THE LUCK FACTOR
WHY SOME PEOPLE ARE LUCKIER THAN OTHERS AND HOW YOU CAN BECOME ONE OF THEM

MAX GUNTEGER

WILEY
John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd
Some people are luckier than others. That is a statement with which few would argue. But the statement is like thin soup eaten before a meal. By itself it doesn’t satisfy. More must follow, and that is when the arguments begin.

Why are some people luckier than others? This is a question of enormous size, for it probes into people’s fundamental beliefs about themselves, their lives and their destinies. There is no agreement on this question, never has been, perhaps never will be. Some think they know the reasons for good and bad luck. Others agree that reasons may exist but doubt they can be known. Still others doubt that there are any reasons at all.

And so the debate begins.
Eric Leek, barber and hair stylist. He has done a lot of thinking about luck in recent months, for luck has blundered into his life and radically altered its course. Anxious to hear his philosophy, I seek him out at his home in North Arlington, New Jersey. I have an address, but it isn’t quite adequate. It is the address of a walkup apartment above some stores on an old, decaying street. Next to a drugstore I find a dim, unmarked doorway that I surmise is Eric Leek’s address. The dented metal mailbox in the hallway has no name on it. Up a flight of creaky wooden stairs I find another unmarked door. Hoping I have come to the right place, I knock.

Eric Leek lets me in. He is a tall, lean, handsome man of 26, with light-brown hair and moustache. The apartment is old but lovingly maintained. Leek introduces me to his friend, Tillie Caldas, who insists on bringing me a bottle of beer because, she says, it makes her uncomfortable to see a guest sitting with nothing. A third member of the household is a small, friendly, ginger-and-white cat who is introduced to me as Keel — Leek spelled backward. Eric Leek remarks that his entire name spelled backward is Cire Keel, and he says he believes there was a medieval sorcerer of that name. He thinks it possible that he is Cire Keel’s reincarnation.

We turn to the subject of luck. ‘It worries me to talk about luck,’ says Leek, ‘because when I do, some people think I’m weird. My views on it are primarily religious — or mystical, if you prefer. I believe good luck comes to people who are ready for it and will use it unselfishly, to help others. I don’t believe it often comes to the greedy. As a general rule, the greediest people I know are also the unluckiest.’

Leek will have ample opportunity in years ahead to demonstrate his sincerity. On 27 January 1976, this obscure young man abruptly became stunningly wealthy. He won a special Bicentennial Year lottery conducted by the state of New Jersey, and his prize was the richest ever awarded in any lottery in the nation’s history —
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$1776 a week, or slightly over $92 000 a year, for life. He and his heirs, if he dies unexpectedly early, are guaranteed a total of at least $1.8 million.

His winning ticket, which cost him a dollar, was one of 63 million in the draw. ‘I know what the question is’, he says. ‘The question is, why did that one ticket win? Out of all those people, why me? I don’t think it was just something that happened at random. There’s a reason for everything that happens, even if we can’t always see the reason. There are patterns … there’s something that guides our lives.’

He has always been lucky, he says. ‘I’ve never done much worrying about the future because, for me, it always seemed to take care of itself. That’s one reason why I’ve never “settled down”, as the phrase goes.’ He has been at various times a singer and actor (which shows in his smooth, precise way of talking), a taxi driver, a construction labourer, a barber. ‘I always had a strong feeling some big change would happen in my life at about this age. I wasn’t in any hurry to find myself because I knew something would happen to change everything, and out of that change would come guidance.’

‘You felt you knew the future?’ I ask.

‘In a vague way, yes. Tillie and I are both semi-clairvoyant.’

‘That’s right’, says Tillie. ‘A few weeks before all this happened, I dreamt I was with a light-haired man who won a fantastic amount of money. It’s funny, though: I didn’t connect the dream with Eric at first. That came later. Just before the drawing I suddenly found I was sure he would win.’

‘I got sure at the end, too’, says Leek. He recalls that the adventure began with no precognitive hint of its outcome. ‘I didn’t really think about the possibility of winning anything. The proceeds from the lottery were earmarked for a state education fund, and I bought tickets because that seemed like a good cause.'
I bought maybe 40 of them over a span of months, whenever I had a spare dollar. The lottery was set up so that 45 finalists would be picked for the big draw. One day I read in the newspaper that the finalists' names would be announced the next day, and I said to a friend, “My name will be on that list”. It was a gag but not a gag, if that makes any sense. I kind of thought it was true. And of course it was.’

