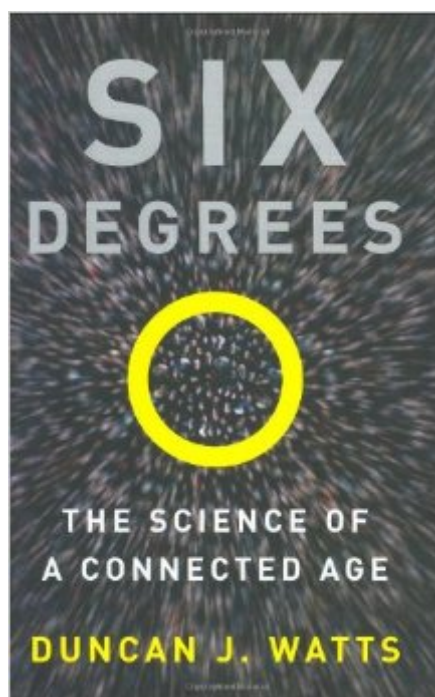


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Six Degrees: The Science Of A Connected Age



Synopsis

The pioneering young scientist whose work on the structure of small worlds has triggered an avalanche of interest in networks. In this remarkable book, Duncan Watts, one of the principal architects of network theory, sets out to explain the innovative research that he and other scientists are spearheading to create a blueprint of our connected planet. Whether they bind computers, economies, or terrorist organizations, networks are everywhere in the real world, yet only recently have scientists attempted to explain their mysterious workings. From epidemics of disease to outbreaks of market madness, from people searching for information to firms surviving crisis and change, from the structure of personal relationships to the technological and social choices of entire societies, Watts weaves together a network of discoveries across an array of disciplines to tell the story of an explosive new field of knowledge, the people who are building it, and his own peculiar path in forging this new science. 24 b/w illustrations.

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Customer Reviews

I've always been fascinated by social networks, having read Granovetter's work on strong vs. weak ties. As a career coach, I naturally talk to clients about the joys and frustrations of networking -- and I loved the movie "Six degrees of separation." If you're looking for an easy piece of entertainment, this is not the book for you. Watts shows how this field has advanced by combining research efforts in information science, physics, mathematics and sociology. We look over his shoulder as he collaborates with other scientists to solve tough problems -- and get a glimpse of modern science in

action (although I think Watts emphasizes the more positive, cooperative aspects of "doing science"). Students of psychology will enjoy his discussion of Milgram's famous experiment -- messages mailed to a Boston stockbroker -- and the real, as compared to legendary, results. Milgram's even more outrageous obedience experiment, which Watts includes, also deserves a footnote: subjects refused to obey (a) when the experimenter broke the rules and gave reasons for the order and (b) when they were able to reconstruct their roles outside the laboratory. I began by borrowing this book from a library but realized that it needs to be owned. It's not a quick, one-time read. Although it's accessible, you have to pay attention and I found a need to read sequentially, from chapter to chapter. But if you read carefully, you'll change the way you look at the world. As other reviewers have noted, Watts shows how daily life is influenced by properties of networks: Why do some viruses, computer and biological, spread, and why others come to a quick halt? Why do airline hub-and-spoke networks often break down? How do computer searches work and what makes them effective?

I wrote this book review as an assignment for a class. Its intended audience was sociologists unfamiliar with network theory. The intended audience for the book though is much wider. If you want the math, read academic journals. In the first chapter of *Six Degrees* Duncan Watts notes that gossip, power outages, epidemics, even properties of the human brain such as consciousness are phenomena that may be understood as emerging from the interaction of their constituent elements. Through such examples, he calls attention to the broad applicability of his subject matter. Having provided this motivation, Watts spends much of first half of the book discussing what he knows best, "small world" networks. In the second half he presents a network perspective for a wide range of topics such as epidemics, externalities, speculation, social decision making, and organizations. Like many academics marketing books to non-academics, Watts skillfully weaves his personal story with the science. His personal story is not only provided to keep laymen interested. Watts is now a member of the sociology department at Columbia University, but one can't help but wonder whether he identifies as a sociologist? How would other members of the discipline respond to a youngster whose PhD is in theoretical and applied mechanics who may never have read Durkheim? His early collaborators were mathematicians, physicists, and computer scientists lodged in appropriate departments. Watts though, has become a strong proponent of interdisciplinary science, and he respectfully acknowledges research that has been done in anthropology, sociology, psychology and economics. His first foray in the social sciences was inspired by the "small world" phenomenon.

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