll try to understand the role that a coincidence sometimes plays in the plot.

2. DEFINITIONS
The "co" at the beginning of the word designates a conjunction of at least two occurrences (incidences). Plenty of definitions can be found in dictionaries and articles. To mention just a few, according to The new shorter Oxford English dictionary on historical principles (1993), a coincidence is
"A notable concurrence of events or circumstances without apparent causal connection". Diaconis and Mosteller's (1989) working definition is "A coincidence is a surprising concurrence of events, perceived as meaningfully related, with no apparent causal connection" (p. 853). The American heritage dictionary defines coincidence as "A sequence of events that although accidental seems to have been planned or arranged" (Dell, 2007, p. 173). By coincidence, my idioms dictionary opened up unintentionally on "by coincidence", explained as "by an accidental and strange similarity; by an unplanned pair of similar events or occurrences" (Spears, 1994, p. 49). It is noteworthy that all the definitions agree about lack of intent. Authors of fiction, however, often contend it's all chance but implicitly allude otherwise. Many of their coincidences might be purposeful.

3. COINCIDENCES IN TEXTS

3.1. ACADEMIC

Prior to highlighting selected instances of coincidences, let's look at some of what scholars have to say about coincidences. Basic statistical techniques for studying coincidences are presented by Diaconis and Mosteller (1989).

Dawes (1988) devoted Appendix A3.5 of his *Rational choice in an uncertain world* book to The Post Hoc Analysis Of Coincidence. I found his final paragraph pointedly convincing: "If we look hard enough we're bound to 'find' something, because the probability that exactly nothing will happen is indeed exactly zero. … In evaluating research findings in order to reach rational decisions it is crucial to determine whether they were hypothesized in advance or simply picked out post hoc—from the 'booming, buzzing experience' of the person proporting (sic) to have discovered them" (p. 331). He was right in maintaining that unexpected combinations of occurrences may catch the eye of an unprepared seeker. But that should not lend extra significance to such a revelation.

In a letter to *Science*, Alvarez (1965), a Nobel laureate in physics, dwelled on a coincidence that he had experienced: A phrase in a newspaper triggered his memory of someone long forgotten from his youth, and a few minutes later he came across an obituary for that same person. Alvarez remarked that such coincidences often lead people to believe in some extrasensory thought transference. However, he felt it was important to elucidate that such an apparently impossible event may occur just by chance (Coleman, Beitman & Celebi's, 2009, and Coleman & Beitman's, 2009, definitions of synchronicity and coincidence, in fact, reconstruct Alvarez's anecdote). By estimating the average number of people that a person knows, and relying on rather conservative assumptions, he showed that considering the large population of the U.S. some such exceedingly amazing coincidences are bound to occur not so rarely (about 10 per day). This ties in well with small-world-research findings (Bernard & Killworth, 1979; Gardner, 1972, see also Paulos, 1991, p. 38) that on average one's friends' friends' friends are half the population of the U.S.

Bandura (1982) maintained that chance encounters may play a prominent role in shaping the course of human life. For example, a coincidental meeting could involve the formation of partnerships of marriage. Although people often intentionally seek certain types of experiences, the persons who thereby enter their lives are determined by a large component of chance. In science, Pasteur's adage that chance favors the prepared mind is well illustrated in the determination of research development through accidental discovery.
According to Cohn (1989), the laws of probability teach us to expect some unusual (even impossible) events. "In a large enough population such coincidences are not unusual. They are the rule" (p. 19). The striking anecdotes are reported in the media and they make good news. The statistic of the population or domain in which such an event might happen, namely, the denominator for an arithmetical assessment of the surprise of the news item is not reported.

A considerable part of the academic writings on randomness deals with coincidences as well. Paulos (1991) claims that our world is so large and complicated that "in reality, the most astonishingly incredible coincidence imaginable would be the complete absence of all coincidences" (p. 41). Similarly, Plous (1993, p. 155) mentions Jung's (1952/1973) synchronicity and the assertion that coincidences occur much more frequently than one would expect by chance, and they are the work of an unknown universal force (see also Hardy, Harvey & Koestler, 1973, and Koestler, 1971, 1972). Martin (1998) asserts that we tend to overlook the powerful effect of coincidences (whether in waking or in dreams). We also underestimate the extent to which highly improbable events occur daily to everyone as a result of randomness. Note the winsome frame in which Martin summarizes a presidential coincidences contest held by The Skeptical Inquirer.

