

# **Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah Study Guide**

**Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah by  
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# Plot Summary

Two itinerant fliers meet on a Midwestern field and the one, a retired Messiah, Donald W. Shimoda, teaches the other, the narrator, Richard, how to see the world and everything in it as illusion. The teacher is assassinated, and the pupil records his story before facing his own destiny as another reluctant messiah.

Richard, who for years has been flying his antique biplane around the Midwest offering folks ten-minute rides for three dollars a turn, is surprised to spot another gypsy flier on the ground in Ferris, Indiana, and swoops down to meet him. They quickly bond through a love of flying and mechanics, and Richard rakes in more money than ever before, teamed up with Donald W. Shimoda. He finds the man mysterious and has a sense of foreboding in his company, but is ready to give up the lonely life awhile, that is, until Shimoda attracts too much attention through the "miracle" healing a crippled man. Fearing what the crowd will do and knowing the fate of messiahs, Richard flees.

Against all odds, Shimoda finds Richard and sets his plane down beside him. Like attracts like, he says and explains they are fellow messiahs. Shimoda knows it, but Richard does not - yet. By "miracles" small and large, Shimoda whets Richard's interest, but Shimoda claims there is nothing miraculous in what he does. One simply must realize the world and all it contains are illusion. The space-time continuum is false. One chooses how to live each of one's many lifetimes, for the person created in the perfect likeness of "The Infinite Radiant Is," i.e., God, is indestructible. Over many lifetimes, Shimoda has learned to be a Messiah, finds it wearying, and has retired with God's blessing but cannot unlearn all he has learned. He takes Richard under his intellectual and spiritual wing, as wing-to-wing they fly from one farming community to the next offering rides and making good money.

Richard is an avid pupil but finds mastering such techniques as cloud-vaporizing; the magnetizing of objects as tiny as a blue feather; walking on water; breathing in water; swimming through dry ground; and sinking into solid earth as though it were liquid, more difficult than he knows they should be. Richard is thoroughly frustrating. Much of the problem lies in Shimoda's maddening teaching techniques, which insists Richard discover truths and master techniques on his own. He shows Richard the standard *Messiah's Manual & Reminders for the Advanced Souls*, a small book of maxims, which sometimes helps clarify things and sometimes only frustrates more. When Richard cannot apply all he has mastered to the task of walking through walls, Shimoda shows him it is possible and takes Richard to a movie theater, where a clearly-illusionary experience helps clarify his mind. It is well-known and easily understood that one must suspend belief in order to enter the storyline of a movie, which is, after all, a series of non-moving images that depend on being projected on a screen to produce the appearance of reality in space and time. Only a small further step is required to see one's many lifetimes as films, whose genre and outcome one chooses rather than having been thrust upon them.



Richard finally sees the point; accepts he knows what he knows; says what he says, and it matters not whether anyone listens or agrees with him. Richard thus "graduates," but has little time left with his Master. His long-held premonition of evil and doom is fulfilled as Shimoda appears as a guest on a late-night radio talk show, intentionally infuriates the listeners and the next day at high noon is assassinated before Richard's eyes. Shimoda lessens the shock somewhat by coming to in Richard in a dream, their roles fully reversed. Shimoda assures Richard they are linked forever and can still discuss matters, but he is tired of living in time and space. Overriding his intention never to write again, Richard begins a journal entry about his late friend, the Reluctant Messiah.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Two itinerant fliers meet on a Midwestern field and the one, a retired Messiah, Donald W. Shimoda, teaches the other, the narrator Richard, how to see the world and everything in it as illusion. The teacher is assassinated, and the pupil records Shimoda's story before facing his own destiny as another reluctant messiah.

A Master emerges from Indiana, recalling earlier lives in other lands, where people have come to him for counsel. People throng the auto repair shop in which he works, to the point his bosses ask him to leave. The Master goes into the countryside, where people follow him, calling him Messiah and miracle worker, and their belief becomes fact. He always speaks in parables about how each person controls whether to be healthy or sick, rich or poor, free or slave.

A mill-man objects that the Master does not need to work for a living, so the Master tells about a village of creatures at the bottom of a great river. The creatures resist the current by clinging to twigs and rocks, a behavior learned from birth. One creature grows bored, trusts the unseen current knows where it is going and lets it take him where it will. The others warn he will be killed faster by letting go than by boredom, but ignoring them, he lets go. He is, indeed, tumbled and smashed but is finally lifted free from the bottom and bruised or hurt no more. Creatures downstream, to whom he is a stranger, proclaim this miraculous flying creature a Messiah. The creature denies this, explains the current and declares their true work lies in the voyage, the adventure. They watch him float on and begin making legends of a Savior.

Worn out by the multitudes thronging him, demanding miracles and lessons on how to live their lives, the Master prays in private to the Infinite Radiant Is, asking to be released from the impossible task of living the lives of 10,000 souls. He is sorry he has let it go this long and wants to return to his work. An androgynous, infinitely kind voice declares it is up to the Master what to do, so long as he is happy. Descending the hillside happily, he announces, "I quit," and the multitudes are astonished. The Master asks what the people would do if God were to command them, face-to-face, to be happy in the world. Breaking the silence, the Master says he has just learned that the path of happiness teaches each why they have chosen this lifetime. His choice is to leave and let them walk their own path as they please. The Master returns to his everyday world.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter 1 consists of thirty-one numbered paragraphs describing in pseudo-biblical language the coming of a Master into the modern world. The description and the speaking in parables have all the marking of Jesus Christ's ministry in Galilee, except this Master does not care for his assignment and asks to quit. God replies that whatever

the Master wants for his life, God, too, wants. The Epilogue makes clear this is the narrator's recollection about his friend, Donald W. Shimoda.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Flying over Ferris, Indiana, in his Fleet biplane, narrator Richard spots an antique Travel Air 4000 on the ground and decides to drop in. It is mid-July and the first time in years he has seen a fellow gypsy flier. He lands neatly, taxis close, throttles down, and nods to Donald W. Shimoda, who is sitting beneath his plane and watching. Richard likes Shimoda instantly without knowing why. He is not large, has black, shoulder-length hair, and hawk's eyes. Shimoda claims there is not much he can do but barnstorm because he gets into problems if he stays anywhere too long. Richard finds it hard to look at the man closely because light seems to glisten around his head and fade into misty silver. Shimoda brushes off Richard's question about his troubles, saying only he likes to keep moving - like Richard.

Shimoda's 1928/29 plane is better than factory-fresh, with no dust, scratches, patches, streaks of engine oil, straw in the cockpit, or smashed bugs on the propeller. It seems eerily like Shimoda must materialize rather than land, and the story Shimoda gives that he has been hopping passengers for four or five weeks with no sign of wear seems a lie. Shimoda calmly claims he is telling the truth and there are some things Richard does not yet know. Richard declares some day he will know everything and give Shimoda his airplane because he will not need it in order to fly. When Shimoda asks why, Richard is delighted to tell his theory: for a long time, people were unable to fly because they did not think it was possible and did not learn about aerodynamics. Richard believes there is another principle in which machines are not needed to fly, to move through walls, or to get to planets. Shimoda half-smiles and nods, asking if Richard expects giving three-dollar hops will teach him what he wants to know. Richard responds he has learned what mattered on his own by doing what he wants, but if anyone could teach him more, he would run to him or her. Richard feels guided and watched over and believes he will find a teacher, provided he himself does not prove to be the teacher, something Shimoda agrees can happen.

A pickup approaches from which step an old man and a ten-year-old girl. Richard lets Shimoda sell the ride. The solemn girl refuses to fly. Shimoda lets Richard take the grandfather up, and, surprisingly, has no trouble starting the propeller for him. Climbing to 800 feet, Richard circles the man's farmstead, passes over Ferris to advertise his services, and lands, just as the Travel Air sweeps into the air bound for the farm. The man declares Shimoda could sell ashes to the devil, for he has convinced Sarah to fly, someone who, from birth, has been terrified of heights. As Shimoda lands, Richard notes no bug splats, and Sarah excitedly tells her grandpa how Shimoda has explained that a fall in a past life caused her fears and now she wants to be a pilot.

