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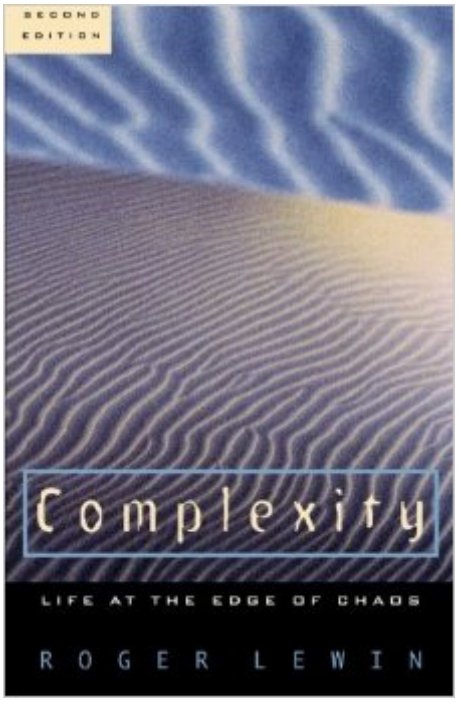
Complexity: Life At The Edge Of Chaos



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Synopsis

"Put together one of the world’s best science writers with one of the universe’s most fascinating subjects and you are bound to produce a wonderful book. . . . The subject of complexity is vital and controversial. This book is important and beautifully done."â ”Stephen Jay Gould"[Complexity] is that curious mix of complication and organization that we find throughout the natural and human worlds: the workings of a cell, the structure of the brain, the behavior of the stock market, the shifts of political power. . . . It is time science . . . thinks about meaning as well as counting information. . . . This is the core of the complexity manifesto. Read it, think about it . . . but don’t ignore it."â ”Ian Stewart, NatureThis second edition has been brought up to date with an essay entitled "On the Edge in the Business World" and an interview with John Holland, author of Emergence: From Chaos to Order.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The science of complexity, a discipline unique to the computer age, was born of chaos and a growing sense that there is something amenable to scientific inquiry about complex systems that we are missing. Before we had the number crunching power of computers, complexity could not be explored because the many variables resulted in astronomical calculations.In this revision of his book originally published in 1992, Roger Lewin explains what the science of complexity is all about through interviews with some of its most important practitioners (and critics) organized around some of the central ideas. As such this is both a fine introduction to the subject and an interesting read. Lewin includes 16 pages of photos of the scientists he interviewed captioned with a significant quote

from each. He has added an afterword on the application of complexity science to business, and an appendix about John Holland, whom he dubs, "Mr. Emergence.""Everything works toward an ecology" is an old dictum of mine. I have the sense that I came up with that myself, but I probably read it somewhere years ago. At any rate, what is being said here is that complex systems work toward a state of equilibrium near a transition phase, near "the edge of chaos." This equilibrium can be an ecology (Darwin's "tangled web"); indeed it can be the entire planet, as in the concept of Gaia in which "the Earth's biological and physical systems are tightly coupled in a giant homeostatic system" (quoting Stuart Kauffman on page 109).A central idea is that "...large, interactive systems-dynamical systems-naturally evolve toward a critical state" (physicist Per Bak, quoted on page 61).

I am not a scientist. I am, however, interested in a wide variety of subjects and fascinated by complexity. I am not referring now to the book, or the subject but the expression in the real world of all that there is to know and understand. How can anyone live and not recognise at the deepest levels of their understanding that everything that exists does so in dependence on other things that exist and that this interdependence, because of the number of dynamic variables, cannot be described otherwise than a complex system. It is at this point that anyone who has read the book or who is a part of this book will protest that I have missed the point. I have not. This book isn't about a vague subjective comprehension of all things being related. It is much more scientific than that. I have started off this way because I am aware that in the hustle of everyday life-the place where most readers of books reside-the subject of the science of complexity is beyond even the periphery of what might occur to them as a topic to take an interest in, let alone find relevant. Having a general, non-expert appreciation for the immense complexity of which we are a part is an appropriate mindset to bring to any reading of the subject. The book is deserving of a wider appeal than for just new wave idea groupies. I find Lewin strikes the right balance with his reader presenting difficult concepts with elegant clarity yet providing enough detail to challenge the reader. To make the material too simple would leave the concepts incoherent-to provide too much would leave the reader behind. He also presents a balanced view of the subject. There are detractors in the scientific community. They are heard from. Lewin develops various concepts directly related to complexity rather cleverly.

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