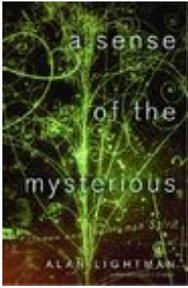


Concord Bookshop: A reading from local author Alan Lightman

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Ten years have passed since I first met **Alan Lightman** when I heard him read from his second novel **Good Benito** at the **Concord Public Library** in 1995. I particularly enjoyed how Alan used highpitched, nasal tone when he read the part of Arnold Scalapino, a cantankerous old physicist that fell into recluse while living in Fells Point, in east Baltimore. I recall a shiver ran up my spine when Alan delineated familiar places in Fells Point like Aliceanna Street, The Horse You Came In On or the Cat's Eye Pub, as these places I knew very well since I had grown up in east Baltimore.

Once again, I had the pleasure of hearing him read, this time from his current book, **A Sense of the Mysterious: Science and the Human Spirit**. A crowd had drawn this afternoon in the Concord Bookshop to listen to Alan read the first in a in this collection of essays.

Introduction:

"Today we have Alan Lightman, who is here to talk about, read from, and sign afterwards, his newest book, **A Sense of the Mysterious**. Alan currently teaches at MIT, he is adjunct professor. He received his undergraduate degree from Princeton and he received his Ph.D. in Theoretical Physics from Caltech. For almost 30 years he's been teaching first at Harvard and then at MIT, and the whole time he was also writing, he was having poetry published, essays, numerous works of fiction including **Einstein's Dreams**, Reunion, Diagnosis, and other works of nonfiction as well [Time for the Stars]. So welcome, Alan Lightman."

Alan Lightman:

"Thank you, Jill. Its wonderful to be here. My wife and I are both southerners, and my wife and I moved to Concord in 1979. We feel like we're really part of the community, and we raised our children here, and we just love this area. I know it takes southerners a long time to be adopted here by those in this part of the country and we feel like we've been adopted. I've been very fortunate in life to have had two different careers, about which goes back to childhood interests, which I'll be reading about. I've been passionate about both science and the arts from a young age and I didn't know how I was going to live with both of those interests. I felt different pressures from parents and family and friends to go one way or the other, either to be the scientific type of person or the artistic type of person. With those different categories there are a lot of other associations such as being rational kind of person or an intuitive kind of person, or being a deliberate thinker versus being a spontaneous actor, and lots of different dichotomies

about how people live in the world, and I felt gentle and not so gentle pressures to be one kind of person or another, but I was able to resist those pressures and starting with a little bit of talent and encouragement from the right people on the way and the generosity of some institutions I've been able to make a life in both worlds and both communities and it's been a real privilege."

"I've been fascinated by the different ways that scientists and artists approach the world, and when I say scientists and artists I mean those in very large categories of living, not just those particular labels, and the different ways that they approach the world and the different ways they think, and also the many similarities. There are probably more similarities than differences, especially the creative side of these fields. I've experienced the wonderful creative moment both as a scientist and as a writer and I feel they are very similar experiences in both cases, so that's a great common denominator. Anyway, what I wanted to do today was read a little bit today from this first essay in this new collection. These are all essays that I've written over the ten years and all of them in some way or another deal with the intersection of science and the humanities. I'm going to read some from the first essay which talks about my childhood which started off both as a scientist and as a writer. Then after reading this I'll be happy to talk to you about it or answer questions or listen to comments that you might have."

Following the reading, Alan engaged the crowd and took a variety of questions ranging from how would he qualify an appropriate question to properly test String Theory, a question which Alan said cannot yet be defined and as such String Theory must remain scientific theory and not fact since it is not yet falsifiable, to specific questions such as what if he had used Potassium Chlorate in his childhood rocket fuel or what was the hour on that proposed frictionless clock where a frictionless bug would have left the surface had it began starting at the 12 o'clock position (about 2:33pm, said Alan, the inverse cosine of $2/3$'s).

Soon Alan began to generously conduct a book signing. At my turn I reminded him of his reading of Good Benito ten years earlier, and I off-handedly commented how later that summer since I felt that I knew him after the reading that when I saw him in his front yard playing with his kids one day, I shouted a quick "Hi Alan" as I bicycled past. He must have thought I was a lunatic, I said. Alan replied, "So you live in the neighborhood, eh? Well please feel free to stop by some time." From a New Englander I would take such an invitation with a grain of salt knowing that they were just really being polite but didn't truly mean that you should just drop by one fine day. Somehow though, with Alan's southern mannerisms, he seemed quite sincere.

If you would like an audio recording of the event in mp3 format, please post a comment and I'll send you a link.