More cars arrive by noon, and the two pilots fly solidly until sunset. Richard observes the Travel Air remains immaculate but is too busy to ask if Shimoda made up the story of Sarah's past death. At dusk, Richard heats cans of stew and Spaghetti-O's, and





happily counts the day's unheard of proceeds. Shimoda is not interested in talking money, wanting to hear more about Richard's theories, but Richard cannot be distracted.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 introduces the enigmatic Donald W. Shimoda, a fellow gypsy flier and drifter, with whom the narrator, Richard, strikes an instant, if uneasy, friendship. Shimoda appears to be waiting for Richard in out-of-the-way Ferris, Indiana and is interested in Richard's theory about some day flying without a plane. Shimoda's pristine plane is a mystery that will only deepen becoming symbolic of the pilot being an authentic Messiah. Note Richard allowing the chance he may himself be a teacher and Shimoda agreeing. This is the first instance of "like attracting like."



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Richard dreams about a throng of humanity pouring against a man, then turning into an ocean of water the man walks over, and then becoming grass on which he lands a biplane. Richard awakens at 3 AM, happy about the dream, and senses Shimoda's presence rather than seeing him. Shimoda asks if the dream has clarified what is going on and admits he is the "Mechanic Messiah" and "American Avatar" who disappeared one day before 25,000 eyewitnesses. Richard recalls the headlines and has a hard time falling asleep afterwards.

Working on his engine, Richard is surprised messiahs can quit. When Shimoda tosses Richard a wrench, it floats weightless but is appropriately heavy when Richard catches it. Shimoda says one can quit anything, even breathing, as he floats a screwdriver for his own amusement. He admits to being defensive about quitting the messiah job but feels that is better than staying with something he hates. Richard cannot picture Jesus returning to being a carpenter, but Shimoda wonders why Jesus would *not* quit once people start call him Savior, rather than trying logic no one can understand. Returning to normal life has not been easy, because people quickly realize he can heal diseases and they surround him in each new locale. The plane keeps him moving aimlessly. Richard doubts people will ever let Shimoda alone because the "motion of our time" is from the material toward the spiritual. Shimoda objects; people want only miracles, which he can teach someone else to perform. There is no problem so big one cannot run from it.

Richard catches the allusion to Snoopy and asks Shimoda how he would react if he were to stop work on his engine and ask him to heal it, or to pay Shimoda to teach Richard to float in the air, or to pray to Shimoda as the Holy One sent to lift his burden? Shimoda smiles, maintaining he can run away. Richard sees this is painful and is sorry he has brought it up, but Shimoda looks through him, saying if one says he has something or acts as though he has something, then he has it. Simple as this is, people refuse to listen and instead demand miracles - just as they demand car crashes at auto races. Shimoda cannot see how other messiahs stand it.

Richard asks where they will head today. Approaching Richard's windshield, Shimoda makes the smashed bugs come alive and fly away, but says he has no destination. He knows past, present, and future, but tries not to think about them. Contemplating the fate of other messiahs, Richard is unsure he will be safe with Shimoda, and common sense dictates he flees. Lonely, however, Richard stays with Shimoda, northbound into an unknown future.



## Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 reveals that Shimoda is a bored ex-Messiah- like the unnamed one in enigmatic Chapter 1. People are too demanding, and Shimoda needs space, so he flies around aimlessly. That the story of his quitting once made front-page headlines will prove important in the epilogue. Richard knows better than to stay with this odd fellow, who seems destined for a sad ending, but he has been lonely too long. Note Shimoda's bemusement at his own miracles, which he will soon explain as being quite unmiraculous.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Richard dogs Shimoda about how he knows so much and what formal training a Master needs. Shimoda produces a copy of the *Savior's Manual* - officially, the *Messiah's Manual & Reminders for the Advanced Souls*, a small suede-bound book of maxims. Richard leafs through it, reading about Perspective. Shimoda cannot recall this passage about being a messiah involving a horrible death. That is not obligatory, and Shimoda is unaware if this awaits him. It seems pointless now that he has quit being a Messiah, so he may just ascend in a few weeks once his task is complete. Richard does not realize Shimoda is being serious and reads on about being true to oneself and teaching best what one most needs to learn.

Shimoda observes Richard is being quiet but does not himself want to be distracted from reading about living in such a way as never to be ashamed; friends knowing one better in a minute than acquaintances in 1,000 years; and avoiding responsibility by saying "I've got responsibilities." Richard asks why the pages are not numbered, to which Shimoda replies one simply opens this book and reads whatever one finds. It will be appropriate. Richard tries it wondering what will happen if he stays with Shimoda much longer and is unable to shake a feeling of dread. Richard reads about being led through life by an inner spiritual creature; about not turning away from possible futures until one is sure they hold nothing, and always being free to change one's mind and choose a different future or past. Choosing a different past boggles Richard's mind, but Shimoda assures him that he only has to practice a week and a half to know all the answers, and, because Richard will believe Richard is a Master, he will, indeed, be one. Richard objects that he never said he wanted this, to which Shimoda agrees. Richard keeps the handbook and Shimoda never asks for it back.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 introduces the little handbook of maxims that will feed Richard's thirst for spiritual knowledge in the pages ahead. Shimoda is cavalier about the book and how practicing its precepts makes one a Master rather rapidly. Richard is fearful but cannot tear himself away. He misses the one serious thing Shimoda says: something big is destined to occur within weeks.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Gypsy fliers need a long, smooth, close-cut field near a town with an access road and the field owner's permission. Richard thinks about this as he flies next to Shimoda. Spotting a field too small for a Travel Air, Richard performs a show-off landing and is about to rejoin his friend in the air when he sees Shimoda approaching so slowly his plane should stall. The three-point landing leaves Richard dumbfounded.

The first customers arrive as Richard asks about the landing. Suddenly furious that Richard has not known this, Shimoda says the answer to floating tools, healing sickness, turning water into wine, walking on water, and landing Travel Airs on 100 feet of grass all come from realizing the world and everything in it are *illusion*. All day, Richard watches the Travel Air perform like an E-2 Cub or helicopter and recalls hearing as a kid how magic is illusion. He opens the handbook to two sentences about how problems always accompany gifts, and, without knowing why this eases his confusion, feels comforted.

They are in Troy, where Richard senses tension in the air and mulls over his partner's impossible actions and odd way of explaining them. They make a lot of money, but Richard feels they had better move along. Every time he has ignored such a feeling in the past, he has been sorry. About 3 PM, Richard needs to refuel and remembers the Travel Air has, impossibly, not needed gas or oil the whole time. Richard casually asks Shimoda how he is doing on fuel. Shimoda responds as to a slow first-grader, "I don't need any gas." Watching Shimoda fly off again, Richard wishes the people would go home so they could leave or that he would have the sense to fly away alone somewhere and try to make sense of this.

When Shimoda lands, Richard announces his decision but agrees to wait while Shimoda takes up one last passenger, a man who sits as he has for eleven years, crushed down in a battered wheelchair. A crowd of fifty or so people watch. It looks staged as the cripple responds to Shimoda's casual command and amazes himself by running to the plane and climbing into the cockpit unassisted. A murmur goes through the crowd as the plane soars, and Richard feels both joy for the miraculous healing of someone who looks like he deserves it and unease about what will happen when they return. Another wheelchair is rolled forward. Shimoda would be wise to drop the passenger on the far side of the field and disappear, but he lands close and is surrounded. Richard flies away south and then southeast, landing at nightfall, far from any town.



## Chapter 5 Analysis

The seeming "miracle" of how Shimoda flies his large biplane proves too much for Richard's sensibilities, and an odd sense of foreboding overtakes him. With the healing of a quadriplegic, Richard worries another Messiah will die messily at the hands of a mob and does not want to be around to see it. Having mentioned Jesus' changing water into wine and walking on the waves, it may have occurred to Richard that the last miracle before the crucifixion is Jesus' raising of Lazarus (hinted at in Chapter 6). Jesus' irritation at his disciples' unending obtuseness is mirrored effectively in Shimoda's attitude.



# Chapters 6 and 7

## Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

An inexplicable feeling of doom has made Richard flee, and it takes a while to readjust to loneliness. He starts a fire, and, for fun, tries floating the 9/16th in the air. For an instant, it works before falling hard. If Shimoda did this by illusion, what is real? If life is illusion, why live? Without knowing the answers, Richard is happy to be where he is, knowing what he knows. Until 10 PM, he sings endless songs to keep from thinking and then mentally wishes Shimoda will get whatever he wants. The handbook falls open to a maxim declaring true family to be linked not by blood but by respect and joy in one another's lives. Richard cannot see how this applies to him, tells himself not to let a book replace his own thinking, and falls asleep.

