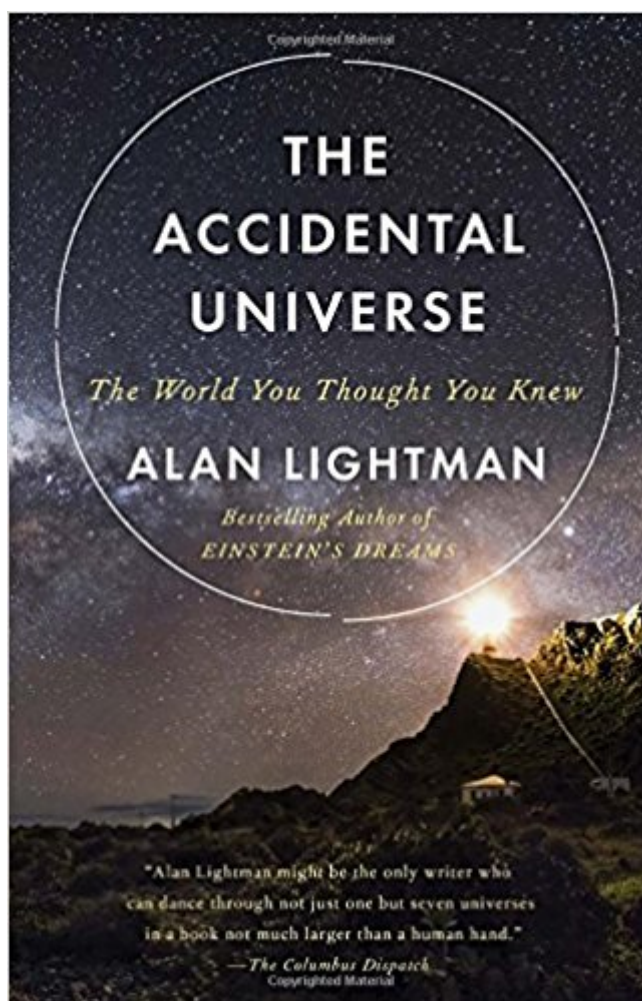


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The Accidental Universe: The World You Thought You Knew



Synopsis

With passion and curiosity, Alan Lightman explores the emotional and philosophical questions raised by recent discoveries in science. He looks at the dialogue between science and religion; the conflict between our human desire for permanence and the impermanence of nature; the possibility that our universe is simply an accident; the manner in which modern technology has separated us from direct experience of the world; and our resistance to the view that our bodies and minds can be explained by scientific logic and laws. Behind all of these considerations is the suggestion--at once haunting and exhilarating--that what we see and understand of the world is only a tiny piece of the extraordinary, perhaps unfathomable whole.

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Customer Reviews

Guest Review of "The Accidental Universe" by Alan Lightman
By Jon Kabat-Zinn
Jon Kabat-Zinn is the author of eight more books, including *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness* and *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*. He holds a Ph.D. in molecular biology from MIT, and is the founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society. He has also helped to organize dialogues between the Dalai Lama and Western scientists to promote deeper understanding of different ways of knowing and probing the nature of mind, emotions, and reality. A *Walden* for our digital, cosmological, and quantum age from a modern-day Thoreau. Not since Fred Hoyle in another era (and universe) has anyone dared to cover such a sweeping

domain, and no one so elegantly, so parsimoniously, and so personally. From the triumph of the Higgs boson to the underlying discomfort of multiverses, from the question of God to the erosion of embodied presence via digital self-distraction, Lightman explores with wistful irony, lyricism, and insight his relationship as a theoretical physicist, a cosmologist, a novelist, a humanist, and a human being to the ever-changing and mysterious interior and exterior universes we all inhabit, knowingly or not. Any one of these essays invites deep reflection. Together, they disturb, inform, inspire, and delight. —This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Theoretical physicist and novelist Lightman (Mr. g, 2012) presents seven elegantly provocative essays that elucidate complex scientific thought in the context of everyday experiences and concerns. In the title piece, he traces the great cosmological shakeup that has top physicists theorizing that our universe is but one of many with wildly varying properties. Lightman brings rigor and candor to his analysis of the coexistence of religion and science. He takes on our misperceptions about time and grapples with the deep question of why symmetry abounds in nature, from snowflakes to the Higgs boson. After blowing our minds with descriptions of galaxies and stars so distant their images have taken billions of years to reach our eyes, he wonders if we accept this realm as part of our understanding of nature. And in "The Disembodied Universe," he considers the implications of our enchantment with the virtual cosmos at our fingertips. Ranging from ancient intuitions and calculations to today's high-tech inquiries, Lightman celebrates our grand quest for knowledge and takes measure of the challenges our discoveries deliver. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Faith, in its broadest sense, is about far more than belief in the existence of God or the disregard of scientific evidence. Faith is the willingness to give ourselves over, at times, to things we do not fully understand. Faith is the belief in things larger than ourselves. Faith is the ability to honor stillness at some moments and at others to ride the passion and exuberance that is the artistic impulse, the flight of the imagination, the full engagement with this strange and shimmering world." It is with passages like this that Alan Lightman won me over. Not only in his direct, clear prose, but with his deep respect for both faith and science. I suppose it's more than respect--his argument is that reason and awe coexist in us....that we contain (and even court) the dual impulses of chaos and order, "the predictable and the unpredictable, the rational and the irrational, regularity and irregularity." And never did his explanation of science, math or the workings of the universe confound. Rather, he framed string theory, dark matter, atomic science in human terms. The

