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Serendipity: the unexpected in science

Review of Pievani, Telmo. *Serendipity: the unexpected in science* / translated by Michael Gerard Kenyon. Cambridge, Mas.: The MIT Press, 2024. 205 p. ISBN 978-0-262-04915-3.

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Telmo Pievani is an Italian philosopher and a full Professor at the Department of Biology at the University of Padua. This is what we can learn from the Internet, while the Italian Wikipedia presents an impressive list of his publications, mainly in Italian.

The title of the translated book drew my attention because of its association with the concept of *serendipity* as used in information science, particularly in the field of information behaviour studies. In this context, *serendipity* is typically linked to the unexpected encountering of information. Erdelez (2004), for example, describes it in terms of unforeseen information encounters. Agarwal later defined *serendipity* as “an incident-based, unexpected discovery of information leading to an aha! moment when a naturally alert actor is in a passive, non-purposive state or in an active, purposive state, followed by a period of incubation leading to insight and value” (2015). A similar understanding of *serendipity* was reaffirmed in a systematic literature review by Liu et al. (2022).

It seemed that the book I was interested in would explore such information encounters within the framework of scientific communication. I must say that my initial guess was not far off the mark – but I received far more than expected.

In its seven chapters, the author opens a window onto a rich landscape of texts, ranging from Persian and Arabic literature to the works of Enlightenment philosophers and writers such as Boccaccio, Montaigne, Conan Doyle, Churchill, Eco, and Lewis – not to mention a wealth of discoveries and innovations in the world of science. He begins by uncovering misunderstandings around Archimedes’ discovery and traces the origins of the term *serendipity*, coined by Horace Walpole in the 18th century. Walpole introduced the word in a letter, referring to the story of the three Princes of Serendip, and seeing their story through the lens of chance discoveries of things they were not seeking. However, Pievani shows that in the original tale, chance plays no part: the princes succeed due to their sagacity in observing and interpreting their environment, rather than by luck. The author guides the reader along the winding road of literary transmission and translation that led to this major misinterpretation.

But Pievani does not stop there. He follows the evolution of the *serendipity* concept through various literary texts and into scientific discourse, where it retains its association with accidental discovery.

In the subsequent chapters, Pievani focuses on the role of sagacity, wisdom, and creativity in what might appear to be lucky, unplanned discoveries or even fruitful misunderstandings in science. He identifies two types of *serendipity*:

- *Weak serendipity* – discovering what one was actively looking for, albeit through an unexpected route or chance event;

- *Strong serendipity* – solving a problem one was unaware of until stumbling upon its solution.

This seemingly neat dichotomy is illustrated with numerous examples from the history of scientific discovery and the work of eminent thinkers such as Merton, Russell, Heisenberg, Popper, and others. These examples underscore the vastness of the unknown, the richness of the social and intellectual environments in which science unfolds, and the creativity of human beings in responding to the unexpected.

Although the book does not explicitly reference information behaviour, it clearly engages with the topic and the contexts in which such behaviour emerges. It concludes with a powerful suggestion, attributed to Heraclitus: “To continue the adventure of knowledge, we must expect the unexpected.”

I am confident that this book will appeal to readers who enjoy the pleasure of rich intellectual discovery and appreciate the multifaceted nature of *serendipity* – in science and in everyday life – which inevitably involves information seeking.

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