

Illuminations
Alan Moore

About this book

In his first-ever short story collection, which spans forty years of work, Alan Moore presents a series of wildly different and equally unforgettable characters who discover—and in some cases even make and unmake—the various uncharted parts of existence.

In “A Hypothetical Lizard,” two concubines in a brothel of fantastical specialists fall in love with tragic ramifications. In “Not Even Legend,” a paranormal study group is infiltrated by one of the otherworldly beings they seek to investigate. In “Illuminations,” a nostalgic older man decides to visit a seaside resort from his youth and finds the past all too close at hand. And in the monumental novella “What We Can Know About Thunderman,” which charts the surreal and Kafkaesque history of the comics industry’s major players over the last seventy-five years, Moore reveals the dark, beating heart of the superhero business.

From ghosts and otherworldly creatures to theoretical Boltzmann brains fashioning the universe at the big bang, *Illuminations* is exactly that—a series of bright, startling tales from a contemporary legend that reveal the full power of imagination and magic.

For discussion

1. In this collection Alan Moore explores the most fundamental aspects of human nature and existence, probing questions as foundational as whether people start out evil or are corrupted along the way. In the first story, “Hypothetical Lizard,” the character Som-Som becomes a prostitute and is forced to have her right brain hemisphere severed from her left in order to keep people’s secrets. She is also kept isolated from the rest of the world. How do you think this impacts her perspective and actions in the story?
2. Though the word *transgender* is never used in “Hypothetical Lizard,” and it was written a decade before transgender rights became the political topic they are today, clearly the story is reckoning with the question of gender roles in a modern progressive way. What role do you think it plays in the story, and what does situating a transgender character in a fantastical brothel allow Moore to explore?
3. In the second short story, the main creature, a Whispering Pete, is living his life in reverse. Every day he reads his journal entries from the chronological day before, then they disappear. His life seems to be predetermined, yet he feels a sense of discovery to it all the same. What do you think this suggests about fate and how we experience our lives? What do you think Moore is saying about morality, given that the Whispering Pete arguably has no moral choices?
4. In “Location, Location, Location,” the main character Angie acts as the lawyer handling the sale and handover of a house, which symbolizes heaven on Earth, to Jesus Christ after

the apocalypse. How does her point of view impact the reality she is seeing around her? And what do you think Moore is saying about God and the end of the world given how he portrays them here?

5. Moore has a knack for making you see many sides of human character in this book. In “Cold Reading,” how does he use detail to sway you for or against the main character? For example, does learning the way the psychic conducts research on his clients impact your view of him? At what points do you find yourself empathizing with his character more or less, and why?
6. In “The Improbably Complex High-Energy State,” Moore explores the possibility of what occurred immediately following the big bang. In the first femtosecond of it all, as Moore calls it, the first metaphysical brains come into being, and life quickly grows corrupt. Is Moore suggesting that the universe is inherently immoral in some way? Would you consider this story science fiction or fantasy, and why?
7. “Illuminations” is both the title of one story and the book itself. What do you make of this choice for each of them?
8. In the story “Illuminations,” an old man visits a seaside resort from his childhood and gets lost in that remembering. What point do you think he is trying to make about nostalgia? Is the past something we’d all be better off letting go of?
9. “What We Can Know About Thunderman” explores the grisly underbelly of the comic industry. What do you think the unsavory nature of the characters in this story, the creators of American entertainment, suggests about the nature of that entertainment? Is Moore saying that the notion of superheroes is inherently bad?
10. Moore is outspoken about the way the comics industry exploited him and his creativity. Do you think that helped or hurt the story? What do you make of his attempt to turn his vendetta into art?
11. Moore uses many writing structures to create the Thunderman narrative, which do you find most effective and why?
12. “What We Can Know About Thunderman” is arguably a novel or novella, not a short story. Why do you think Moore considered it a story instead, and how did your read of it in a collection impact your experience of it?
13. In “American Light: An Appreciation,” we read through a poem by an imaginary beatnik author restarting his career and the annotations and analysis of said poem. What do you make of the use of the annotations, and do you feel this is more a story about the poet or the person analyzing him?
14. In the last story, we find two souls trying to discover who they are. The narrative takes the form of a conversation that gradually narrows the field to a surprising conclusion.

What does this form and its revelation suggest about the nature of identity and ethics?
Why do you think this is the story that concludes the collection?

Further reading

Alan Moore, *Jerusalem*; Alan Moore, *Watchmen*; Ted Chiang, *Exhalation*