Then the number 10 entered the story. Leek regards 10 as his lucky number. ‘I was born in the 10th hour of the 10th day of the 10th month. Most good things that happen to me have a 10 in the picture somewhere. I met Tillie on the 10th, for instance.’ One good omen lay in the date of the final lottery drawing: 27 January. The three digits of that date, 27/1, add up to 10. Another numerical omen turned up during the draw itself. The draw was held in a college auditorium with most of the finalists present. It was a theatrical and complicated procedure, studiously protracted to heighten the suspense. At one stage of this long process, Leek’s name arrived at a ‘post position’ marked 10. That, he says, was when he knew he would win.

What will he do with the money? His major plan at the moment is to open a youth centre in North Arlington, ‘to help kids in trouble. My good luck, you see, is going to be turned into good luck for some kids I haven’t met yet’.

Does he feel he will continue to enjoy good luck? So far, so good. He took Tillie to Acapulco not long after the drawing, and a hotel unknowingly assigned him to just the room he might have asked for: 1010. Back in New Jersey a few weeks later, he attended a barbers’ union meeting. A lottery was held. Since Leek was locally famous by that time, he was asked to pick the winner’s name from an urn held over his head. The name he picked was his own.
Jeanette Mallinson, unemployed clerk-typist, in her late thirties, slightly overweight but attractive. She has brown hair and blue eyes. We meet at a drugstore lunch counter in Washington, DC. Next to her coffee cup is a newspaper in which she has been studying the help-wanted ads.

She says, 'I'm always finding myself out of work, it seems.' There is no whine of self-pity in her voice, however. On the contrary, she seems unaccountably cheerful. 'I read something by a psychologist once, saying people make their own bad luck. But in my case that isn't true — not the whole truth, anyhow. I've had a lot of bad luck in my life, much more than my share, I think. When I say bad luck, I mean things beyond my control. I think it's destiny. Some people are singled out to have bad luck for a time. But it doesn't have to last forever. In my case things will get better next year — and the year after that, at last, everything will go my way.'

'How do you know that?'

'My horoscope says so. Maybe that sounds like superstition to you, but listen, when you've had as much hard luck as I have, you begin to wonder what it's all about. I tried religion, but that didn't give me any good answers. Finally a friend got me interested in astrology, and I was amazed by how accurate it is. See, my sun sign is Scorpio, but I've got Saturn and Mars in the wrong places and a lot of other problems. Nearly 40 years of problems from the day I was born. But it's nearly over now, so instead of worrying about this year, I'm looking forward to next year. I'll make it through this year somehow. I always have made it through…'

The first piece of notable bad luck she can recall, she says, struck when she was a child in Maryland. Somebody tried to start a picnic fire with gasoline, and in the resulting flare-up her left cheek was badly burned. She has since had the damaged skin replaced by plastic surgery, and the only traces visible today are some tiny scars. 'But plastic surgery wasn't all that advanced when
I was a kid, and anyway my parents didn’t have the money. So I went through my teens with this big, ugly red patch on my cheek. You know how sensitive a teenage girl is. The patch wasn’t all that disfiguring, but I thought I was too hideous to be seen. I stayed home by myself, didn’t go on dates or anything. I became a hermit. They say character makes luck, but with me it was the other way around. Destiny made my character. That burned cheek made me a loner, too shy to look anybody in the face.’

Out of high school, Jeanette moved to Washington and went to work as a government clerk. ‘All my life, I’ve never held any job longer than three years. Something would always happen to push me back out in the street. Maybe some of the problems were partly my doing, but — well, take my very first job. Somebody stole a bunch of money from petty cash. Who did they accuse? Me, of course. It was just my bad luck that somebody had seen me coming back to the office after hours. I came back to get some shampoo I’d bought and left in my desk drawer, but it looked like I was sneaking in to steal the lousy money. That’s how it goes with me. Or take my last job, the reason I’m looking at these help-wanted ads right now. I was going along fine in that job, when what happens? The office manager quits, and the new person they move in is a real witch of a woman. Nobody likes her and she doesn’t like anybody, but for some reason she makes me her main target. I don’t know why. I’ve gone over it and over it in my mind, and I honestly can’t think of anything I said or did to make an enemy of her. It was just one of those things, two personalities that struck sparks, plain bad luck. Anyway, she made things so unbearable for me that it was either quit or land in a mental hospital.’