accidental universe need not be scary or intimidating. Rather, Lightman suggests, "Could there be a preciousness and value to existence stemming from the very fact of its temporary duration?" lovely....just lovely

What this MIT physicist and humanist (he holds a joint professorship, and this leads as he notes crossing his campus to some mental adjustment as he bridges the gaps) brings to familiar Big Questions is a gentle sense of wonder tempered with a scientific rigor. Both qualities are enhanced by his humility, and he accepts that we may not be able to answer what some of his colleagues anticipate as the Unified Theory that explains (after the Higgs Boson) everything. Instead, he cautions us to keep balancing in a humane (if still rational and certainly secular) approach our dual capacity of exacting and verifiable measurement and very cautious speculation. As these linked essays show, the universe can be conceived as alternately or respectively accidental, temporary, spiritual, symmetrical, gargantuan, lawful, or disembodied. He applies his life's moments gently to enrich his lessons. I like reading books for popular audiences about cosmology, so I found Alan Lightman's style (in an advanced copy for review) engaging and accessible. He brings in his daughter's wedding on the Maine coast, his beloved pair of wingtip shoes, the amazing hexagonal symmetry of a honeycomb, or the disturbing harbinger of a world where our young appear to be wired, shut off from conversation, and online all the time. However, as his last chapter predicts, even those who try to flee the virtual realm as it takes over our physical and spiritual worlds may find themselves shut off from yet another universe now evolving. Provocatively, Lightman compares how insignificant we are, stuck in a minor galaxy on a middling planet in a marginal status, yet we have figured out so much about the universe that surrounds us, if not the next stage, which we may never be able to discern to our satisfaction, that of multiverses. He tells us that our little worlds on a similarly infinitesimal level may elude our grasp. He imagines us as captains of a ship, up on a bridge, unable to discern fully from our perch what tumult lies below deck. This sort of deft analogy, modest and never drawing too much attention to itself, characterizes Lightman's approach. Unlike some of his colleagues who write such essays, he keeps the math to a minimum while accentuating the verbal and visual images that he hones to remind us of the sheer amount we know now about our origins, back to the first trillionth of a trillionth of a trillionth of a second. But, as we cannot penetrate that first moment of the Big Bang, that too stands to teach us of our own small stature, and how much the universe, big or small in these essays, continues to keep from our eager investigation. All the same, people such as Lightman inspire us to keep asking why.

Since the author is a theoretical physicist and it had been awhile since I had found a good popular physics book, I had hopes. They were quickly dashed as page after page turned out to be philosophy and religion. I am glad some people found it interesting, but I care nothing about Lightman's or anybody else's personal philosophies. I paged forward to see if there was a change in content, but it was all similar stuff interspersed with some very basic historical physics history, which most readers should probably already know. I deleted it. Although I got it on the cheap as a Kindle book, it was still a waste of money. Richard Feynman, I miss you so very much.

Where to begin? Alan Lightman is a man of the humanities and science which is quite rare. It is evident in his writing as he takes both perspectives in the different essays found within the book. To me, it is the best of both perspectives, which is a mutual gratification. I found all of the essays interesting and thought provoking, but the Spiritual Universe is the one that will capture you into deep thought. While he claims to be an atheist, it seems that he would believe that we are not here by accident. He mocks fellow scientist like Dawkins that try to prove that a god doesn't exist while also halting spiritual groups from claiming that there is a divine. When I finished the book, I felt compelled to read another of his books because it was well written and thought provoking. My advice would be to break apart the book and read each essay on a different day as reading all of them in a day might take away the treasure found within each essay.

Alan Lightman addresses fundamental questions in this collection of short essays. He thinks clearly and his writing style is engaging and limpid. Why is the universe tuned so improbably perfectly to make life possible? How do we reconcile the ephemerality of existence with our longing for permanence? Is spirituality more than self-deluding wishful thinking? Why does the universe exhibit regularities and laws accessible to the human mind? Lightman explains the thoughts of many scientists and philosophers and shares his own feelings.

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