Although attractive, Kahneman's (2011, pp. 72-73) own coincidence stories add little to the academic analysis of such phenomena. This brings to mind Weaver's (1963) delightful story: He had encountered disbelief when explaining at a dinner party of 22 officers that there was an even chance, with only 22 or 23 persons, that at least two would share their birthday (Feller, 1957, p. 32). Someone proposed to run a test. They got all the way around the table without a duplicate birthday, at which point the waitress remarked, "Excuse me. But I am the 23rd person in the room, and my birthday is May 17, just like the General's over there" (p. 135). This story is famous. It appears also in Gardner's (1957) book. See also Gardner's (1981) chapter "The Roots of Coincidence" in his book Science: good, bad and bogus (pp. 241-249).

An interesting case of a too perfect coincidence is reported by Cullison (1969, p. 511). In a legal case concerning suspicion of forgery of a will, five different specimens of alleged signatures of the same person were shown to coincide unrealistically. It was determined that different signatures of a certain person cannot be completely congruent when superimposed on each other.

In two papers, Falk (1981-82 & 1989) showed experimentally that most people are not amazedly struck with surprise by coincidences that happen to others. We all understand that "strange events permit themselves the luxury of occurring" (Gardner 1957, p. 307). Our surprise is greater when the very same occurrence happens to ourselves rather than to somebody else. Examining the nature and the treatment of coincidences in nonacademic fiction is the next intriguing endeavor.

Although not strictly academic, Huffington's book Thrive (2014) includes an interesting chapter headed Coincidences: Life's Secret Door to Wonder. She claims that we all love coincidences and she quotes an old Chinese saying: "No Coincidence, No Story!"

### 3.2. FICTION

Many authors of fiction indeed love coincidences. When reading novels coincidences captivate the reader's attention, either by the astonishment they stir up or by the puzzle they pose. Unexpected
coincidences abound in the genre of crime and forensic writing. They might play different roles in the development of the story. The following list of examples represents an attempt to encompass a variety of quotations, and, when possible, probe their hidden message, moral, or the hints they provide towards the denouement of the plot. Although out of context, in many cases the coincidences speak for themselves.

In a classic of English literature, Thomas Hardy used the word in its strictly verbal interpretation as a co-occurrence of two events: She did not discover the coincidence of the market with the fair till she had reached the place (1891/1983, p. 66).

3.2.1. Expression of astonishment or stupefaction

The visit was fortuitous, the decision impulsive and he was later to look back on that afternoon as one of life's bizarre coincidences which, although occurring more frequently than reason would expect, never fail to surprise. (James, 2003, p. 3).

'At that precise moment? That would make it the biggest coincidence of all time.' (Rendell, 1990a, p. 116).

3.2.2. An improbable, unrealistic event

He said it was an incredible coincidence that he happened to walk by. (Walls, 2005, p. 73).

By one of those coincidences that normally happen only in novels (Allende, 2013, p. 10).

To have two bell-ringing convicts in Maidstone Gaol at once seemed rather too much of a coincidence. (Sayers, 1988, p. 220).

By an extraordinary coincidence, which we none of us believe in, (Forsyth, 2013, p. 201).

Crushed by the certainty that nothing as statistically spectacular as this chance meeting could possibly happen again. ... how accidentally a destiny is made... . Today she is reading...a book by Julia Kristeva, ... and across ... she sees a man reading, of all things, a book ... by Kristeva's husband, ... .The issue is the coincidence, a coincidence that is almost sinister. (Roth, 2001, pp. 125 & 200).

3.2.3. Hard to believe in just chance

The following quotes are taken from Truman (1990).

Any possible connection between the murder of a Reverend Paul Singletary in Washington and the murder of a Reverend Robert Priestly in England, both in church ... . It could have been sheer coincidence, (p. 162). ... Would he be dwelling upon it if there had not been the coincidence of an Anglican priest's being murdered in a church thousands of miles away? (p. 176). ... Not only was the same type of murder weapon, which could have been coincidental, left at the scene. ..., but robbery might have been the motive. (p. 237).

The above coincidence hints at some denouement and also connects separate parts of the plot with each other.

