

Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives Study Guide

**Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives by David
Eagleman**

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Plot Summary

"Sum," is a collection of stories about the afterlife and the possibilities are endless. The author, David Eagleman, uses the far reaches of his imagination to create forty unique takes on afterlife. Death and what follows is, to many, a mysterious subject and the author capitalizes on that mystique. Eagleman presents his many scenarios of what might be or what could be in the afterlife. The author takes the image of the creator to the extremes. In one narrative, "The Microbe," he describes god as the size of a microbe, so small that he does not know that we exist. In another tale, the reader is told that god is a Giantess who is so large that it is virtually impossible to communicate with her. She does not know we are there!

Many of the stories focus on the consciousness of those entering the afterlife. For example, in "Graveyard of the Gods," afterlife is for man and for everything created or made by man. Therefore, anything that man invented has an afterlife. Everything from toasters to grand pianos have a place in the afterlife. But afterlife is also for the literary and mythic creations of man. All the gods that man ever created in stories have a place in the afterlife. In another story, those arriving in the afterlife are met with the daunting challenge of meeting versions of themselves - what they could have been - in comparison of their own filtered views of themselves.

In several stories god, or the creator, is seen as anything but all powerful. In "Reins," god is perplexed when a committee, urged on by angels, finds him incompetent of deciding who should go to heaven and who should go to hell. In "Narcissus," the creators are called Cartographers. These creatures are smaller than man and equip man's eyes with high-resolution cameras. During their time on earth, humans are to take photos of the earth's terrain so the Cartographers can create accurate maps. But the program is a failure when the creators discover that humans prefer to look at each other rather than at the terrain.

It is obvious that each tale is told with much thought and is told with great detail. There are several stories that compare man to machines. For example, in "The Impulse," the author describes how humans are just like computer chips. He goes to great lengths to describe the networks and the substrates that celestial Programmers build to construct humans. In another story, "Quantum," humans have unlimited storage capacity like quantum computers.

The collection of stories are all thought-provoking and most are written with a light, humorous touch. But there are a few dark stories including "Death Switch." An elaborate system is put in place on everyone's computer in case they should pass without leaving behind their passwords. The people begin to abuse the Death Switch, which eventually leads to suicide and murder.



Chapters 1 through 4

Chapters 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 1: Sum

In the afterlife, a person's life is relived but in a different order. Everything is grouped together such as sleep for thirty years in a row, seven months of having sex, five months of reading a magazine, and so forth. All the hurt is grouped into one segment as well. Once you make it through the pain segment, your afterlife is agony-free forever. Everything else is not pleasant however. You cannot take a shower until that segment comes up which might be years. You might spend eighteen months waiting in a line. You could spend six months watching commercials. In that reshuffled life, you begin to long for your earthly life where things occurred in varying sequences.

Chapter 2: Egalitaire

In the afterlife, you discover that God understands how complex life is. She originally completed her universe like other gods and created people to be either good or bad. But as she became more experienced, God realized that a person could have elements of both bad and good. But then she had to create a way to judge a person. Could an embezzler also be charitable? At first, God tried running computer programs to make the judgments. But she sometimes disagreed with the conclusions. She was torn between two warring factions that both pleaded for mercy. This god was a very unusual god for her sensitivity she displayed.

God was in a quandary and finally decided to let everyone have a place in heaven, after all everyone had some good inside of them. She shut down the operation in Hell and fired the Devil since he wouldn't be needed any longer. Everyone would be treated the same from that point on. But there were problems none the less. The communists had achieved an equal society but it was created by god in whom they didn't believe. The conservatives had no poor to disparage and the liberals had no poor to rescue. Everyone agreed on one thing: they were all in their own kind of hell.

Chapter 3: Circle of Friends

In the afterlife, everything seems the same as the earthly life with the exception that the only people you run into are people you know and those you remember. If you didn't recall your second grade teacher, she would not be in your after life. You are with your old lovers and bosses and people you dated or wished you had. It is a time to catch up, renew old ties and solidify others. The streets and parks are abandoned and industries in which you had no contacts are shut down. You never encounter a stranger and you begin to long for new people and new experiences.