There have been several relationships with men and all have turned out badly. She was married at age 22. After three years her husband deserted her, leaving her with two small boys. In her late twenties she met another man named Gene. He seemed, she says, ‘just right … a perfect relationship.’ He was charmed rather than
put off by her two sons and wanted to marry her. A week before the scheduled wedding her mother became seriously ill, and Jeanette had to postpone all her plans and take care of the older woman for several months. It eventually became clear that the mother was going to be an invalid for the rest of her life and would need to live with Jeanette or in a nursing home. The prospect of living with Jeanette’s mother or footing nursing home bills seemed to dampen Gene’s enthusiasm. Jeanette talked with him about the problem for several weeks and helped prop up his sagging enthusiasm. He began to talk about rescheduling the wedding.

Then another blow fell. One of Jeanette’s sons collapsed in school. He turned out to be an epileptic. The epilepsy was a kind that is difficult to treat, requiring frequent visits to a doctor and costly medication. Gene silently vanished. ‘My other son has asthma,’ says Jeanette matter-of-factly, as though that fact should follow obviously and inexorably. ‘Right now I’m about six months behind in my doctor and drug bills and two months behind in my apartment rent. I had a TV set but it was repossessed last month.’

She sighs. ‘Well, some people get the breaks and some don’t. All you can do is wait out the bad time. If the stars are wrong for you, there’s no way you’re going to fight it.’

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Sherlock Feldman, professional gambler. Until his recent death, Feldman was a dedicated student of luck — or, more accurately, of other people’s theories about it — and an enthusiastic chronicler of luck’s oddballs. He was casino manager at the Dunes, one of the better known gambling clubs in Las Vegas. He spent his days and nights, mostly nights, watching people play with the distilled essence of luck — people who would rather gamble than sleep.

Everything about Sherlock Feldman was big: his belly, his nose, his black-rimmed glasses, his grin, his lust for life. His tolerance
was big, too. He listened with patience and sympathy to everybody else’s views of luck and absorbed all the theories — and, when he saw fit to propose a theory of his own, proposed it softly.

‘You ask me what luck is,’ he told me once, ‘and I’ll have to say I don’t know. People come in here with four-leaf clovers, astrology charts, lucky numbers. They want to control their luck with these gimmicks. Maybe lucky numbers do work for some people, and maybe that’s a definition of luck. Luck is being the kind of person lucky numbers work for. But with me, luck has never been anything but things happening in a random way’.

Feldman had strange stories to tell, however — stories that, as he freely admitted, he couldn’t explain adequately. Some of his favourites had to do with what he called ‘born losers’. He acknowledged that this phrase seemed to contradict his own philosophy. ‘If luck is random, we should all get roughly equal shares of good and bad breaks. There shouldn’t be born losers, not if you’re talking about pure random luck, like at the roulette table. But there are people who win often, and there are people who break even over the long run, and there are people who never, never win. Why? You tell me if you ever find out.’

Feldman was drifting around the casino one night when his observant eye was drawn to a man who didn’t seem to belong there. ‘He was a little guy, maybe 45, 50, with a sad look on his face. He was wearing a sport-shirt but he kept putting his hand up to his neck, like he was more used to wearing a tie. He was just standing around all by himself, watching a crowd of people play roulette. I went over to say hello. I didn’t think he was planning to rob the place or anything, but in this business you’ve got to be curious about people, you know?’

The man seemed pleased that somebody wanted to talk to him. He and Feldman chatted for a while. He said he was ‘in haberdashery’ in a small Midwestern town. He and his wife were touring
the Southwest on a two-week vacation. His wife had gone to a show with a friend that night and he was by himself. ‘I thought I’d stop in here and look around’, he said. ‘I’d never be able to show my face back home if people found out I had been to Las Vegas without seeing a casino.’

‘There’s room to squeeze in at the table if you want to try your luck’, said Feldman.

‘Oh, my goodness, no. I don’t need to try my luck because I already know it’s bad. I’ve never won anything in my life, not even a coin toss. I’m a sure loser.’