Richard wakes at dawn feeling something brush his forehead and, figuring it is a bug, slaps it - only to find the 9/16th in his grip. It seems to hover as it bounces away, but is heavy when he picks it up. Puzzled and annoyed, Richard prepares to cook pan-bread. Hearing an engine, he knows this field is really out of the way, but Shimoda has found it, so Richard calmly plans what to say. The Travel Air lands as a Travel Air should. Both men act as if this meeting is expected, and Shimoda criticizes the pan-bread. Richard asks why no one likes it, and, grinning, Shimoda says it tastes good to Richard only because he believes it does--to others, it is terrible.

Richard has vowed not to ask Shimoda how he found him but cannot resist. "Like attracts like," Shimoda says; it is a cosmic law. When Richard asks how they are alike, Shimoda replies we miracle-workers must stick together. The position of the 9/16th suggests Richard has been levitating, so Shimoda explains many beginners do miracles in their sleep because their waking minds will not accept miracles. Richard will learn faster now and will soon be a wise spiritual maestro. Richard insists he does not want to know anything beyond why the world is, why he is here, where he is going, and how he can fly without an airplane.

Shimoda is sorry it does not work this way: once one learns what the world is and how it works, one *automatically* performs so-called miracles. Richard does not recall Shimoda asking if he wants to learn anything - and immediately knows Shimoda will inform him, rightly, that he will recall it later. Shimoda dismisses worry about the crowd; Richard is magic, invisible, and untouchable - unless he wants to be touched. He can walk through doors. Shimoda admits letting the crowd at Troy get him because he is a ham and enjoys it. Just because he has quit full-time Messiah work does not mean he can unlearn what he has spent lifetimes coming to know.

Richard asks Shimoda straight out what is going on, and after a silence, Shimoda suggests Richard tell him and he will correct any errors. Richard says: 1) seeing Shimoda over Ferris is no coincidence, and 2) they share some mystical agreement Richard has forgotten but Shimoda has not. Perhaps they have met long ago, enjoy the



same adventures and learning, and hate the same destroyers. Shimoda has the better memory. Their meeting today is because "Like attracts like." Shimoda laments how long the story is taking, but concedes Richard may find the point. Richard replies he must make Shimoda know what Shimoda *thinks* Richard knows, so Richard can learn the things Richard *wants* to learn.

Richard asks what is in it for Shimoda, a man too advanced to need anything from the world, whose only problem is having no problems? Shimoda asks Richard to hypothesize why he quit his Messiah job, but dismisses his answer; "crowdphobia" is Richard's cross, not Shimoda's. Only crowds that do not care what he has to say and cannot be made to care bother him. Richard perceives if Shimoda's happiness depends on what someone else does, then he has a problem. This observation causes a sharp reaction, and Richard realizes it is a bad idea to anger Shimoda, but Shimoda agrees and falls into a trance, missing Richard's prattle about the universe. Shimoda says nothing as Richard asks why he can suddenly talk about things he has never tried to talk about and declares it unfair to leave him to answer his own questions. The Messiah has fallen asleep.

At 6 AM, Wednesday, Richard jumps out from under the Fleet's wing as a symphony and thousand-voice Latin choir shake the field. Shimoda orders the music to stop, and tells Richard it emanates from Richard's sleeping mind. Shimoda returns to sleep, leaving Richard to read the handbook and consider there is much about messiahs Richard does not understand.

## Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

Chapter 6 swiftly reunites Richard and Shimoda as "likes," fellow miracle workers. Richard is uncomfortable with this likeness, but intuits it is true. A wisecrack on Richard's part causes Shimoda's temper to flare, and the stricken Messiah, who cannot turn his back on his gift entirely, sleeps through his new apprentice's first discourse on the universe. Richard standing dumbly with his 9/16th wrench in his hand evokes an image from the opening of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. His attempts at levitating the wrench while asleep prove his spiritual quest has begun. The two-page, Chapter 7 shows Richard does not yet understand much about messiahs. The following chapters will demonstrate this in various situations.





# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

After dinner in Hammond, Wisconsin, Richard concedes life can be interesting or dull, depending on what one makes of it and states he has never figured out why we are here. Shimoda insists they see *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. At the climax, as the heroes are surrounded, Shimoda asks why Richard is here and then orders him to snap out of this illusion. Irrked, Richard says he is at the movies because Shimoda has asked him - and he wants to see the ending.

Walking back to the planes, Shimoda explains laughingly *Sundance* is the answer to Richard's question of why we are here. Even the best movie is illusion, he says, and the pictures only appear to move. Richard lists many reasons why people go to films, but Shimoda categorizes them to entertainment or education. After Richard deduces movies must be like one's lifetime, Shimoda points out some like horror, others soap opera, and many believe they are helpless in the "films" of their own lives. They are unhappy because they choose to be unhappy, which is all right, although humans are fun-loving creatures - the otters of the universe - incapable of dying or hurting themselves any more in life than in movies. They can, however, imagine being hurt or hurting, having good or bad luck over many lifetimes.

Richard has seen tonight's movie partly because Shimoda wanted him to, and so, too, do many choose lifetimes that let them do things together. Tonight's actors have worked in other films. People buy tickets because they agree to believe in the reality of space and time, which is both primitive and untrue. Writers, actors, movie professionals, and audiences all play their part; all are free to walk out, change the plot, or see the same film many times. The mind or imagination, Richard perceives, is life's projector, and, Shimoda explains, a can of film holds the beginning, middle, and end simultaneously. To enjoy it, to experience the illusion of time and space, one must see it put through a projector and lens. Then one forgets everything outside the theater. The blood one sees in real life could as well be tomato sauce for the effect it has. Reality is divinely indifferent. "The Is" cares nothing about human illusions and games, knows only itself and humans in its perfect, finished likeness.

When Richard objects that being perfect and finished is boring, Shimoda takes him out to admire the starry sky, always perfect, even though it is constantly changing; as is the sea. Richard gets annoyed that everything he says is wrong and suggests maybe he should sell real estate or insurance. He wants neither future nor past, just to become a Master of the World of Illusion within a week. Shimoda hopes it will go faster.



## Chapter 8 Analysis

Philosophical Chapter 8 uses a classic American movie to help explain how human life is illusory. Shimoda's point is most graphically made when he suggests that the violence that fills real life is no more meaningful than the ketchup blood on screen. People repeatedly live the illusory lives they choose, and God stays scrupulously out of the picture, seeing only the perfection of human nature as a reflection of him/herself. Note Shimoda is sticking to the time frame he originally sent for the completion of his still-undisclosed mission with Richard. The focus on the chapter is on how the technology of movie-making clarifies how life is illusory, making which film they view irrelevant, but it may be that *Sundance's* quick-tongued male leads in an anti-establishment tale make it particularly appropriate for this Messiah and his apprentice.



# Chapters 9, 10 and 11

## Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Summary

One afternoon, between passengers, Richard cannot vaporize clouds and knows he is making things harder than they are. He points to the biggest, meanest storm cloud as a challenge for Shimoda and it disappears. Shimoda claims it is easy and has Richard concentrate on a wispy puff of white. After seven minutes, it vanishes, and Shimoda advises him just to relax and remove it from his thinking, rather than being negatively attached. The handbook says clouds do not know why they move as they do, but get an impression from the sky, which does know. In the same way, if one lifts oneself high enough, one can also know. One never receives a wish without the power to make it true - with work.

At an isolated field on the Illinois-Indiana state line, Shimoda tells Richard to watch quietly and see a non-miracle. Shimoda walks several yards onto the surface of a pond, stands firm, and summons Richard, who laughs as he seems to walk on blue linoleum. In less than a minute, Richard accepts walking on water as natural and then learns to drink it by believing it is liquid, breathing it by believe it is air, and all the while suspecting this is happening only because he is in the presence of an advanced soul. When Richard asks why one cannot do the same with land, Shimoda walks ashore, sinks slowly into the pasture, swims, splashes, floats, and then walks, and the walking seems suddenly miraculous. Richard imagines the ground to be two feet deep, steps ashore, but plunges over his head. Shimoda laughs and applauds Richard as a remarkable student. When Richard stops struggling, he sees the ground is solid and walks out, crusted in dirt. Shimoda's clothing is spotless.

As Richard changes his clothes, Shimoda tells him never to forget what he has done today. It is easy to forget or to think something is a dream or a miracle, but nothing good is a miracle, and nothing lovely is a dream. The image even of a sunset is a dream, but the beauty is real. When Shimoda asks if Richard understands, Richard almost does but later checks the handbook. The world, it says, is one's exercise book rather than reality, a place where one can express reality - or write nonsense or lies, or even tear the pages.

## Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

Two-page Chapter 9 establishes that summer is rapidly and profitably passing and Richard is learning things. The next two chapters show how painfully slow the progress is, first by having Richard wish a cloud to disappear, and then having him walk on water and swim in solid ground. There is great playfulness to the narrative as the Messiah makes it look effortless and the disciple cannot let it be effortless. The physical world is what one believes it to be, says both Shimoda and the prescient handbook.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

One afternoon walking out of town, Shimoda is in no mood to discuss the metaphysics of whether he can walk through walls, and Richard is annoyed about never receiving straight answers. When Shimoda says it helps if he is precise in his thinking, Richard restates the question: How can he move the illusion of a limited sense of identity in space-time (i.e., his body) through the illusion of material restriction (i.e., a wall)? Shimoda is pleased and believes this should answer itself. Shimoda reminds him how easy things once appeared hard (like walking as an infant), and reverses the proposition: Can *Richard* walk through walls? Frustrated, Richard says it is impossible for him, until Shimoda reminds him of swimming in the earth, walls being just vertical earth. Richard believes it is getting through to him, so Shimoda turns sharply and vanishes through an orange brick wall, leaving Richard to take the long way back to the planes.

Richard concludes Shimoda does not live in this world. Learning to pour gas into his tank, Shimoda looks up, startled, and agrees, asking if Richard can name *anyone* who does. Richard insists he does and is puzzled when Shimoda marvels at the way Richard never stops learning. Without sarcasm or irony, Shimoda asks about the other four billion people in the world, who are rocked by the financial markets and the New York Open rather than flying passengers in Maitland, Ohio, and worrying about hailstorms. Can they be living in four billion separate worlds? Richard understands only after the handbook opens to a passage about fictional characters being more real than flesh-and-blood.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

Chapter 12 shows Richard, having swum through earth, unable to make the logical jump to walking through walls or to phrase his question in such a way that it will answer itself. Shimoda is growing impatient. Notice Shimoda is learning to pour gas into his own tank. In the following chapters, the two aircraft begin to equalize as signs of their owners' spirituality, until, in the epilogue, they are fully reversed.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

That night, when Shimoda observes it is a great way to run the universe, allowing everyone to do whatever he or she wants, Richard adds a proviso, "as long as we don't hurt somebody else." A shadow frightens Richard. Shimoda walks toward it and leads back a lean, wolf-like fellow dressed in evening clothes and a lined cape. He speaks with an indistinct East European accent and seems uncomfortable in the light. Richard tries to put him at ease but jumps back when he asks to drink some of his blood. The wanderer has not chosen this lonely, painful life and seems to think Shimoda will force Richard to submit. When Richard threatens violence, the vampire admits Shimoda has made his point, smiles, and fades away.

Still trembling, Richard hears in a mock-Transylvanian accent about a "thought-form," a very useful tool when one wants to make a point with someone who is not listening. Hoping he did not overdo it, Shimoda says Richard's ferocity proves he will do what he wants even if it hurts another, and that each person decides alone whether or not to be hurt. The vampire's decision to hurt if he fails to drink blood is his own. Richard's decision is to give him blood, ignore him, tie him up, or drive a stake through his heart. The vampire is free to resist however he wants, and the choices go on and on. It is important to realize all are free to do whatever they want.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

Chapter 13 opens with a handbook quote: "Your conscience is the measure of the honesty of your selfishness. Listen to it carefully." Richard's conscience tells him one's freedom to do whatever he wants is bounded by the provision no one be harmed by the decision. Shimoda disproves such naivety through a useful messianic trick that gets the reticent to listen. Shimoda's offbeat humor comes through the mock-Transylvanian dialect and his entire staging of the demonstration.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

At a cafe in Ryerson, Ohio, Richard asks Shimoda if he gets even a little lonely and proceeds to talk about the experience of meeting people for mere minutes. Over tasty hamburgers covered with sesame seeds, Shimoda declares, humans are magnets, naturally able whenever they want to attract anything they want and leave all else untouched. One need not *do* anything, for cosmic law takes care of it - like attracting like. Simply be what one is, ask, "Is this what I really want to do?" and act only if the answer is yes. This takes imagination, not faith. When Richard asks how imagining a lovely, wise, mystical lady in Tarragon, Illinois, will affect anything, Shimoda despairs and runs through a series of sayings, too rapidly for Richard to follow. The gist is imagining does not affect reality. Why does Richard dream about airplanes when asleep? Shimoda asks, to which Richard replies: freedom and escape. Shimoda declares one's waking dreams are the same -freedom from routine, authority, boredom, and gravity. Richard has failed to realize he is already free and has always been.

Shimoda claims he gets lonely only if he feels like it and both of them have friends from other dimensions around them from time to time. Shimoda challenges Richard to imagine something small, to visualize its every line and edge from end to end and setting it in a golden light, if he wishes, which sometimes helps make it seem real. Richard waits all afternoon to see the blue feather he has imagined, and is amazed when it appears at dinnertime as a milk carton logo. Had he wanted a *real* feather, Richard should have visualized himself holding it. Richard is exhilarated by this first experience of magnetizing, but Shimoda warns him to be careful.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Chapter 14 introduces the concept of magnetizing: imagining something so perfectly that it appears. It includes a clever allusion to Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed, with Shimoda claiming back then people had no word for imagination and used "faith," which creates a solemn bunch of followers for a Messiah. Richard knows for fact, sesame seeds were present in first-century Palestine, but says nothing.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

Richard's engine is throwing less oil. Shimoda tests him by asking how he can expect to impress the workaday world while running around irresponsibly as a gypsy pilot.

Richard replies: 1) he does not exist to impress the world but to make himself happy, 2) everyone else is free to do whatever they want for a living, and 3) since "Responsible is Able to Respond," he answers only to himself - if he wants. There is nothing wrong with being irresponsible, but most people like to know why they are doing something.

Realizing the answer is too long; Richard tries again, saying he allows both the world and himself to live as they choose. Shimoda smiles proudly, declaring this last statement the concise, quotable, guarded words truly messianic, and Richard savors watching his own mind work.

Pretending to be a kind, but friendless, person, Shimoda tests Richard to answer how that person can be loved. Richard first tries humor, but is cautioned people who come with problems do not want jokes and games. Richard turns serious: Masochists, crocodile god worshipers, and would-be martyrs prove the Golden Rule does not work. What made the Samaritan think the man by the roadside wanted help? What if he was enjoying the challenge of healing himself spiritually? Changing the Rule to "Do unto others as they want to be done to" or "Do unto others as you truly feel like doing unto other" would improve nothing. Shimoda warns Richard will lose ninety percent of his audience unless he keeps it short, but Richard shoots back he does not care, since he knows what he knows and talks what he talks. Shimoda declares Richard has just graduated and is a Master. Richard declares it frustrating as hell, and Shimoda advises him to get used to it.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Chapter 15 shows Shimoda giving Richard his final examination in Messianic training, and Richard thinks he is being quite clever in his answers, albeit too verbose. Only when he turns petulant at the suggestion he will turn off his audience does Shimoda declare he has graduated. The discussion focuses on Jesus' familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), skirting the cogent features to examine some odd paradoxes that fit the life is illusion theme. Note the Fleet showing signs of needing less routine maintenance, becoming similar to the Travel Air.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

In Hayward Hardware, Richard finds parts for his plane and is pleased to hear a boyhood favorite, *Greensleeves*, played on a lute. It seems out of place in so small a town. Stranger yet, it comes from a cheap guitar Shimoda is playing. When Richard complements him, Shimoda asks if he thinks Jesus would have said he could not play a guitar, or a true Master would not understand someone speaking Russian or Persian, or know how to skin a D-10 Cat or fly a plane. They both know all things, but Shimoda knows he knows. Richard could play in his own style, simply by giving up his inhibitions and the belief he cannot play. Richard recalls reading about "hypnotic learning," but finds letting go of doubt hard. Shimoda deduces it will take years of practice before Richard gives himself conscious permission to play well. Recalling how easily learning to fly came to him because nothing else mattered, Richard sees Shimoda's point. Richard has the sinking feeling Shimoda flies without lesson or license, but Shimoda shows a sealed commercial pilot certificate with several ratings. Richard, he says, must forge his own documents.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

Chapter 16 shows Shimoda demonstrating one can do whatever one believes one can and using Richard's experience of learning easily to fly as proof. True masters must be up for anything.





# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

The host of the *Jeff Sykes Radio Talk Show* suggests gypsy piloting is somehow illegal. Richard knows why the answer is no, but Shimoda says tactlessly, no one can stop them from doing what they want. Listeners begin calling in. A woman points out some must hold down a job, earning their bread by the sweat of their brow, as scripture says, to which Shimoda responds all are free to do as they please. She is tired of hearing "do your thing," running wild, and destroying the world, but Shimoda says if people destroy this planet, there are a billion other worlds to choose from. Everything balances; no one suffers or dies without his or her own consent, and there is no good or evil outside of what makes one happy or unhappy. The woman demands to know how Shimoda knows these things are true, to which he responds he does *not* know it, but finds it fun to believe it. Richard wishes he had cited his experience and wonders why is he making no effort to help listeners understand.

The next caller is male. He takes exception to Shimoda's comment about selfishness and explains what the antichrist is. Another flip answer about going to heaven or hell as one wishes brings the charge Shimoda is dangerous, but Shimoda believes if everyone did whatever he wished, earth would be the happiest planet in the near galaxy. The caller does not want his children hearing what Shimoda says and believes he is free to come blow Shimoda's fool head off. Shimoda agrees and the line goes dead. Every button on the switchboard is lit up with angry callers. Richard considers things could have gone differently and feels as he had in Troy, that it is time to move on fast. The handbook is no help, saying a free and happy life requires that boredom be sacrificed - and not always easily. Sykes has announced where their planes are parked and that they sleep under the wing. Richard feels waves of anger increase in the last half hour. Shimoda agrees with one caller, who says Shimoda is a fake; everyone is a fake - not atoms, molecules, and bodies, but unkillable, undestroyable ideas of The Is, even if they do not believe so. Shimoda would have reminded him Richard is free to go and laugh at his fear of lynch mobs.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Chapter 17 sets up an unexpected crisis, as Shimoda abandons his elusive manner and talks over the heads of the simple Christian folk listening to the radio, making glib statements about his complex mysticism. They instantly take him as a destroyer of youth (a la Socrates or Muhammad) and one irate man turns threatening. A confused Richard worries about their safety as in Chapters 6-7 but does not abandon his friend this time.



# Chapters 18 and 19

## Chapters 18 and 19 Summary

Next noon, before anyone comes to fly, Shimoda asks if Richard remembers saying his problem is that no one listens. Shimoda announces that is why Richard is here: to learn it does not matter whether he communicates or not. The Is does not need Shimoda to tell anyone how the world works, so Shimoda could have said nothing. Richard finds this obvious, which offends Shimoda.

Richard is fueling his plane when Shimoda is shot gunned in his cockpit, and the assassin joins the crowds in fleeing. As if in slow motion, Richard runs to his friend; nothing else matters. Gory and motionless, Shimoda is still able to speak. Richard says lightly he had thought Shimoda had no enemies, and Shimoda replies the killer is a friend. He does not want to think some hater has brought trouble into the hater's own life by murdering him. Richard asks if this had to happen, to which, barely breathing, Shimoda replies, "No," but he likes the drama. As Richard tells him light-heartedly to heal himself so they can start flying, Shimoda slumps dead. For Richard, the world tilts, and Richard slides into the bloody grass. The handbook falls open beside him and Richard reads what is on the page three times before he can believe it: "Everything in this book may be wrong."

## Chapters 18 and 19 Analysis

Two-page Chapter 18 also looks back to Chapter 7, when Richard briefly angers Shimoda by diagnosing his problem. Shimoda has now figured out his present life's mission is superfluous, and Richard sees it as obvious. Chapter 19 unexpectedly shows someone - likely the irate male caller who had threatened Shimoda - killing the Messiah, fulfilling Richard's sense of doom. It does not appear at all illusionary, for Shimoda cannot heal his mortal wounds, and the handbook declares everything Richard has been learning may be wrong.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

By autumn, Richard has flown south to large crowds with whom he pauses to talk until they grow too curious, and he then flies away. No miracles occur, although the Fleet runs better and kills no more bugs. Richard relives the day Shimoda dies, hoping it will change, but it never does. Sad he has no one to talk to, learn from, or banter with to sharpen his newly-bright mind, Richard dreams of meeting Shimoda and passing his hand over the hole Shimoda is laboring to patch manually. Shimoda is proud of him, confirms this is a dream, a different space-time event Richard will remember and will find it changes his thinking and life. Shimoda is ready to go beyond space and time, but they remained linked, should Richard wish to discuss any problems. Shimoda explains Richard needs practice in being unflustered and unsaddened by appearances, which is why Shimoda added the gore of a shotgun death. It was fun for him, too, because dying is like diving into a deep lake on a hot day. If his crowds are small, Richard should not despair. Richard promises to run away forever if he stops having fun as a Messiah. Shimoda worries about Richard not liking crowds, but Richard admits he enjoys bouncing ideas around, if not being worshipped or depended on. Shimoda suggests writing his message down, but Richard balks at the effort. As Shimoda shrugs and flies away, Richard wakes, alone, and, for the fun of it, opens his journal to write about his friend, "1. There was a Master..."

## Epilogue Analysis

*Illusions* ends with Shimoda appearing to Richard in a dream, with an explanation of his gory end, encouragement in Richard's mission, and the suggestion Richard be a writing Messiah, rather than a speaking one; it is safer and more convenient for the recipients. Richard, like the author in his preface, begins writing the words that constitute Chapter 1, clarifying this is Shimoda's story.



# Characters

## Donald William Shimoda ("Don")

A gypsy pilot, whom the narrator Richard first meets in a field north of Ferris, Illinois, Shimoda flies a 1928/29 gold and white Travel Air 4000 biplane. The plane is in such immaculate condition that Richard is certain Shimoda must be lying about having been hopping passengers for 4-5 weeks. Shimoda claims to have held many jobs but prefers gypsy flying because he gets into (nondescript) trouble if he stays in one place too long. Eventually, Shimoda confides to Richard he is the "Mechanic Messiah" and "American Avatar," who disappeared one day before 25,000 eyewitnesses, a feat which appeared in front-page headlines. Shimoda hails from Indiana, where he has been an auto mechanic. He recalls earlier lives in other lands, where he has been wise and strong and people have sought his counsel. He believes he can help himself and all mankind, and this belief draws people to him for healing.

In Indiana, people throng the places he works until his bosses ask him to leave, and he goes into the countryside to teach in parables about how each person controls whether to be healthy or sick, rich or poor, free or slave. Finally, having the multitude throng him, seeking miracles and lessons on how to live their lives, Shimoda prays to the Infinite Radiant Is, asking to be released from his impossible task. He is sorry he has let it go this long and wants to return to his work. An androgynous, infinitely kind voice speaks to the Master saying it is up to the Master what to do, so long as he is happy. The Master gives thanks and descends the hillside humming a song. The throng presses him, but he just smiles and says, "I quit." Donald cannot, however, set aside lifetimes of learning to be a Messiah, and, when he encounters Richard, Shimoda takes Richard under his wing to teach him to be a Master. As Richard learns the lessons, Shimoda accepts an invitation to be interviewed on talk radio, expounds his beliefs in a way that infuriates the listeners, and next day at high noon is gunned down in his cockpit. Shimoda dies as Richard encourages him to heal himself, so they can be off. Shimoda later appears to his grieving friend to say he has decided to go beyond time and space, but their link will remain.

## Richard

The semi-autobiographical narrator, Richard, is a former writer and flight instructor, who has for some three years been flying about as a gypsy pilot in the Midwest, enduring a lonely life because of the freedom it offers him. Richard learns to fly in a large, Travel Air biplane, but finding it too large to land on the typical farm field, now uses a vintage Fleet aircraft, which can take off and land in 500 feet. Richard has often thought about how mankind had been unable to fly for millennia because no one believed flight possible, and, therefore, had not considered the principles of aerodynamics. Now, Richard looks forward to the day he will discover how to fly without a plane - and do other



extraordinary things without the use of equipment. This belief sets him up for a meeting with an experienced Messiah, who believes everything in the world is an illusion.