Chapter 4: Descent of Species



In the afterlife, you get to choose what you want to be in the next life. You can elect to be born into royalty, be a member of the opposite sex, or be a great philosopher. Or you may have had a life with stress and responsibilities and you just want a simple life. You think of grazing in grassy fields and flicking off a fly with your tail. Your body begins to transform into a horse. Your muscles bulge and a layer of coarse hair begins to cover your body. Your fingers morph into a hooves. There are internal changes, too. The cortex of your brain retreats and neurons are redirected. Your thoughts of human experiences fade and your way of thinking is altered.

But you begin to forget how it started or the time when you were a human dreaming of being a horse. For a split second before the transformation is final, you realize you will not appreciate being a horse because you will not remember what it was like not to be a horse. And when you die as a horse, you will not have enough brain matter to aspire to be a human. In your last thoughts as a human, you wonder what advanced alien had wanted to be a human.



Chapters 5 through 8

Chapters 5 through 8 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 5: Giantess

The afterlife is soft, everything seems to be focused on comfort. The floors are cushioned and the walls are padded. A hard surface is impossible to find. A princely-looking man appears but explains he is not a god. He is from another star system and has studied earthlings extensively. He has found them to be the least tranquil and content of all beings. Earthlings are predicted to continue making weapons and advancing their space programs. They will make the heavens noisy with all their arms and vehicles. The man explains that all living creatures from all solar systems and planets are connected by a large living mass that is referred to as the Giantess. She consists of hundreds of billions of cells.

The Giantess is so vast that the man and his people were not even aware of her existence for many eons. Once they discovered her, they decided to try to communicate with her. They wanted to try to determine her size and learn to influence her actions just as internal infinitesimal molecules impact a human. The people finally figure out how to transmit a message to her. As the message travels through her vast system, it results in changes to the orbits of planets, changes the gases in the atmosphere and bends the path of light.

The man concluded that the destruction of the planets and elements was the Giantess' way of communicating. He realized that although communication with the Giantess was possible, it was meaningless. The size disparity between the beings and the Giantess made communication impossible.

Chapter 6: Mary

When you arrive in the afterlife, you discover that Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley is sitting on a throne and is being served by a band of angels. She was given this lofty position because her book, "Frankenstein," is God's favorite book. He reads it every night. God relates to Victor Frankenstein because they are both doctors of unparalleled ability and they both "created" life. God feels that Mary understands him. God had discovered life by experimenting with yeast and bacteria. He practiced for many eons by first making animals. Finally, he created his most prized creation, man.

Of all his creatures, God was most able to relate to man. He watched as man created things just as he had. He loved the music that man made. He observed the glorious cities that man erected. But he became disenchanted when man began to have conflicts and wage wars. God thought he could intervene but found he was powerless to stop them. The bloodshed and the destruction devastated God. God found comfort in reading about Frankenstein's monster who turned on his creator and went out of control.



Chapter 7: The Cast

Death is a dream and not your own but someone else's. Going through life, all the people in the "background" of your life are all actors. They play roles in your life, and are waiting for your life to play out. These actors had already gone through the life-death process. No one is thrilled with this mandatory role-playing in the lives of others, except maybe some former actors. Some of the players had bigger roles—interactive roles with dialog. The words are all delivered in a believable manner. On one occasion these dream actors went on strike and upset the entire process. Some "dreamers" were so upset with the abandoned streets and empty buildings, that they committed suicide.

It is not a satisfying experience to be actors in living people's lives. After the shifts end, the actors suffer in their restless sleep from dreams that are populated by others who had gone on to the next level. The hope among some is that eventually the cycle will return everyone to a life on earth.

Chapter 8: Metamorphosis

There are three deaths. First, the body ceases to be; second, the body is placed in a grave; and, a person's final death is when your name is spoken for the last time ever. There is a waiting room where the third death is awaited. It is filled with people waiting for their names to be called. Many of those summoned by the Callers are shattered because they know the last grasp they had on life has ended. The Caller comforts the people assuring them that they are heading to a better place. But there is skepticism among those called. Many are called just when they see the last one on earth who would have remembered them enter the waiting room.

