



Einstein's Dreams

By Alan Lightman

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A modern classic, **Einstein's Dreams** is a fictional collage of stories dreamed by Albert Einstein in 1905, about time, relativity and physics. As the defiant but sensitive young genius is creating his theory of relativity, a new conception of time, he imagines many possible worlds. In one, time is circular, so that people are fated to repeat triumphs and failures over and over. In another, there is a place where time stands still, visited by lovers and parents clinging to their children. In another, time is a nightingale, sometimes trapped by a bell jar.

Now translated into thirty languages, **Einstein's Dreams** has inspired playwrights, dancers, musicians, and painters all over the world. In poetic vignettes, it explores the connections between science and art, the process of creativity, and ultimately the fragility of human existence.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

If you liked the eerie whimsy of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Steven Millhauser's *Little Kingdoms*, or Jorge Luis Borges's *Labyrinths*, you will love Alan Lightman's ethereal yet down-to-earth book *Einstein's Dreams*. Lightman teaches physics and writing at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, helping bridge the light-year-size gap between science and the humanities, the enemy camps C.P. Snow famously called *The Two Cultures*.

Einstein's Dreams became a bestseller by delighting both scientists and humanists. It is technically a novel. Lightman uses simple, lyrical, and literal details to locate Einstein precisely in a place and time--Berne, Switzerland, spring 1905, when he was a patent clerk privately working on his bizarre, unheard-of theory of relativity. The town he perceives is vividly described, but the waking Einstein is a bit player in this drama.

The book takes flight when Einstein takes to his bed and we share his dreams, 30 little fables about places where time behaves quite differently. In one world, time is circular; in another a man is occasionally plucked from the present and deposited in the past: "He is agonized. For if he makes the slightest alteration in anything, he may destroy the future ... he is forced to witness events without being part of them ... an inert gas, a ghost ... an exile of time." The dreams in which time flows backward are far more sophisticated than the time-tripping scenes in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, though science-fiction fans may yearn for a sustained yarn, which Lightman declines to provide. His purpose is simply to study the different kinds of time in Einstein's mind, each with its own lucid consequences. In their tone and quiet logic, Lightman's fables come off like Bach variations played on an exquisite harpsichord. People live for one day or eternity, and they respond intelligibly to each unique set of circumstances. Raindrops hang in the air in a place of frozen time; in another place everyone knows one year in advance exactly when the world will end, and acts accordingly.

"Consider a world in which cause and effect are erratic," writes Lightman. "Scientists turn reckless and mutter like gamblers who cannot stop betting.... In this world, artists are joyous." In another dream, time slows with altitude, causing rich folks to build stilt homes on mountaintops, seeking eternal youth and scorning the swiftly aging poor folk below. Forgetting eventually how they got there and why they subsist on "all but the most gossamer food," the higher-ups at length "become thin like the air, bony, old before their time."

There is no plot in this small volume--it's more like a poetry collection than a novel. Like Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, it's a mind-stretching meditation by a scientist who's been to the far edge of physics and is back with wilder tales than Marco Polo's. And unlike many admirers of Hawking, readers of *Einstein's Dreams* have a high probability of actually finishing it.

From Publishers Weekly

Few endeavors are more beguiling than a grossly improbable conceit realized with subtlety and wit. Science writer Lightman (A Modern Day Yankee in a Connecticut Court) seems to have mastered this principle: his slender but substantial fictional debut is a daring re-creation of Einstein's dreams during May and June 1905, when the Swiss patent clerk was putting the final touches on his special theory of relativity. Each dream embodies "one of the many possible natures of time." In one world time proceeds in circles; in another its rate varies with location. In a third, time reverses unexpectedly; in a fourth, it stutters and skips. Each variation spawns its own weird psychology, yet magically, touchingly, each also echoes patterns of events

that take place in supposedly ordinary time. Lightman's speculative prose poem warrants comparison to Calvino's masterful *Invisible Cities*. Its one disappointment is a scanty view of Einstein, whom we glimpse only in the waking interludes which periodically break the progression of dream-worlds. The great scientist broods in the hazy distance, indifferent as the Alps above this chronometric carnival. First serial to *Granta*, Harper's and the Sciences.

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From Library Journal

In his first novel, Lightman focuses on three months during Albert Einstein's most remarkable year. In 1905, while working as an examiner at the Swiss Patent Office in Bern, Einstein published three important papers in *Annals of Physics*. Here Lightman re-creates the dreams that allegedly culminated in the famous essay on the relativity of time. Since most of the action is interior, this book is more lyric than narrative. One vision of a world without time is filled with vivid, haiku-like images. In another, time stands still, recalling the scene on the Grecian urn from Keats's ode. As a teacher of both physics and writing at M.I.T., Lightman offers provocative and elegantly wrought speculations on the nature of time. Recommended for most libraries.

- *Albert Wilhelm, Tennessee Technological Univ., Cookeville*

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