Richard is surprised to spot a Travel Air 4000 biplane on the ground below him as he overflies Ferris, Illinois, and decides, fatefully, to go down to investigate. He and pilot, Donald W. Shimoda, strike up a friendship and fly on together throughout the summer and into the fall. Richard, however, is uneasy with Shimoda's tricks and contention that Shimoda is a messiah, who has resigned from the job. Shimoda makes Richard discover most of the truths about the illusions of the physical world, correcting his errors, confirming his insights, and urging him to streamline and speed up his thinking. Richard learns to walk on and breathe water, to swim in the ground, to make clouds vanish, and to conjure objects at will. When he realizes he can do as he wishes without reference to what others want, Richard is declared a Master. Soon afterwards, Richard first listens as his mentor antagonizes a radio audience and then the next day watches Shimoda assassinated by a shotgun blast. The Master dies in Richard's arms but returns to him in a dream to encourage him in his own messianic mission.

## The Female Radio Caller

A woman is the first listener to phone the *Jeff Sykes Radio Talk Show*, and she is annoyed that guest Donald W. Shimoda flies happily around the country, not holding down a job to earn his livelihood by the sweat of his brow, as scripture says. She is angered by Shimoda's response that all are free to do as they please, and with hearing "do your thing," running wild, and destroying the world. When she demands to know how Shimoda knows the things he says are true, he responds he does *not* know it, but finds it fun to believe it.

## God

Variouly referred to as "The Infinite Radiant Is," "The Is," "The Mind," God wants his creatures to do as they wish and to follow their own happiness. When Donald W. Shimoda wearies of being thronged as a Messiah, God, in an androgynous, infinitely kind voice, tells him he should do whatever makes him happy, so he quits and returns to the workaday world.

## Jesus Christ

The founder of Christianity, Jesus is portrayed in *Illusions* as the prototypical Messiah, a witty man enlightening the masses that throng to him, healing diseases, and performing often dramatic miracles such as walking on water and turning water to wine. His fate, however, is to be turned on and crucified. His followers some 2,000 years after his death lack his sense of humor and are easily offended by comments made on a radio program by Donald W. Shimoda, a latter-day Messiah. One listener phones to suggest Shimoda is the Antichrist, a figure prophesied by early Christians as a dangerous figure



who will woo believers away from the truth in the last days. Like Jesus, Shimoda is martyred for his message, gunned down in the cockpit of his airplane.

## The Male Radio Caller

The second caller to phone the *Jeff Sykes Radio Talk Show* equates the Antichrist with selfishness and threatens guest Donald W. Shimoda with hell for his unorthodox views. When Shimoda says one goes to heaven or hell as one wishes, the male caller charges Shimoda is dangerous and does not want his children hearing what Shimoda says. He believes he is free to come blow Shimoda's fool head off, to which Shimoda agrees. The man hangs up. Next day at noon, someone approaches Shimoda's biplane armed with a shotgun, shoots him point-blank in the chest, and escapes in the panicky crowd. It is not stated the assassin is the Male Caller, but it would appear he is sufficiently upset and emotional to make good on his threat.

## The Quadraplegic

Having spent eleven years confined to a wheelchair after driving his truck into a ditch, the unnamed quadriplegic from Troy, Illinois, is brought by a crowd to fly with narrator, Richard, and his new partner, Donald W. Shimoda. He surprises himself, standing up, running to the plane, and climbing unaided into the cockpit. The crowd grows restive during the flight, and Richard flees when they land, not knowing whether the mob will worship or crucify Shimoda.

## Sarah

A solemn, brown-eyed, blonde, ten-year-old girl from Ferris, Illinois, Sarah does not want to fly with her grandpa until Donald Shimoda explains to her that in a past life, she died in a fall and is thus afraid of heights. She is cured and declares to her grandpa she wants to be a pilot, own and service a plane of her own, and take people on short flights like Shimoda.

## Jeff Sykes

The host of the *Jeff Sykes Radio Talk Show*, Sykes invites Donald W. Shimoda one night and opens, provocatively, by suggesting gypsy piloting is somehow illegal. Narrator Richard knows there are good reasons to answer no, but Shimoda chooses tactlessly to say, no one can stop them from doing what they want. Towards the end of the three-hour program, Sykes announces who the gypsy pilots are, where their planes are parked, and the fact that they sleep under the wing. Richard feels waves of anger from the listeners increase in the last half hour.



## The Vampire

A "thought-form" Donald W. Shimoda produces one night in a hayfield outside Maitland, Ohio, to disprove narrator Richard's qualification that humans are free to do whatever they want - provided they hurt no one else. The Vampire is dressed in stereotypical vampire clothing, including a red-lined cape, and asks piteously for a drink of Richard's blood because when it he goes without blood too long, the pain is terrible. Startled, Richard threatens to spill plenty of the Vampire's blood. Losing his accent, the illusory Vampire smiles and disappears, leaving Shimoda to explain that each individual decides whether or not to hurt him/herself. Each decision requires the other to make a decision on how to respond, through an endless series of decisions.



# Objects/Places

## The Blue Feather

When Donald W. Shimoda challenges narrator Richard to practice "magnetizing" things to make them materialize at will, Richard chooses a blue feather. He carefully pictures every aspect of the feather for several minutes and then broods all afternoon because no blue feather appears as Shimoda assures him it will. Finally, at dinnertime, a blue feather appears as a logo on a milk carton. Shimoda explains a real feather would have appeared had Richard pictured himself holding one rather than as an abstract thing.

### *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*

A classic 1969, film about two Western desperados, who end up surrounded by the Bolivian army as they seek to escape justice, *Sundance* is one of narrator Richard's favorite movies. He is annoyed when Donald W. Shimoda insists they see it at a theater in Hammond, Wisconsin, and more annoyed when Shimoda waits until he is engrossed, near the end, to ask are they (Richard and Shimoda) are here? Walking back to their planes, Shimoda helps Richard understand how the film demonstrates the illusory nature of human life.

## Clouds

The first physical object narrator Richard is able to manipulate by his mind, clouds initially frustrate him, when he finds he cannot vaporize them. Donald W. Shimoda tells him he can if he tries hard enough, and Richard realizes he is making things harder than they are. Shimoda effortlessly vaporizes the biggest, meanest storm cloud Richard points out as a challenge, so Richard then concentrates on a wispy puff of white. After seven minutes, it vanishes, and Shimoda advises Richard to relax and remove the cloud from his thinking, rather than being negatively attached. The authoritative *Messiah's Manual & Reminders for the Advanced Soul* says clouds do not know why they move as they do, but get an impression from the sky, which does know. If one lifts oneself high enough, one can know also. One never receives a wish without the power to make it true - with work.

## Ferris, Illinois

A rural town with a population of 200, Ferris is where the narrator and Donald W. Shimoda first meet, parking their biplanes near one another in a newly-mown hayfield. The locals swarm out for ten-minute flights over their lands.





## The Fleet

Narrator Richard's biplane, a Fleet is powered by an old Kinner B-5 engine, which requires regular maintenance because of a tendency for the nuts to loosen every 100 flying hours. The Fleet can land on a 500-foot field, making it ideal for gypsy flying. As Richard learns to be a Messiah and make real whatever illusions he desires, the Fleet throws less oil and its propeller and windshield are no longer covered with splattered bugs.

### *The Jeff Sykes Radio Talk Show*

A late-night talk radio program at which Donald W. Shimoda is an invited guest, *Jeff Sykes* provides Donald W. Shimoda a forum for making enemies. Rather than speaking in enigmatic terms, Shimoda talks over the heads and into the faces of the rural audience, infuriating pious Christians and conservative patriots. One caller threatens to come down with his shotgun and blow Shimoda's head off. Next day, at high noon, someone with a shotgun blows a hole in the wall of Shimoda's cockpit and leaves him a bloody and mangled, hanging on only long enough to exchange a few words with the narrator, Richard.

## Maitland, Ohio

This is the town where narrator Richard annoys Donald W. Shimoda with questions about walking through walls, until the Master takes a shortcut back to the planes through a brick wall. That night, in a field outside town, Shimoda produces a "thought-form" Vampire to prove to his apprentice that people are absolutely free to do whatever they want, with no restriction that it harm no one else.

### *Messiah's Manual & Reminders for the Advanced Soul*

The small suede-bound book that Donald W. Shimoda says is the "bible for masters," the *Messiah's Manual* is a collection of maxims and short paragraphs. Shimoda explains to narrator Richard, whom he has taken on as his apprentice, that one allows the manual to fall open to any page and reads there a message appropriate to his needs. Many are so enigmatic Richard has a hard time seeing how they fit. Many are used as aphorisms to open and/or end chapters. The final one Richard reads after Shimoda's bloody assassination unnervingly states everything in its pages may be untrue.

