

Time and Time Again

A Review of Einstein's Dreams

by John Stuckey

[*Einstein's Dreams*. Alan Lightman. Warner Books Edition, Pantheon Books, Random House, NYC, NY, 1994. 179+ pages.]

This little book is proof that a simple idea need not result in a trivial composition. I often feel that I am the last person to read really interesting books. In case I'm wrong, I'm writing this to urge you to **read this book**. I mean, it was offered for copyright more than ten years ago. What have we been waiting for?

Lightman's inspiration is to imagine what Albert Einstein might have been dreaming in the nights leading up to submitting his historic manuscript on the special theory of relativity in the summer of 1905. If time, energy, gravity, and even space are not the constants that they seem intuitively to us to be; if our understanding of those concepts is based on our own limited experience in the universe and on each of those dimensions; if their interactions might yield previously unexpected results, then how different might our world be from other possible worlds? Might time not stand still in some worlds? Or be rushed, or slowed to a snail's pace? Repeated endlessly? What would be the interpersonal consequences? Would the inhabitants notice? Would they care?

This is a work of fiction. Of imagination. Of speculation. But the author teaches physics and writing (read that again: **physics** and **writing!**) at MIT (**MIT!**). OK. I'll stop shouting.

This is the first book I've reviewed here at my own suggestion. I defended it to Editor John Gehl because those of us in computing and networking depend a lot on time. We think routinely of MHz and Nanoseconds. Some of us remember seeing Commodore Grace Hopper illustrate what an amazing but meaningful measure a nanosecond was, translated into distance traveled at the speed of light. So a book on time seemed a natural work to review on this site.

That, however, is not the reason you are reading this review. The reason you see it here is that I was knocked over by the book. Heck, my review is so late. Lightman's copyright is 1993. But read the book. If you accept some or any of the dreams, the book may not in fact have been published yet, and my review is wonderfully prescient. Or my review is a constant, and the book varies irregularly. I mean it. Read the book!

It is a short book. The shortest by far that I have reviewed. Yet it is the one I recommend most enthusiastically. Read it. If you read any of the stuff here on Ubiquity, I confidently predict that you'll be charmed by it.

This, however, is supposed to be a critical review, so here's the criticism: there are not enough words in the book. Not because it **needs** more but because you will approach the end with disappointment, because you will wish it could go on and on.

My judgment: While it's true that I wanted more words in the book, I treasured each. Each dream is told with an astounding, concise delicacy, if one can be quietly and subtly astounded.

Pardon me for the following exercise, but the book inspires it. It offers fewer words than I want, but the words that it contains are descriptive, aromatic, sensitive, eloquent, piquant, reassuring, delicious, amazing, dense, fragile, gay, colorful, elegant, somber, inquisitive, quiet, sorrowful, judicious, fast, haunting, exact, relentless, spare, pointed, creative, novel, respectful, brief, savory, frightful, tinkling, observant, provocative, inspired, puzzling, funny, delicate, slow, perceptive, soft, measured, concise, silver, perfect, piercing, hurried, transparent, pungent, sparse, inspiring, poignant, quick, sorrowful, threatening, velvet, thin, awesome, timely, and timeless.

How long did it take you to read that list? Read *Einstein's Dreams* if you have not already (or once more if you have) and answer that question again. What do you have to lose but a little time?

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