What at first view seems to be a tangle of coincidences is in the precise eye of the camera revealed in all its perfect symmetry. Nothing is casual, nothing is banal. (Allende, 2000/2002, p. 237). (Please note the inadvertent coincidence of the page numbers in the last two independent citations.)

3.2.4. Just fun

Cecil's (1957) book is a hilarious trial novel, full of amazing coincidences, repeatedly showing how they can really happen in the juristic sphere:
'Because it was another coincidence. And Mr Brent doesn't like coincidences, nor, I fear, does your Lordship'. … The sensation went round the whole Court. Apparently the spectators didn't think much of coincidences either. (p. 98).

3.2.5. Just chance

What's this,…Premonition? No; coincidence. (James, 1997, p. 118).

The following four excerpts are taken from James (2003):

It's probably a coincidence, the kind of throwaway remark anyone might make in the circumstances. (p. 166).

I don't think we should indulge in fantasy. It was probably coincidence. (p. 232).

I find that an interesting coincidence. But there's another way (p. 360).

The first was almost certainly coincidence. (p. 379).

A coincidence is mostly taken as an explanation in the above sentences, despite one hint of another possibility.

Susannah said that was a coincidence (Rendell, 1990a, p. 154).

In what follows, coincidence is legitimized as a meaningful concept:

It used to be considered highly unphilosophical to indulge in speculations about coincidence, still more to base any work of art upon it – but that was in the days when we believed in causality. Now, thanks to the Quantum theory and the second law of thermo-dynamics, we know better. (Sayers & Eustace, 1930/1970, p. 72).

3.2.6. Unexpected similarity

You dropped out of university?… That's a coincidence. I did, too. (J. K. Rowling, under the pen name Robert Galbraith, 2013, p. 296).

3.2.7. Expression of enjoyment or delight

How delightful this is! Positively, I cannot get over the amazing coincidence of your arrival. It shows the wonderful way in which Heaven provides even for our pleasures. (Sayers, 1934/1988, p. 18).

These words apparently also reflect the psychological delight that a coincidence contributes to a literary text.

3.2.8. Hinting at the beyond

Something occult must be at work, some force as yet beyond human knowledge…. Worse for him than the coincidence was the discovery that glass daggers actually existed. (Rendell, 1990b, p. 198).

Coincidences connect us across time, to one another, to ourselves, and to an invisible order in the universe. (Huffington, 2014, p. 202).

Coincidences are portrayed here as above-human powers.

3.2.9. Shaping future developments

One often recognizes only in hindsight a coincidence or unlikely object that altered fate. Who would have imagined that a zealous professor's cavalcade of pinned beetles would open the gate from the Ghetto for so many people? (Ackerman, 2007, p. 152).

Chance encounters play a prominent role in shaping the course of human lives. … (they) often play in the formation of partnerships of marriage (Bandura, 1982, pp. 747 & 748).

How easily life can be one thing rather than another..., how accidental fate may
seem… . how accidentally a fate is made… (Roth, 2001, pp. 125 & 127).

These authors fully agree on the crucial role that haphazard occurrences play in human life.

3.2.10. Dwelling on coincidences

Graham Greene is apparently fascinated by coincidences, he keeps coming back to the subject time and again: It's an extraordinary coincidence, isn't it?.... An odd coincidence.... I've known stranger coincidences.... I've even collected car numbers. That teaches you about coincidences. Ten thousand possible numbers and God knows how many combinations, and yet over and over again I've seen two cars with the same figures side by side in a traffic block.... I'll never lose my faith in coincidence.... I tried to summon up all my faith in coincidence.... Another coincidence, ... how many coincidences are there going to be? (Greene, 1951/1962, pp. 187-189).

He would haunt car parks until he found a car with the same number as one of his tickets (no owner could resist a coincidence like that). ...It's a coincidence, it must be. ... I thought of a funny coincidence .... It was as though her basic training had included telepathy. (Greene, 1958, pp. 36, 117 & 121).

Coincidences in my experience are seldom happy. How hypocritically we say 'what a happy coincidence!' when we meet an acquaintance in a strange hotel where we want very much to be alone. ...

An odd coincidence. I chose the date for that reason. (Greene, 1980, pp. 46 & 55).

3.2.11. Lucky or miraculous

That man had seen me many times holding my grandfather's hand, and by a fortunate coincidence he belonged to the same tong (Allende, 2000/2002, p. 131).