## Travel Air 4000

A bi-plane belonging to Donald W. Shimoda. The plane is immaculate with gold and white paint and in better than factory-fresh condition. A 1928/29 model has all the original equipment, including spark advance. There are no scratches, patches, or even streaks of engine oil on the cowling. There is no straw in the cockpit, making it seem to narrator Richard that Shimoda materializes in wheat fields rather than landing there.



The Travel Air is twice as big as Richard's Fleet, too big to land on a field under 1,000-1,300 feet long. The Travel Air stalls at under 50 mph, but Shimoda's is able to drop to 30 mph, stop in midair, and make a three-point landing on the grass. As Richard's mystical understanding grows, Shimoda's airplane begins showing need for routine maintenance, while Richard's needs less. Shimoda is assassinated in the cockpit of his Travel Air and later appears to Richard in a dream.

## Troy, Illinois

A rural town south-southeast of Ferris, Troy is the next place narrator Richard and his new flying companion, Donald W. Shimoda, land. Richard lands his Fleet biplane in a cow pasture he knows is too small for Shimoda's large Travel Air, but the latter glides in below stall speed and lands gracefully. They fly passengers all day, while Richard slowly gets a feeling of impending doom. The last passenger, a quadriplegic, responds to Shimoda's command to get out of his wheelchair and walk to the plane, and Richard flees without his friend when the mob descends on the aircraft when it lands.



# Themes

## Illusion

*Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* is, above all, about how the entire physical universe in time and space is an illusion. Reality exists, but is divinely indifferent. "The Is" (i.e., God) cares nothing about human illusions and games, views humans as his/her perfect, finished likeness. When modern-day "Reluctant Messiah," Donald W. Shimoda, attracts a disciple, the narrator Richard, Richard begins with simple tricks such as floating tools in the air. Richard recalls being told as a child that magic tricks are illusions. Shimoda explains how any so-called "miracle" becomes possible once one realizes all is illusion. If this is so, Richard initially wonders, why live?

Shimoda uses a movie to explain. The story exists *in toto* in the film canister but there is no sense of time and space until the film is projected through a lens. The viewer then chooses to suspend reality to enter the story on the screen and nothing outside matters. The viewer chooses what kind of movie to watch, can walk out at any time, or view the film repeatedly. He or she cannot be hurt or killed by the action, but can imagine it. These points clearly established, Shimoda then suggests lifetimes are the same. No one is helpless in the "film" of his or her own life, but rather chooses to be happy or unhappy. This extends over many lifetimes.

When Richard believes he can walk on water, he can - and breathe water, and both sink and swim in the solid land, but he balks at the idea of moving the illusion of a limited sense of identity in space-time through the illusion of material restriction (i.e., walking through a wall) until Shimoda shows it is possible and reminds him how easy things that once appeared hard -like walking as an infant - become with practice. As Richard becomes a Master of Illusion, however, his teacher is shot and cannot repair the damage. The *Messiah's Manual*, which Richard regularly consults throughout his training, is disillusioning when it states everything it contains may be wrong.

## Messiahship

In *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, the enigmatic Donald W. Shimoda of Indiana claims to be a "Mechanic Messiah" or "American Avatar," a spiritual Master, trained through many lifetimes, and one of many messiahs whom the "Infinite Radiant Is" - God - has sent into the world. He names and discusses only one, however, the founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth. (In the preface, author Richard Bach also wonders about Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism, but he does not appear in the book and is not, technically, a Messiah.)

Jesus and Shimoda are both witty, urbane personalities, physically striking, and attractive to the masses. Their ministries bear much in common: they passively heal diseases - the sufferer having only to touch them or their clothing; they perform dramatic



"miracles" such as walking on water, but make clear anyone is able to do the things they do. When Shimoda stands on the surface of the lake, he invites Richard to join him, and Richard is amazed and delighted to find he is able to do so - just as the Apostle Peter is able in the Gospel account, until Paul's faith falters; then he sinks. Shimoda believes Jesus and the early Christians would have spoken in terms of "imagination," rather than faith, if they had had this word in their lexicon.

Shimoda denies it is the inevitable fate of a Messiah to suffer a horrible death as Jesus did, and earlier in Shimoda's career, prior to meeting Richard, Shimoda simply disappears one day before 25,000 eyewitnesses. Richard, gradually becoming his disciple, however, fears the mobs will turn on and crucify Shimoda as happened to Jesus. One irate man likens Shimoda to the Antichrist, a figure prophesied by early Christians as a dangerous figure, who will woo believers away from the truth in the last days. The *Messiah Handbook* disagrees, saying, "Being true to anyone else or anything else [other than oneself] is not only impossible, but the mark of a false messiah." True to himself, like Jesus, Shimoda is martyred for his message, and gunned down in the cockpit of his airplane.

## Flight

On the surface, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*, is the story of two gypsy pilots who decide for a while to work together in an occupation that normally is very lonely. The narrator, Richard, is a former flight instructor who remembers the thrill of first learning to fly. The complex tasks come easy to him because flying is all there is to life in that period. He has been hopping about the Midwest for years, offering rural folk ten-minute flights over their homes and fields for three dollars per flight, and understands the thrill they experience in the air, but for him it has become simply a job.

Flight has, unfortunately, become for Richard a matter of performing routine maintenance on his biplane and being able to spot from the air towns large enough to support a solid day's services, with a flat, recently-mowed field nearby and accessible by road. He uses a hard-sell approach on those who show up because his next meal, fuel, and parts depend on people buying flights. Spotting Donald W. Shimoda's antique biplane from the air is an unexpected thrill, and he sets down to check him out. Shimoda sells his services by guaranteeing he will give each customer the kind of ride, as placid or as thrilling as he wants. Shimoda shows himself to be a highly-skilled pilot, but then performs maneuvers Richard knows are beyond the capability of his aircraft. Richard then suspects Shimoda is untrained, despite his seemingly authentic documentation. Shimoda flies in the same way as he plays guitar, simply by believing he can, which fits his overall view that the entire physical universe and the space-time continuum are illusory. Flying's prime motivation for Shimoda appears to be the freedom it gives him from remaining in any one place long enough to get into trouble.

Richard's old zeal for flying is preserved in his dream (waking and sleeping) of one day being able to fly without a plane. He reasons that mankind did not fly for millennia because no one believed it possible. Without this belief, no one looked for the principles



of aerodynamics that make flight possible. Richard is certain new principles will be discovered that will do away with planes. That belief is what creates a "like-attracts-like" bond with Shimoda, for whom everything is possible simply by imagining and seeing the unlikely and the impossible accomplished.



# Style

## Point of View

*Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* is narrated in the first person past tense by a character identified simply as Richard. From the author's preface, it is clear the book is semi-autobiographical. Like his narrator, author Richard Bach enjoys taking up passengers for three dollar ride in his antique biplane most summers, and he practices something he calls "cloud-vaporizing." Bach dislikes the painful process of writing and claims he had no plans for any more stories after publishing *Jonathan Seagull* - until *Illusions* crashes through his wall, seizes him by the throat, and refuses to let go until he puts it down on paper.

The narrator, Richard, keeps a journal and suggests he has in the past been a writer, but is reticent to write again. Still, after his friend Donald W. Shimoda's sudden and violent death, Richard gives in, and, half asleep, begins recording Shimoda's story. The first chapter of *Illusions* adds to the illusion of this being a true chronicle by presenting it as a photoreproduction of a handwritten summary of the anonymous Reluctant Messiah's abandoned career, up to the point he walks off the job and back into the workaday world. Thereafter, *Illusions* takes up Bach's rich descriptive narratives and extended dialogs between the two protagonists.

## Setting

*Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* is set in various locales in the American Midwest, some time in the second half of the twentieth-century, long enough after 1930, as it is mentioned several times that spare parts for antique biplanes are difficult to find. In the rural setting, radio is mentioned but no more modern means of communications - or commercial flying, for that matter. When the book is set is thus rendered inconsequential. Two like-minded men are brought together by their love of antique biplanes and team up for a while to take passengers up for ten-minute rides at three dollars a head. They land wherever the right conditions appear on the ground below: recently mowed, level land for take-offs and landings; close to a town of a few hundred people with an access road handy, and no livestock to avoid. After they land, they must secure permission to use the field for a day or two.

