

An Interview with Myself

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This is an interview with Jim Stone about his book: Bayes' Rule: A Tutorial Introduction.

Each question below has two answers. At least one of them is serious.

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Interviewer: Why did you decide to interview yourself?

Jim Stone1: I hoped it would serve as inspiration for anyone who is thinking about writing a tutorial style of textbook.

Jim Stone2: Well, let's face it, who else was going to?

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Interviewer: Why are there so many examples in the book?

Jim Stone1: I have been teaching Bayes' rule to undergraduates for about 10 years, so I know there is no point in showing the equations, and expecting students to understand them immediately. Like any normal human beings, my students need to see real-world examples first, and equations later.

Jim Stone2: I was trying to put off explaining the hard stuff for as long as possible.

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Interviewer: What is the best feature of the book?

Jim Stone1: It is short (180 pages), and it has a Glossary which covers really basic terminology. It makes no assumptions about the reader's mathematical competence, so it starts at the bottom, and works its way up. It covers a huge amount of ground, without getting bogged down in details.

Jim Stone2: The cover - and the text.

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Interviewer: What is the worst feature of the book?

Jim Stone1: It is short (still 180 pages). This means there is not much room to go into details about various techniques, which are described briefly in the book. But these are covered in the annotated list of Further Readings.

Jim Stone2: The cover - and the text.

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Interviewer: What made you want to write Bayes' Rule?

Jim Stone1: It was a kind of test of my own understanding. As Stephen Hawking said, "Try to communicate clearly what you are doing and (who knows?) you may end up understanding it yourself." When I started writing, I was off work for a couple of weeks. I thought that would be long enough to explain the basics of Bayesian analysis. That was in January of 2012, but it actually took about 6 months to finish the book. Hawking was right.

Jim Stone2: I thought that if we all use Bayes' rule to make decisions then world peace would surely follow.

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Interviewer: What is the basic philosophy of the book?

Jim Stone1: Keep it simple.

Jim Stone2: I wanted to write a book that would have allowed a younger version of myself to understand Bayes' rule. But a younger version of myself was actually a bit of an idiot. That's why the book had to be kept simple.

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Interviewer: Did you have any help?

Jim Stone1: Yes, many friends and colleagues read the final drafts. One old friend in particular gave detailed advice, for which I am very grateful.

Jim Stone2: Yes. My wife's patience (with me banging on about how everything in the universe is Bayesian) was wearing thin. In the end, it was a straight choice between divorce and finishing the book.

On reflection, the correct answer to your question is "No". It's all my own work. I invented Bayes' rule. Not one of my so-called friends lifted a finger to help; in fact, at one point I was strongly advised to stop writing the book. Who was Bayes anyway?

Call yourself an interviewer? My cat could do a better job.

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Interviewer: Anything else?

Jim Stone1: Yes. There is a lot of hocus-pocus talked about Bayes' rule, as if it is some kind of algorithmic fairy dust that will make hard problems easy. Hard problems remain hard, with or without Bayes' rule. But Bayes' rule does at least provide a rational route to solving them.

Jim Stone2: Aren't you going to ask me where I get my ideas from (thus giving the impression that the book contains original ideas)? That's the sort of question that proper interviewers ask proper writers.

Interviewer: No. That's a lame question.

Jim Stone2: Oh. Can I have a proper interviewer next time?

Interviewer: Yes, but only if you don't interview yourself.

Jim Stone2: Can we stop now?

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Interviewer: Yes. Thank you for your time.

Jim Stone1: It was a pleasure talking to you. Thank you.

Jim Stone2: What?

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Back to [Bayes' Rule book](#)

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