Feldman nodded amiably and started to walk off. Just then the sad man noticed that somebody had dropped a $5 bill under the table. He leaned through the crowd and shouted to the croupier, ‘There’s a five on the floor!’

Amid the noise and confusion the croupier misunderstood. He thought the haberdasher was calling a bet: ‘Five on four’. Accordingly the croupier put a $5 chip on the number 4. The wheel spun. The little ivory ball fell into the ‘4’ slot. The haberdasher’s chip had won $175.

The croupier pushed the stack of chips across the table. Stunned, the sad man left the stack where it happened to lie: on the square marked ‘red’. The wheel spun again. Red won. The $175 doubled to $350.

Feldman had picked up the $5 bill from the floor and returned it to a woman player who had dropped it. Now he clapped the haberdasher on the back and said, ‘Seems to me your luck isn’t so bad after all.’

‘I can’t believe it!’ said the sad man. ‘Nothing like this ever happened to me before. I never win. If there’s a 50–50 chance of losing some game, with me it’s a 100 per cent chance. Why, when I used to play poker with the boys back home, they called me Old Cash Flow because I was always sure to subsidise the game.’
‘Well, tonight’s your night,’ said Feldman. ‘Looks like your luck has turned at last. Why not let it run?’

The haberdasher did. He went on winning. Eventually his pile of chips totalled more than $5000, and the tension was more than he could bear. He decided to take the cash and go.

But bad luck was still dogging him in its own mysterious way.

Gaming houses in Las Vegas, as all over the world, often seem charmingly casual in their methods of handling bets and extending credit. But beneath the easygoing surface there are rules of iron. One of the more firmly enforced rules — no exceptions are permitted, ever — has to do with the process of calling a bet.

A player may call a bet without actually putting up cash, and if the dealer likes his looks, the dealer will advance him a chip or two and invite him into the game. Eventually, however, the player must produce cash to pay for those opening-stake chips. Even if he wins, he must show that he had enough cash in his pocket to cover the original stake. If he can’t show the required amount of cash, the house will apologetically but immovably refuse to cash his winnings for him.

In the haberdasher’s case, he had been advanced a $5 chip. The requirement seemed easy enough. To get his $5000-plus in cash all he needed to do was show that he had $5 in his pocket.

He pulled out his wallet and looked inside. His smile changed to a look of shock, then of sorrowful surmise. His wife had taken all his cash for her evening’s expenses and had forgotten to tell him. The wallet was empty.

We probably should stop now and try to clarify what we mean by ‘luck.’ It is a short and charmingly simple word, but one loaded with emotional, philosophical, religious and mystical paraphernalia.
There are dozens of possible definitions of this burdened little word. Each definition implies a certain way of looking at life, and each, if you insist on it loudly enough, will get you into fights with other men and women who see life differently and so favour different definitions.

Dictionaries are only of limited help in this quandary. Each dictionary definition can be argued with, for each seems to slight one philosophy or another. Funk and Wagnall’s begins by saying luck is ‘that which happens by chance’. Some would call that a fine and complete definition, but others would say no, luck is more than chance. The Random House Dictionary gets off to a more mystical start: ‘The force that seems to operate for good or ill in a person’s life’. Force? What force? As for old Noah Webster: ‘a purposeless, unpredictable, and uncontrollable force that shapes events favorably or unfavorably for an individual, group, or cause’. But the devoutly religious would say no, not purposeless. Astrologers and psychic-phenomena enthusiasts would say no, not unpredictable. And many Las Vegas and Monte Carlo and racetrack gamblers would say no, not necessarily uncontrollable either.

I’ve looked for a definition that everyone can accept — one that simply states the facts and leaves the explanations and analyses behind. And so:

