

Reunion

by Alan Lightman

Pantheon Books (a division of Random House, Inc.)

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Judith Gray
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SUMMARY:

Reunion is the story of Charles, a complacent, alienated college literature professor who has decided, without quite knowing why, to attend his thirtieth college reunion. Once there, Charles retreats from the banal reunion activities and uninspiring classmates to a quiet room, where he begins to vividly relive memories of himself as a twenty-two-year-old college Senior. He travels back to the late 1960's, a time when he was infatuated with the poetry of Emily Dickinson and in love with Juliana, a beautiful and driven ballerina. His thoughts are set against a backdrop of political unrest, alternating between the leafy college campus of his youth and the New York City ballet world of Juliana. It is a year of personal and emotional trauma for Charles; he discovers that his English professor, James Galloway, is having an affair with Juliana. He confronts him, but what happens next? Charles remembers two distinct versions of this confrontation: in one, he is pillaring and threatening Galloway; in the other, he relents and forgives him. In both scenarios, however, Juliana is lost to him. She disappears and Charles is never able to find her.

This novel of a passionate but doomed love affair alternately shifts from first person to third, retelling events from different perspectives, as memory is reshaped by a changing self over time.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What does Charles' relationship with Sheila at the beginning of the novel reveal about him?
2. What is the significance of their discussion of the Honduran television piece?
3. During the reunion, Charles is silent about his experience. Why? What does this say about the author's portrayal of the experience?
4. Does Charles' infatuation with Juliana seem realistic? As an adult recalling these events, do his emotions resonate with the reader?

5. Why does Lightman choose an anorexic, driven character as Charles' love interest?
6. The recounting of his confrontation with Professor Galloway is a pivotal moment in the story. Why does Charles have two very different memories of this event? How could this happen?
7. In speaking about the formation of identity and reshaping of memories over time, Alan Lightman says that "every ten years or so you become a different person. How do you connect with the previous versions of yourself?" Discuss this concept of changing identity over time.
8. Charles quotes Deborah Raeke: "We are all the mothers and daughters of our own anxiety." He notes: "What is this anxiety? That we cannot accept our selfish natures." Discuss this concept as it relates to the characters of Juliana, James Galloway, and Charles.
9. Is Charles' narcissistic character redeemed at all by his commitment to raise the baby, or is this a selfish act?
10. Does Charles change as result of the reunion? Do you feel differently about Charles at the end of the novel than you did at the beginning?
11. What aspects of Lightman as a scientist come through in *Reunion*?
12. Discuss the view of aging portrayed in the novel.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Alan Lightman was born in 1948 in Memphis, TN, the oldest of four sons. His father, Richard Lightman, owned a movie theater and his mother, Jean Garretson, was a dancing teacher and volunteer Braille typist. He married Jean Greenblatt, a painter, in 1976. They have two daughters, Elyse and Kara, and live in Concord, MA.

Lightman received an AB in physics from Princeton University in 1970 and a PhD in theoretical physics from the California Institute of Technology in 1974. He taught and conducted research in astrophysics and astronomy at Harvard from 1976 to 1988. He moved to MIT in 1989, where he was given the chance to teach both science and writing, as a physicist and director of the Program in Writing and Humanistic Studies. In 2001 he became an adjunct professor, enabling him to devote more time to writing.

Lightman has always been interested in both science and humanities, especially writing and literature. He began writing essays on science in the 1980's, and turned to fiction in 1991. His interests include cross-cultural understanding, conveying the world of science to the lay reader, and distorting reality as a way of illuminating it.

His writing achievements include science textbooks, books on science for the lay reader, periodical columns and articles, and the novels *Einstein's Dreams* (1993), *Good Benito* (1995), *The Diagnosis* (2000), and *Reunion* (2003). *Reunion* is a transition away from science and social commentary to the inward, emotional life of characters.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Alan Lightman's website: <http://web.mit.edu/humanistic/www/faculty/lightman.html>

Additional Reading & Discussion Guide for *Reunion* published by Random House:
<http://www.randomhouse.com/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=0375713441&view=rg>

Book reviews of *Reunion*:
<http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/reunion/>

Bookninja discussion of *Reunion*:
http://www.bookninja.com/reviews/nov_2003/reunion.htm

Identity Theory interview of Alan Lightman by Robert Birnbaum:
<http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum128.html>

Interview of Alan Lightman on *Reunion* by Minnesota Public Radio:
http://www.mpr.org/www/books/titles/lightman_reunion.shtml



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