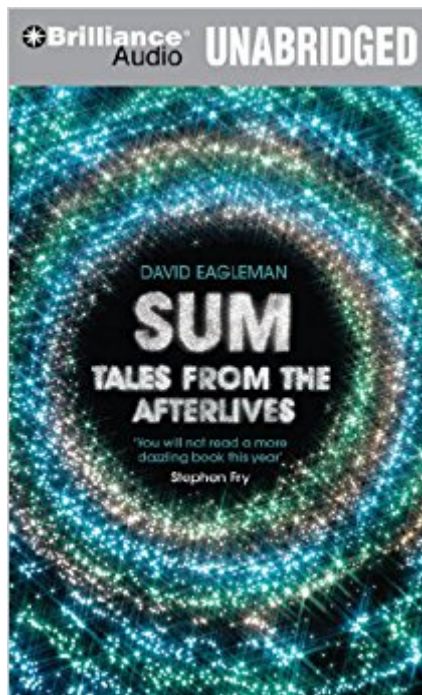


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Sum: Tales From The Afterlives



Synopsis

SUM shows us forty wonderfully imagined possibilities of life beyond death. In one afterlife you may find that God is the size of a microbe and is unaware of your existence. In another, your creators are a species of dim-witted creatures who built us to figure out what they could not. In a different version of the afterlife you work as a background character in other people's dreams. Or you may find that the afterlife contains only people whom you remember, or that the hereafter includes the thousands of previous gods who no longer attract followers. In some afterlives you are split into your different ages; in some you are forced to live with annoying versions of yourself that represent what you could have been; in others you are re-created from your credit card records and Internet history. Many versions of our purpose here are proposed; we are mobile robots for cosmic mapmakers, we are reunions for a scattered confederacy of atoms, we are experimental subjects for gods trying to understand what makes couples stick together. These tales—at once witty, wistful and unsettling—are rooted in science and romance and awe at our mysterious existence while asking the key questions about death, hope, technology, immortality, love, biology and desire that expose radiant new facets of our humanity.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. A clever little book by a neuroscientist translates lofty concepts of infinity and death into accessible human terms. What happens after we die? Eagleman wonders in each of these brief, evocative segments. Are we consigned to replay a lifetime's worth of accumulated acts, as he suggests in Sum, spending six days clipping your nails or six weeks waiting for a green light? Is

heaven a bureaucracy, as in Reins, where God has lost control of the workload? Will we download our consciousnesses into a computer to live in a virtual world, as suggested in Great Expectations, where God exists after all and has gone through great trouble and expense to construct an afterlife for us? Or is God actually the size of a bacterium, battling good and evil on the battlefield of surface proteins, and thus unaware of humans, who are merely the nutritional substrate? Mostly, the author underscores in Will-o-the-Wisp, humans desperately want to matter, and in afterlife search out the ripples left in our wake. Eagleman's turned out a well-executed and thought-provoking book. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

A slender volume of bite-size vignettes, Sum appears to be a whimsical novelty, amusing for idle perusal but quickly forgotten. In it, neuroscientist Eagleman offers 40 fates that may await us in the afterlife. A close reading of each carefully measured chapter provides an insight into human nature that is both poignant and sobering. In one afterlife, you relive all your experiences in carefully categorized groups: sleeping 30 years straight, sitting five months on the toilet, spending 200 days in the shower, and so forth. In another, you can be whatever you want, including a horse that forgets its original humanity. There are afterlives where you meet God, in one a God who endlessly reads Frankenstein, lamenting the tragic lot of creators; in another a God, female this time, in whose immense corpus earth is a mere cell. Eagleman's engaging mixture of dark humor, witty quips, and unsettling observations about the human psyche should engage a readership extending from New Age buffs to amateur philosophers. --Carl Hays --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