One of those lucky coincidences that the Widows for Jesus attribute to the power of prayer. ... It was impossible to get messages..., but by a miraculous coincidence, ... the Red Cross made its first visit (Allende, 2011/2013, pp. 339 & 348).

And another real-life excerpt concerning the holocaust:

This was simply a question of luck. I can hear you asking, with the palms of your hands directed upwards, Jewish style: "What is luck, Valya?" you are right mom, because, as a matter of fact, what is, after all, luck? I have no answer. But we survived. The more I scrutinize my memory, the more and more I am amazed that father is still alive, that I am living, and so is Paula. And I ask myself, is it feasible, that in one person's life there would be room for so much chance?" (Senger, 2011, p. 74).

3.2.12. Affirming consensus among people

People's minds do hook together... . One might find a cumulative series of such coincidences (Byatt, 1990, p. 237).

3.2.13. Wondering whether this is a coincidence

I'm not sure that what I am about to describe really rates as a startling coincidence (McEwan, 2001, p. 336)

But he didn't believe it. Coincidence had not that long an arm. (Rendell, 1988, p. 206).

3.2.14. A serious phenomenon requiring investigation

Maisie had taken to pondering just about everything that happened in the course of a day, seeing coincidences and patterns in the life around her. ... Coincidence could simply be what it appeared to be: two events connected to each other by the thoughts and experience of a person. ... Pay attention to
coincidence. Coincidence was a messenger sent by truth. (Winspear, 2003, pp. 101 & 205).

All I know is that what we have here is way, way beyond the realm of coincidence. So there has to be an explanation. (Connely, 2000, p. 147).

3.2.15. Obsessed with chance

Coincidences feature highly in Paul Auster's novels. He is repeatedly preoccupied with the dilemma of chance in several of his books: Just as two words can rhyme for the ear…it is possible for events in one's life to rhyme as well (Auster, 1982, p. 161). I like that metaphor: authors of prose sometimes trifle with events just as poets do with words. Auster (1982) vacillates between ascribing meaning to a coincidence (p. 146) and considering it meaningless: Like everyone else, he craves a meaning. But at his bravest moments, he embraces meaninglessness as the first principle, … His life has no meaning. The book he is writing has no meaning (p. 147). And in 1987 Auster concludes that nothing was real except chance (p. 3), and: Perhaps he was looking for pictures in the clouds, as he had done as a small boy (p. 70). Later on, Auster (2002), still preoccupied with the concurrence of events, asks: Was it a coincidence? Of course it was, but at the time I felt as though I had willed it to happen (p. 69). Auster's (1990) novel is headed The music of chance and it starts with one of those random, accidental encounters that seem to materialize out of thin air (p.1).

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Coincidences touch people and amaze them. Consequently they sometimes invent bizarre, opposing explanations. There are examples of chance side by side with nonchance attributions, among the latter also supernatural causes. On the whole, most people don't remain indifferent.

Unlike other ingredients of a story, coincidences often cast a special spell on the reader. Events in our real lives that are parts of a coincidence are more likely to be remembered than those that are not (Huffington, 2014, p. 199); the same is apparently true for literary events. Part of the attraction of coincidences could be the enigma of their improbability.

Falk (1989) showed experimentally that the very same event is more surprising when it happens to oneself rather than to somebody else. Hence, the more a reader identifies with the protagonist of a story, the more would that reader be impressed by a coincidence in which the latter is involved.

A coincidence can serve as an omen or an augury, but it can also sum up in retrospect what has happened (as in Auster's work). Undoubtedly, some texts would be impoverished by removing their coincidences. Though generally not central in the plot, coincidences often incite curiosity, spice up the text, and increase one's pleasure in reading a novel.

Psychologists can gain new insights by focusing on people's dealings with coincidences in varied contexts. Proper methods for studying this phenomenon, as the statistical ones illustrated by Diaconis and Mosteller (1989), should be developed. B. D. Beitman and his associates in the medical domain are working energetically on coincidences (see the references to Coleman et al.).

The psychology of coincidences should be part and parcel of the sphere of judgment under uncertainty. Tversky and Kahneman (1983) highlighted cases of erroneously judging a conjunction of events more probable than one of its constituents. Conversely, some of the coincidences cited in this paper are apparently considered by
readers of fiction less probable than a mere conjunction of their constituent events.

NOTES
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