**Luck: events that influence your life and are seemingly beyond your control.**

That is a broad definition, and it is meant to be. It should satisfy those who believe luck is simply the ebb and flow of random events. And those who, though they feel it is more than just randomness, are convinced the forces can be explained in rational, scientific terms. And those who believe luck involves occult or otherworldly forces: the stars, numbers, spells, rabbits’ feet, four-leaf clovers; or bigger than this, Almighty God.
Each person's definition of luck depends on what his or her life has been like. There is no sense in arguing about somebody else's view of luck, any more than there is in arguing about somebody else's life story. This book will not argue with anybody. We will talk to men and women who hold diverse beliefs and we will listen to their stories and explanations, and when it seems useful, we will investigate what seem to be flaws in logic — but very, very gently and with the utmost humility. We want only to see what men and women do and think about luck. In the course of this quest, we are going to meet many strange philosophies and many strange and appealing people. Our ultimate purpose is to find out whether there are tangible differences between the consistently lucky and the unlucky. Are there certain things that lucky people do more often than unlucky people? Do the lucky people take certain approaches to life, have certain ways of thinking and acting? Are these things learnable? Can you meld them with your own philosophy of luck, whether that philosophy is stodgily pragmatic or wildly occult or somewhere in between?

The answer to all those questions is yes.

‘Shallow men believe in luck’, said Ralph Waldo Emerson a century ago. His definition of luck was obviously a narrow one. In making that sour statement he referred to luck in its mystical or metaphysical sense: a nonrandom thing, a force or agency or pattern that pushes people around in mysterious but somehow ordered ways.

But if we apply Emerson’s words to our broader definition of luck — events that influence our lives and are seemingly beyond our control — the statement makes no sense. To talk about believing or not believing in luck, as thus defined, is like talking
about believing or not believing in the sun. The sun is plainly there, and so is luck. Everybody’s life is influenced by events that come blundering into it from outside. No man, woman or child may be said to be in total control of his or her own life. We are all subject to the unforeseeable, the unexpected, the uninvited. Sometimes our luck is good and sometimes bad, but it is always an element to contend with. It plays a role in everybody’s life, often the commanding role.

It is scary to consider the role played by luck in the very start of your life. I exist today because, many years ago in London, a young man happened to catch a cold. He worked for a bank in the city. On Sundays, when the weather was good, he liked to go into the country for picnics or down to one of the English channel beaches for a swim. One spring Sunday, laid low by a cold, he called off his picnicking plans and stayed home in his grubby little furnished room near the bank. A friend dropped in and invited him to a party, where he met a young woman. They fell in love and got married. They were my mother and father.

About a quarter-century after that, another young woman arrived in New York, job-hunting. One prospective job that attracted her greatly was in the personnel department of a university. After being interviewed for the job she waited for a week or so, heard no word, grew nervous about her diminishing cash supply, and reluctantly accepted another, less attractive job offered by a magazine. A few days later the university offered her the job she had really wanted. The offer had been delayed, it turned out, by a series of clerical complications and other trivial events, including the fact that some key decision maker had been home in bed with the flu. The young woman thought about it for a day, and finally, guided partly by a sense of moral obligation and partly by comfortable inertia, decided to stick with the magazine job she had started. Not much later I drifted around to the same magazine and was hired to work
at the rewrite desk. The young woman and I met, fell in love and


got married. Our three children would not exist today if an obscure

university executive hadn't caught the flu at just the right time.

And so it goes. You can talk about such stories in terms of Fate
or Destiny, portentously capitalised, or you can say (as I personally
prefer to say) that the stories illustrate nothing but the patternless

workings of random events. Either interpretation fits under our

broad definition of luck. If we think we exert rigorous, detailed

control over our lives through personal planning and direction,

we are victims of an illusion.

Many men and women of strong intellect are frustrated and

baffled, as Emerson was, by the existence of luck. For luck is the

supreme insult to human reason. You can't ignore it, yet you can't

plan for it. You can only wait around and know that it will come

into your life again and again and again. You cannot know what

form it will take or whether its visit will leave you sad or happy or

angry, richer or poorer, up or down or somewhere in between.

You cannot know, indeed, whether it will leave you alive or
dead.

The human intellect is always trying to make order. Luck is
always making chaos. No matter with what care and cleverness
you plan your life, luck will surely change the design. With good
luck, any half-baked plan will get you somewhere. With bad luck,
no plan will work. This is the frustrating characteristic of luck. It is
the element that must be, yet can't be, taken into our plans.

