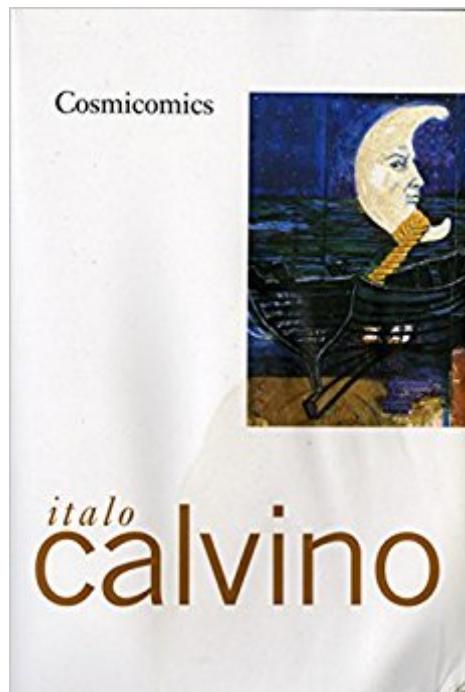


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Cosmicomics



Synopsis

Enchanting stories about the evolution of the universe, with characters that are fashioned from mathematical formulae and cellular structures. "Naturally, we were all there, - old Qfwfq said, - where else could we have been? Nobody knew then that there could be space. Or time either: what use did we have for time, packed in there like sardines?" Translated by William Weaver. A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book

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Customer Reviews

An enchanting series of stories about the evolution of the universe. Calvino makes characters out of mathematical formulae and simple cellular structures. They disport themselves amongst galaxies, experience the solidification of planets, move from aquatic to terrestrial existence, play games with hydrogen atoms -- and have time for a love life.

Metaphysical conceits are a thing of the past. Now with moon shots and interstellar probes, a writer really in tune with his age has to think of scientific conceits, or better yet, treat mathematical formulate, or theories and equations from physics, as if they were "characters" gamboling about the universe, beaming and burping through the void, carrying on the most enlightened (though not necessarily enlightening) conversations: " 'Ahal' I said. 'Why don't we play at flying galaxies?' 'Galaxies?' Pfwfp suddenly brightened with pleasure. 'Suits me. But you. . . you don't have galaxy!'

'Yes, I do. . . ." ' Italo Calvino offers many similar exchanges, his tales being extraordinary and brilliant (if you like them; tiresome and thin, if you don't) variations on the whole spectrum of evolutionary transformations, contractions, and expansions that have affected time and space since whatever your version of genesis happens to be. Calvino is a witty and fanciful fellow who enjoys linguistic pirouettes somewhat in the manner of Nabokov, but he lacks the latter's commanding personality, and he relies too heavily on the pathetic fallacy (the illusion that external objects have human feelings), so we find his simple cellular creatures telling us "When I was a kid, the only playthings we had in the whole universe were the hydrogen atoms. . . ." etc. etc. For science fiction devotees, in any case, clearly the most sophisticated item yet from that genre. (Kirkus Reviews)

We've always been trying to marry art and science. Correction--we've always been marrying art and science. Just that we perceive them to be separate, but Calvino's first collection of stories told by a super-natural creature where we hear the experiential side of science concepts like the Big Bang and the speed of light is great stuff. The followup isn't as strong, so enjoy the one on its own, I'd say.

Science-fiction is far from the realm of literature that I find fascinating. I mean the closest I ever was to the genre was reading the slightly spooky Northanger Abbey. Much to my chagrin one of my literature professors assigned this. Much to my surprise I couldn't put it down. A vignette of prehistoric stories retelling the creation of the universe from an unprecedentedly soulful point of view this novel really challenged the way I perceived language. I think I adored it so much because it made me question the significance and beauty of words. Calvino presents themes and emotions everyone can relate to in a totally difference setting and society. Imagine language before the creation of vowels, love before the creation of earth or time, or what family would look like if no one had bodies. Calvino repackages everything society presumes to be true into a thought-provoking series of stories that make you question the concept of truth. Calvino's fictional masterpiece is a springboard for discussing everything from creation stories to social constructs, and I could not recommend it enough. I rarely see this on the lists of "must read" books, but I can certainly tell you it is on mine. Delightful, poetic, and inspiring.

I had never read Calvino before but I was interested in the idea of science principles embodied as characters. I'm not a "science person" but I think he makes the material accessible in that it isn't as much about the science as it is using these phenomena to explain very human experiences. I did

think "The Distance of the Moon" was a bad story to put at the very beginning. I felt every other story in the collection had the same basic feel to it, except that one. I would recommend coming back to that one after you have read a few. As far as my favorites: "A Sign in Space" is very focused in semiotics, or the meaning and nature of signs and symbols. "The Aquatic Uncle" deals with the "problem of the older generation" and also has an ending that questions if it is worth being old and unchanging. "The Dinosaurs" was the strongest to me. It focuses on how perceptions of events or people groups change through time and how they can become untrue to the original event or people group. Also addresses how our understanding of history is subjective and interpretive. "The Light-Years" was also extremely strong and to me one of the most human ones in the collection. The narrator deals with the conflict of a bad first impression but being unable to correct it and how his overcompensation often leads to more problems than it solves. It also deals with our image of ourselves and if this is consistent with what others see of us. I would highly recommend this collection. It was a great read and my husband (who doesn't do as much magic realism as I do) read the ones above and liked them as well. :-)

Though anyone can enjoy this book I think it appeals especially to students of the physical sciences. Some of the stories are bizarre exactly because they violate scientific laws and those who have a good understanding of the laws in question will get more of the joke. For example, there is one about the moon being very close to the Earth, allowing people to climb a ladder from one to the other with gravity switching direction halfway between. Of course the gravity would not change appreciably between them because the Earth's gravity would still be dominant on the moon at that distance but that's what makes it fun. That is only my perspective from a science background though and I'm sure people from other disciplines will find their own particular joys in these cosmicomics. We used it for a school seminar and wrote our own cosmicomics afterward and I highly recommend trying it yourself. Was a lot of fun!

When I read the description for Cavlino's collection of science fiction stories inspired by the origins of the universe, I was immediately intrigued. As a writer who often uses math and science as a basis for my fiction I love to see what others have already done. The author spins his brief tales over many millennia, but the scope of time is not overwhelming for the characters or the reader, nor is the breadth of the expanding universe it takes place in. Each piece is spun out of a scientific theory but with a whimsy that is both endearing and a bit precious. It is his adherence to the theory within the fictional construct that I found fascinating, and having read Hawking and Sagan I know Calvino

has a lot of the right elements (quite literally). Many of the characters, including the narrator of the majority of the stories, are taken from formulas, and part of the fun is figuring out which. There is a playful inquisitiveness in each piece, and a love of women and their bewitching behinds, that make for entertaining reading.

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