

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Properties of Light

by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

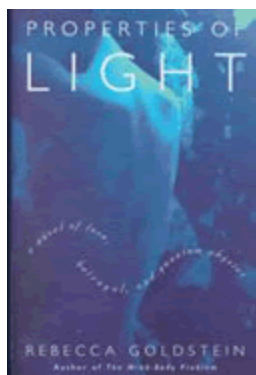
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Summary



With poetic lyricism, Rebecca Goldstein crafts what is, in essence, a ghost story about the relationships between love and sex, philosophy and physics. Justin Childs, a combination protagonist, omniscient narrator, hero and villain, is a young, brilliant professor desperate to achieve intellectual greatness. By doing so, he hopes to fill the void left by his equally accomplished and doting parents whose early death provided an abrupt end to his idyllic childhood.

Inspired by his work, Justin seeks out Samuel Mallach, an outcast professor sentenced to teach Physics and Poetry, and approaches him about a collaborative project—a modern take on Mallach’s earlier and much ridiculed work involving mathematics and physics. Mallach is apprehensive yet intrigued, and invites Justin over for dinner. There, Justin is introduced Dana, Mallach’s brilliant and intriguing daughter. Justin and Dana begin a romance based on lust, loss and quantum mechanics.

Justin, Mallach and Dana form a tight yet insidious threesome. But when Mallach learns that Justin has also been working with department head Dietrich Spencer, his intellectual rival, Mallach is pushed over the edge. Suddenly, this makeshift family of three is driven apart by their philosophical passions and fragile hearts.

Discussion Questions

1. Both Justin and Dana have suffered the tragedy of losing a parent/parents at a younger age. Does this influence how the two interact with one another? If so, how?
2. When Dana asks Justin if he believes in souls, Justin responds, “Of course not, Dana. We’re scientists, physicists. How can we believe in souls?” Can one believe in souls and science? Are they mutually exclusive of one another?
3. Quantum mechanics is the scientific study of matter on the atomic and subatomic level. Aside from it being what Justin and Mallach study, how does quantum physics play a role in the

novel? Did you notice the constant references to heat, fire, flames and light?

4. How would you characterize Justin and Dana’s relationship? Do they love one another?

5. Dietrich Spencer is a minor, yet pivotal character. What do you think of him and his role in the novel?

6. Do you agree with the claim Justin makes in the very first line of the novel, “The essential fact is that I hate her”? How would you define Justin’s passion for Dana?

7. Throughout the novel, Justin attempts to establish a sense of family with Dana and Mallach, only to destroy it. Why is this?

8. Describe Justin’s harsh opinion of Carlotta. As a mother and wife, does she leave a lot to be desired? Is Justin’s assessment of her fair? Did Carlotta destroy Mallach and Dana?

9. Describe Dana, her relationships with the men in her life and where she ends up at the close of the novel.

10. What do you think of Goldstein’s writing style? Did you notice her use of literary devices (foreshadowing, alliteration, allusion, imagery), and if so, how did it impact how you read the story?

About the Author

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein grew up in White Plains, New York, and graduated summa cum laude from Barnard College, and immediately went on to graduate work at Princeton University, receiving her Ph.D. in philosophy. After earning her Ph.D. she returned to her alma mater, where she taught courses in philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, philosophy of psychology, the rationalists, the empiricists, and the ancient Greeks. It was some time during her tenure at Barnard that, quite to her own surprise, she used a summer vacation to write her first novel, *The Mind-Body Problem*, which was published by Random House and went on to become a critical and popular success.

More novels followed including *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind*; *The Dark Sister*, which received the Whiting Writer’s Award, and *Mazel*, which received the 1995 National Jewish Book Award and the 1995 Edward Lewis Wallant Award. Her book of short stories, *Strange Attractors*, received a National Jewish Book Honor Award. Her 2005 book *Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*, was featured in articles in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times*, received numerous favorable reviews, and was named one of the best books of the year by *Discover* magazine, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *New York Sun*.

Goldstein’s *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew who Gave Us Modernity*, published in May 2006, and winner of the 2006 Koret International Jewish Book Award in Jewish Thought. Her latest novel, *Thirty-Six Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*, was published by Pantheon Books in 2010.

In 1996 Goldstein became a MacArthur Fellow, receiving the prize which is popularly known as the “Genius Award.”

Goldstein lives in Boston and in Truro, Massachusetts.

Adapted from the author’s website, <http://www.rebeccagoldstein.com/bio/index.html>

Additional Resources

New York Times Book Review “Love and Other Quantum Leaps”

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/09/17/reviews/000917.17brownr.html>

A review of the novel written by Sylvia Brownrigg, and includes the full-text of the first chapter of *Properties of Light*.

The Scientist in the Modern Novel: The Work of Rebecca Goldstein

<http://coastlinejournal.com/2010/07/16/the-scientist-in-the-modern-novel-the-work-of-rebecca-goldstein/>

This article defines “lab lit,” a literary genre in which scientists and their work are the premise of the story, and includes a scientific and literary overview of Goldstein’s major works of fiction.

The Quantum Handshake by John G. Kramer

<http://www.npl.washington.edu/AV/altvw16.html>

Kramer’s “Alternative View” column, from the magazine *Analog Science Fiction & Fact Magazine*, provides an overview of quantum mechanics and the Copenhagen interpretation.

“Quantum Mechanics” from the PBS companion site to *Transistorized*

<http://www.pbs.org/transistor/science/info/quantum.html>

This easy-to-follow introduction to quantum mechanics, by ScienCentral, Inc., and the American Academy of Physics, explains many of the theories discussed in *Properties of Light*.



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