There are many famous people who stay in the waiting room, in limbo because their names are in history books and will never attain their third death. The waiting area begins to mimic earth as people of the same cultures and speaking the same languages gather together. Many are desperate to leave the waiting room, begging the Callers to summon them. Many people transform from their earthly identity since the warlord is canonized and the depressed woman is praised as a saint. The people awaiting their third death become what others who are still alive remember them to be.



Chapters 9 through 12

Chapters 9 through 12 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 9: Missing

The dispute over God's gender is misdirected. God is actually a married couple. The female of the god couple creates women and the male creates men. On rare occasions, the man-god will create a woman and the woman-god will create a man—just to see what it's like. They are devoted to the people they create and consider them their children. They are delighted with how bright their "children" are and actually learn from them as many parents do.

The God couple is not always happy. There was a rocky patch in their relationship. They watched the relationships of their children and saw that there was sometimes divorce and separation. They paid heed and decided to separate. The two were at war and created their own planets and solar systems. Men were separated from women. But the orbits of the planets were sluggish and the planets and meteors were silent. They realized that there could be no vitality on the planets unless men and women shared them. The God couple reconciled and soon the planets separating men and women drifted back together and there was great cosmic relief.

Chapter 10: Spirals

In the afterlife, it is discovered that the Creator is actually a species of small creatures that have a similar appearance to humans. They are not very intelligent. They lose their places in conversations and sometimes you have to draw them pictures. These harmless creatures push and shove to see a new arrival shouting the same question: Do you have answer? They ignore you when you ask them what they are talking about. A scribe takes down every word you say.

Long before the creatures wondered why they existed. In an attempt to find out, they built computing machines, called humans, that would give them answers. But the hitch was that in order to provide answers, the machines had to be smarter than the creatures. As such, the creatures were not intelligent enough to communicate with their machines. The creatures think that the machines have the answers to their questions but are so advanced and complex that they are unable to communicate with them. They don't realize that the machines don't have the answer and have built their own machines to try to discover learn what the answers are.

Chapter 11: Scales

In the afterlife, humans are God's organs. They are part of God's biology—his internal organs. If man dies, God dies. God and his doctors try to keep man healthy so that God's life can be sustained. But the influx of so many humans is making him weak, they are spreading out inside him and draining his strength. God thinks man is trying to



purposely harm him. He observes man trying to find cures for his own diseases, only on much smaller scales. He watches them destroy cells with chemotherapy and radiation. The realization comes to him that everything creates itself upon the backs of smaller entities which will ultimately destroy the original entity.

Chapter 12: Adhesion

Man is the product of large beings that live on asteroids and are called Collectors. The universe was created because of the beings' curiosity over why some things "stick together" and why some do not. The Collectors observe that some people have just brief and passing relationships while others have long-term relationships. They see that some people are held together by circumstance. Some force their unions to last. Some sabotage their relationships and others have relationships that are totally unexpected but none the less endure. When the people die, they are brought before a board of beings who interrogate them about their relationships. They want to understand motivations behind breaking off or maintaining relationships. They are way over budget for the project but it continues because they have failed to reach understanding. They recycle the people for another life in hopes they can gain more understanding. They are mesmerized by the project but even the brightest among the beings is unable to understand human relationships.



Chapters 13 through 16

Chapters 13 through 16 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 13: Angst

After humans die, they expand back to their original enormous forms. It is not a happy situation since man's job is to maintain and support the entire cosmos although collapse seems imminent. If man does not do his job well, the entire Universe will be in jeopardy. These large creatures are given a vacation every three hundred years and most opt to take on human form and go to earth. The beings have fun—watch movies, drink alcohol and listen to music. The beings make friends, have fights and don't give the collapse of the universe one thought. They are concerned only with human pursuits. When the beings wear out their human bodies, they feel great sadness because they must return to the impossible chore of keeping the universe from collapsing.

Chapter 14: Oz

At the beginning of afterlife, each person is given the opportunity to meet the Creator of the universe but only if the person is among the most courageous. There is much fear and trepidation when a newly arriving person is sent to meet the Creator. He imagines how huge and all-powerful the Creator will be and how intimidating it will be to be in his presence. It is no disappointment when he meets the Creator. His power is terrifying, his voice is booming. The man confirms to the Creator that he is brave. The huge face of the Creator disappears and is replaced by a yellow curtain that opens on the face of an old stooped-over and balding man. The old man tells the man that true bravery is measured by whether a person can face the absence of the Creator.