Narrator Richard and the "Reluctant Messiah," Donald W. Shimoda, hop about Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, and the action takes place on the temporary airfield and during sorties into town for food, supplies, and a movie. Shimoda is teaching Richard the tricks of the messiahship trade, and, in some cases, crowds of would-be passengers turn into throngs of miracle- and truth-seekers, whom Richard fears could turn on them with violence. Jesus Christ's ministry in first-century Palestine is regularly mentioned. From the air and on the ground, author Richard Bach effectively captures the spirit of the rural Midwest, using the laconic characters of the two protagonists the pilots meet in



passing and the fiery fundamentalist Christians, who react to Shimoda's comments during a late-night radio talk show performance. This leads to the climax, Shimoda's bloody martyrdom in his cockpit in the midst of a hayfield.

## Language and Meaning

The whole of Richard Bach's *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* is in clear, simple Standard American English, but contains three disparate types of material. First, there is ample, vivid narration as Richard and the "Reluctant Messiah," Donald W. Shimoda, fly in and out of wheat fields across the American Midwest and visit tiny rural towns. Richard attaches himself to Shimoda, reluctantly at first, and then with growing hopes of quickly mastering Shimoda's dense philosophy. Shimoda recalls things he has learned over many lifetimes about being a messiah or spiritual master, all of which is based on the difficult premise that the entire physical universe in both time and space are an illusion. Much of the teaching takes place by demonstration, so the reader watches them walk on water and perform other "miracles."

Convincing Richard that all of life is illusion, however, also requires long, profound, and complex philosophical discussions, sometimes in the form of presentations but more often as dialogs, for Shimoda prefers Richard discover truths for himself. The frustrated disciple complains much of the time at the difficulty of this brand of learning, although Richard has occasional, enthusiastic "eurekas," with which the reader can easily commiserate.

Finally, Shimoda hands over to Richard a standard volume in the messiah trade to help with his education, *Messiah's Manual & Reminders for the Advanced Soul*. It is a book of maxims and short paragraphs, all enigmatic and many quite lyrical, whose sentiments are scattered through the last two-thirds of *Illusions*. Oftentimes they are accompanied by Richard's expressions of frustration at not seeing their applicability to his situation, and they require the reader to think a bit as well.

## Structure

*Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* consists of Richard Bach's lively preface, nineteen numbered, but untitled, chapters, and an epilogue, essentially just Chapter 20. The first chapter consists of a reproduction of a handwritten journal in a lined notebook. In thirty-three numbered paragraph (reminiscent of the way Bibles are sometimes printed), the narrator gives an account of a remarkable man who finds himself in Indiana called to be a Master. After being thronged for a while, the anonymous, but clearly reluctant Master/Messiah, obtains God's permission to return to the life of a normal person, so simply walks away. The story shifts in Chapter 2 to how the narrator, Richard, happens to meet one Donald W. Shimoda, a fellow gypsy pilot, and attach to him, despite some edginess. Only in the epilog will it be made clear that Shimoda is the Master of Chapter 1. Flashback to flesh out the two protagonists is



minimal throughout the book. Instead, they are simply appreciated by being seen together, flying about the Midwest together.

Rather soon, Richard sees Shimoda can perform "miracles," first little, magic-like one, but after a while truly astounding, and he naturally wonders how it is done. Shimoda begins teaching Richard there are no miracles, just the skilled manipulation of the illusions of space and time in which human beings live. For the bulk of the book, Richard, with difficulty and frustration, masters techniques of cloud-vaporizing, magnetizing objects, walking on water, breathing in water, swimming through dry ground, and sinking into solid earth as though it were liquid. When Richard has trouble transferring this ability to walking through walls, Shimoda is forced to explain his theory at length, using the analogy of watching a movie - a well-known and well-understood suspension of belief in order to enter another realm of reality.

Suddenly, as Richard becomes adept, the tenor of *Illusions* shifts, fulfilling Richard's long-held premonition of evil. Shimoda appears as a guest on a late-night radio talk show and intentionally infuriates the listeners and next day at high noon is assassinated before Richard's eyes. The staccato pace of the final chapters stands at odds with the plodding pace earlier. The epilog lessens the shock of Shimoda's death by showing the two protagonists reunited in Richard's dream, and Richard beginning the handwritten journal entry that makes up Chapter 1.





## Quotes

"It was toward the middle of the summer that I met Donald Shimoda. In four years' flying, I had never found another pilot in the line of work I do: flying with the wind from town to town, selling rides in an old biplane, three dollars for ten minutes in the air." Chapter 2, pg. 25.

"Of course you can quit! Quit anything you want, if you change your mind about doing it. You can quit breathing, if you want to.' He floated a Phillips screwdriver for his own amusement. 'So I quit being the Messiah, and if I sound a little defensive, it's maybe because I am still a little defensive. Better that than keeping the job and hating it. A good messiah hates nothing and is free to walk any path he wants to walk. Well, that's true for everybody, of course. We're all sons of God, or children of the Is, or ideas of the Mid, or however else you want to say it." Chapter 3, pg. 39.

"Remember where you came from, where you're going, and why you created the mess you got yourself into in the first place. You're going to die a horrible death, remember. It's all good training, and you'll enjoy it more if you keep the facts in mind." Chapter 4, pg. 44.

"Your only obligation in any lifetime is to be true to yourself. Being true to anyone else or anything else is not only impossible, but the mark of a false messiah." Chapter 4, pg. 47.

"He was low and slow, so that the hair on my neck prickled. I was about to see a crash. A Travel Air, you want to hold at least 60 mph over the fence to land, slower than that with an airplane that stalls at 50 and you are going to wrap it up in a ball. But what I saw was this gold and snow biplane stop in the air, instead." Chapter 5, pgs. 54-55.

"Can a moment be happy and at the same time terrifying? There followed a lot of moments like that. It was wonder at what could only be called a miraculous healing to a man who looked like he deserved it, and at the same time, something uncomfortable was going to happen when those two came down again. The crowd was a tight knot waiting, and a tight knot of people is a mob and that is not good at all." Chapter 5, pg. 61.

"From the position of the nine-sixteenths on the toolbag, I'd say you were running the old levitate-the-end-wrench trick this morning. Tell me if I'm wrong.' ""Wasn't running anything! I woke up ... the thing woke me up, by itself!' ""Oh. By itself.' He was laughing at me. ""YES BY ITSELF!' ""Your understanding of your miracle-working, Richard, is as thorough as your understanding of bread-making." Chapter 6, pg. 69.

"We buy tickets to these films, paying admission by agreeing to believe in the reality of space and the reality of time ... Neither one is true, but anyone who doesn't want to pay that price cannot appear on this planet, or in any space-time system at all." Chapter 8, pg. 81.



"I have been a flight instructor, and I know that students always make easy things hard; I do know better, yet there was I a student again, frowning fiercely at my cumulus targets. I needed more teaching, for once, than practice. Shimoda was stretched out under the Fleet's wing, pretending to be asleep. I kicked him softly on the arm, and he opened his eyes. "I can't do it," I said. "'Yes you can,' he said, and closed his eyes again." Chapter 10, pg. 88.

"Richard, don't forget what you did today. It is easy to forget our times of knowing, to think they've been dreams or old miracles, one time. Nothing good is a miracle, nothing lovely is a dream. "'The world is a dream, you say, and it's lovely, sometimes. Sunset. Clouds. Sky.' "'No. The image is a dream. The beauty is real. Can you see the difference?' "I nodded, almost understanding. Later I sneaked a look in the handbook." Chapter 11, pg. 96.

"All that afternoon I looked for the feather to appear, and it didn't. it was evening, dinnertime over a hot turkey sandwich, that I saw it. A picture and small print on the carton of milk. *Packaged for Scott Dairies by Blue Feather Farms, Bryan, Ohio.* 'Don! My feather!'" Chapter 14, pg. 115.

"The next second there was a sound like a tire exploding and the crowd itself exploded and ran. The tire on the Travel Air was untouched, the engine ticked over at idle as it had a moment before, but there was a foot-wide hole in the fabric under the pilot's cockpit and Shimoda was pressed to the other side, head slammed down, his body still as sudden death." Chapter 19, pg. 134.



## Topics for Discussion

Should messiahs be able simply to quit? Why or why not?

What is your favorite maxim from the *Messiah's Manual & Reminders for the Advanced Soul*, and what does it say to you?

How do the two biplanes serve as characters in the novel?

Will Richard ever learn to fly without an airplane? Why or why not?

Does Shimoda purposefully infuriate his radio audience to bring on his own martyrdom? Why do you say that?

How does the film, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, help explain Shimoda's theory of life being illusion? Do you find it compelling?

How do dreams feature in *Illusions*?