From a camping ground for old gods no longer worshipped to a heaven in which one can choose to live out eternity as a horse, *Sum: Forty Tales From the Afterlives* is truly a unique work. It is laugh-out-loud funny, it is thought provoking and it is, well, odd. But anyone who has ever wondered what the afterlife will be like will find this book immensely engaging. Take your choice of afterlives. Is God there? Sometimes. Is She confused? Often. Is She infallible? Not exactly. Author David Eagleman, who is described as "a neuroscientist and writer," treads the lines between science fiction and philosophy, is well versed in mythology and is someone you'd really like to sit down and talk to. This is a fabulous book in both senses of the word. Read it and you'll find yourself going back to one of its possibilities just as you're falling asleep. It'll give you something to think about during those times of day when the mind

drifts off into its remotest frontiers. It's all remind you of being a child and wondering about subjects such as a reflection inside a reflection inside a reflection. This book cannot be highly recommended enough. Just take my word and read it.

This is a quick, enjoyable read of forty different possibilities after death. I found all the stories intriguing. Each chapter is just a few pages long. I read it in just a couple of hours; starting it one evening before bed and finished the next as our plane was approaching home after a trip to Chicago. It's difficult to write about this without giving too much away; if you want take the stories at their freshest, stop reading my review and read the book now. Come back when you've finished (in an hour or two) to compare your thoughts with mine. In many of the chapters we can't communicate with God, or the creator(s), because there are such differences of scale or understanding. "Do you think it would have any meaning at all if you displayed one of your Shakespearean plays to a bacterium? Of course not. Meaning varies with spatial scale. So we have concluded that communicating with her is not impossible, but it is pointless." (P 16). Also: "She is the elephant described by the blind men; all partial descriptions with no understanding of the whole." (P 99) This theme resonates with me; I first saw a form of this idea on the original Cosmos with Carl Sagan. Because God is beyond us we can't perfectly conceive of him (Sagan was talking about aliens not God). Consider a two dimensional universe; one with length and width but no height - thinner than a flattest, thinnest paper. Beings in this universe would develop math and philosophy based on their experiences. Then suppose a cube appears over the universe casting a varying shaped shadow as it revolves above this two dimensional universe. The two dimensional beings could see the shadow shape change but could not conceive of a three dimensional cube. We can only conceive of those things which meet our scale. Other stories show the creator(s) were imperfect and even heaven is imperfect. "He is in the position of an amateur magician who performs for small children and suddenly has to play to skeptical adults." (P 93). Even then all is not lost: "He has recently faced his limitations, and this has brought Him closer to us." (P 94) Still another recurring theme considers our physical, atomic structure of bacterium, molecules, atoms and quarks. "But it turns out your thousand trillion trillion atoms were not an accidental collection; each was labeled as composing you and continues to be so wherever it goes. So you're not gone, you're simply taking on different forms." (P106). My favorite story was the last: Reversal where we live our lives backward "The pleasures of a lifetime of intercourse are relived, culminating in kissed instead of sleep." (P109) The most disturbing story was chapter four: Descent of Species. When given a chance to go back to earth as anything you want, pick wisely. David Eagleman is a neuroscientist, not a theologian or a

philosopher. This book is not for conservative religious, regardless of faith. But if you would like a small diversion to consider what might be ahead of us.

The book is a series of conjectures about the nature of the afterlife, and necessarily, the nature of God. Each tale relates the author's ideas on what happens when we die and the period following that ending. Each story is written matter-of-factly and is quite believable until the reader tries to keep reminding himself grounded in the "real" afterlife, which no one can really prove, one way or another. The comparison keeps the brain busy with maintaining the self in reality, while being curious about the latest tale and how reasonable it seems if you ignore the "facts." The facts themselves would find itself at home in the volume, and therefore the "real" afterlife is no more believable than the various make-believe versions. A friend who also read the book commented that it made him feel as if he were being "eaten alive."

I was impressed at how clever and diverse these stories are, and how consistently good they are. The first 20 or 30 are all completely different and brilliant. By the time I got to the last 40 they were getting a little repetitive and not quite as clever, but I still enjoyed them. Read it in small doses and it will be a thoughtful, humorous, and creative read.

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