Chapter 15: Great Expectations

The hereafter is computerized and is down-loadable. You can select the moment of your death as well as the type of afterlife. You choose to be beautiful with firm muscles and a perfect complexion. Cell phones and jet-packs are standard issue. Parties are held around the clock. Other than religious folks who are waiting for heaven, people anxiously wait in line to select their afterlife. For those who choose the computerized afterlife, the transition between life and death is seamless. When the nurses and technicians begin the process, the person is resting in a comfortable chair like that in a dentist office. They assure the person that everything will be fine. The technicians, however, have no way of proving that their process actually works. They just assume that it does.

Sadly, the process does not work. Its failure is linked to a basic misunderstanding of the cosmic scheme. When a person leaves earth, his essence or his spirit immediately is whisked off to heaven. The technicians who developed the process did not realize that the essence was missing and that it was essential for the process to be successful. The



afterlife had been designed by God and those who enter into it wake up in soft clouds and white togas. Those who downloaded an afterlife are disappointed. They were looking for a life of drinking and partying. God tries to explain that their fantasies have cursed their realities. God is saddened that blind faith in an afterlife has been destroyed.

Chapter 16: Mirrors

Death is a two-stage process. When waking from his final breath, the person finds himself in Purgatory. He doesn't appear to be dead. The first sensation in the afterlife mimics that of standing up too fast. Confusion sets in and then everything becomes dark. The person feels powerless but he doesn't resist. Only naked consciousness, like that of a baby, remains. Without the filters that the person used in his previous life to minimize his own shortcomings, he is now able to see all his flaws, which is when his second death occurs and what finally kills him.



Chapters 17 through 20

Chapters 17 through 20 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 17: Perpetuity

In the afterlife, if you wake up in the suburbs you will know that you were a sinner. It is called Heaven. There are TVs and nice accommodations, neighbors are on all sides and there are shelves lined with books. The odd thing is that all the people thought to be good on earth are not there. The philanthropists, the saints, and the good Samaritans are all absent. It seemed as though God designed it so that only sinners would enjoy the afterlife. Even the sinners try to figure out why they were given a good afterlife. God doesn't pay them much attention but he wants to keep them alive in the afterlife. Some sinners thought they were being kept to eventually wage battles such as Gladiators for God's amusement. In truth, God lives exactly the same life as the sinners. He has grown bored with the life, is constantly trying to improve himself and has grown bitter. God has designed the afterlife for sinners concluding that someday they will be as miserable as he is.

Chapter 18: The Unnatural

In the afterlife, you get to change one thing about life and return to earth again. You could make yourself two inches taller or you could request that everyone on earth be given a terrific sense of humor. Having just departed from your own funeral, you might want to eradicate death. But if that is the selection, a technician will quickly tell you that you tried it before and it only led to frustration. If you insist, the technician would comply.

In the new life, you become a great physician. You have a thesis that there is no such thing as death and you raise millions to support your research. Dedication and hard work pay off. After an old lady breathes her last breath, you are able to tell the world that she was the last person ever to die. There is great celebration and you are honored for your gift to mankind. And sure enough, people begin to live forever. But as the quantity of life increases, its quality declines. People become lazy, accomplish less, take more naps. Everyone begins to feel that death actually refers to the death of motivation.

People begin to schedule their own suicides. Productivity begins to pick-up. But people postpone their suicides and society begins to decline again. Eventually a law is passed that a suicide cannot be postponed once it is scheduled. It is concluded that suicide does not solve the lack of motivation in a culture. The randomness and unexpectedness of death is necessary to promote progress. In order to have random death and have a more vital society, people began murdering each other. Eventually, rioting occurs in the streets, your lab is broken into and you are killed and you're back in the technician's waiting room ready to make your next selection.

Chapter 19: Distance



The afterlife is a beautiful land without strife. Each person can ask the Creator one question when he arrives. A man asks the Creator why he doesn't live with the people. The Creator tried that once, he explained, but the people began to take him for granted and lose faith. It was better for all concerned to keep a little distance.