All our earnest efforts at self-improvement become virtually
futile unless accompanied by the right breaks. You can have
courage and perseverance and every other trait admired by the
Protestant Ethic, and you can have love and humility and all the
traits admired by poets, but unless you also have good luck (as
Jeanette Mallinson would tell you), none of it does you much
good. You can study personal tactics, like Machiavelli. You can
learn techniques for getting power. You can learn to intimidate people, lead them, say no to them without feeling guilty, charm them, hypnotise them, sell them hot-water bottles on the Equator. Or you can go in the opposite direction and learn to be happy inside yourself, learn to pray, find oneness with God. No matter. Any self-enlargement technique that attracts you can probably be made to work for you, but there is an element that must be present if the technique is to work well. It is an element that is seldom acknowledged in the instructions. It is luck. Almost any approach to success and self-fulfillment can work — when you are lucky.

An IBM man of my acquaintance went into a toilet in his office building one day to practise transcendental meditation. It was the only place where he could find the needed solitude. As he began reciting his mantra a loose tile fell from the ceiling and hit him on the head. He leaped up, startled. His car keys fell from his rear pocket and into the toilet. He leaned down to fish them out. In his bewildered state he failed to lean with proper care and leaned on the flush handle. His keys went.

Nothing, nothing works without good luck. It would be nice if we could learn to control this enormously powerful element better than most of us do. It would be nice if there were techniques for managing luck as there are for managing everything else.

There have been many attempts to find such techniques. Ever since the earliest tribesmen asked their gods for rain or good hunting or other blessings, most religions have been — though of course, for one more complex like Christianity, only in part — attempts to control luck. People still pray for favourable outcomes today, (if Roman Catholic) perhaps carry St Christopher medals to ward off travel accidents, and seek spiritual guidance in choosing between alternatives. Nearly all the inadvisable occult arts try to usurp control of the uncontrollable — or, as in astrology, to prepare for it by predicting what kind of luck is on the way.
The very existence of the word ‘superstition’, however, demonstrates that people can’t agree on the unseen forces that may or may not operate in our lives. The word is defined as ‘any religious, mystical, or occult belief not held by me’. What is superstition to me may be religion to you, and vice versa. The trouble with all such approaches is that their efficacy in improving one’s luck has not been demonstrated to everybody’s satisfaction. Some may work for some people, but not everybody is willing to try them.

It would be useful if there were approaches to luck control that didn’t depend on unseen forces — approaches whose efficacy could be demonstrated in a pragmatic way. There are.

I have been a fascinated collector of luck stories and luck theories since the middle 1950s, when a thunderbolt of good fortune came crashing into my life from nowhere (or so it seemed at the time) and radically altered the design. Since then, in the course of interviewing several thousand men and women for sundry journalistic purposes, I’ve also interviewed them about luck: their experiences with it, thoughts about it, attempts to control it. I’ve paid special attention to spectacularly lucky people and also to the spectacularly unlucky. I’ve asked: What do the luck-blessed do that other people don’t do — and particularly that the luck-cursed don’t do? Is it possible to change one’s luck by making practical changes within or around oneself?

Yes, it is possible, and that is what this book is about. When you know how to do it, you can exert limited but perfectly real control over your luck. You will not be able to control it in the deliberate and detailed fashion imagined by some mystical and occult practitioners. Nonetheless, with or without unseen forces to help you, you can position yourself in such a way that your chances of stumbling into good luck and avoiding bad luck are appreciably increased.
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For it turns out that there are perceptible differences between the consistently lucky and the unlucky. In general, and with exceptions, the luckiest men and women are those who have adopted certain approaches to life and have mastered certain kinds of internal psychological manipulations. I call this array of traits and attitudes the luck adjustment.

I have made this adjustment in and around myself. It produces pleasant results. My friends call me lucky, and it's true: I am. But I believe I'm lucky not just because I'm lucky, but partly because I know how to be. If my luck and yours both hold for a while, by the time we reach the end of the book, the luck adjustment will be making itself useful to you.

We have a fascinating journey ahead of us. We will begin by exploring the realm of luck and finding what various kinds of people do and say and think about it. Gambling deals with luck in its plainest and most direct form, and thus we will study the lives and luck of gamblers to see what truths are to be found there. We will also talk to stock-market speculators and others who challenge raw luck in their daily lives. And we will talk to ordinary, obscure men and women who don't consider themselves gamblers but who actually are, like everybody else.

So come with me, keep your fingers crossed, and kiss your lucky charms. We are about to venture into some strange lands. We will see things that will strain our capacity to understand or believe, and it may be we will come back home with more questions raised than have been answered. Still, we may return a little wiser than we left — if we are lucky.