Chapter 20: Reins

The afterlife is run by committee. Initially, God had run the entire operation but with the growing population, he began to lose control. Sin escalated and it was obvious God was slipping. The angels began to sew the seeds of discord. They complained that they had done God's bidding and he had taken credit for it. After the committee took over and decided who would go to heaven or hell, God was lonely and felt misunderstood. He often sat on his porch with men like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi lamenting about how movements can be stolen from their founders.



Chapter 21 through 24

Chapter 21 through 24 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 21: Microbe

There is no afterlife. After decomposition sets in, the microbes living inside the dead person move on. God is the size of bacterium and lives on the surface of every cell. The human body is far too vast for God or the microbes to be aware of man's existence. There is no trauma to the microbes when a body dies. They redistribute themselves to a different food source.

Chapter 22: Absence

The afterlife is deteriorating. New arrivals notice that the angels are gaunt and the foliage is neglected. God is missing. Some say he is dead, some say he is ill or has just abandoned everyone. Wars begins to break out in heaven over where god is, whether he ever really existed and what happened to him. Heaven has begun to mimic the religious wars of earth that wage on endlessly.

Chapter 23: Will-o'-the-Wisp

In the afterlife, everyone is in a big lounge that is equipped with monitors that are trained on earth. You can see everything that goes on. You can choose to watch wars, secret plots and private citizens in their homes. You can follow the lives of your descendents through the years. Some complain when their membership to the lounge expires. They are angry that they will no longer get to monitor life on earth. What they don't know, is that they are also isolated from the failures and misery their friends and family will go through.

Chapter 24: Incentive

It is difficult to imagine death since it really does not exist. Half of the people in your life were actors while the other half were those who were also unaware of the absence of death. They are called the Beneficiaries. Your "death" is your initiation into the game, when you become one of the actors. Before each "performance," the actors are given a small script with suggested reactions and dialog. Many of the actors don't like being deceitful to the beneficiaries, many of whom are their loved ones they left behind. The actors continue playing their parts and if they play them well, they will be able to leave their acting jobs. The actors are cooperative because they want to preserve the process when they return to earth was Beneficiaries.



Chapters 25 through 28

Chapters 25 through 28 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 25: Death Watch

A death switch was installed in computers so that if a person died without having revealed their passwords, it could be accessed. The death switch activated if the computer was idle for a number of days. But the switch started to be misused by people. Some used it to find out banking and other private information about people. The process also allowed people to write emails that were scheduled to be released in the future, long after their deaths. Some began to use the death switch to prove they were alive long after they were dead by making automated on-line purchases and bank transfers, making it appear as though they were alive. For those still alive, it became a problem to figure out who was dead and who was alive. The emails and transactions created a false history of life on earth.

Chapter 26: Encore

Afterlife got into full swing just a century ago. The Creators only create they don't judge lives. In the afterlife, they gather all the records about your life and try to re-create you in the afterlife exactly as you were in life. They gather files, videos, phone messages, and emails - every record that they can find so their recreation is perfect. The afterlife has flourished in the last one hundred years because of all the electronic data that became available.

Chapter 27: Prism

When the afterlife was created, God was undecided at what age people should spend eternity. Was it fair for an old person to be old forever? To solve the problem, God devised a way for a person to live all ages of his life at once. Just like light through a prism, different images could be displayed in a person's afterlife by being split into all possible ages. A problem quickly surfaced when it was realized that the different ages of a person did not have much in common with each other. They all conceded that the human they represented was a complex entity and that none of them individually represented that person.

Chapter 28: Ineffable

Living beings are not the only things that die. When a play ends, it dies. When a battle is over, the conflict dies. When a congress adjourns, it dies. What is not generally known is that there is afterlife for all these organizations and they don't require the presence of the humans who participated in them. What humans also don't know is that the cells within them die when the body dies and go on to an afterlife of their own.



Chapters 29 through 32

Chapters 29 through 32 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 29: Pantheon

There are many gods and each rules over a separate category. There is a god of spoons, a god of telephones, a god of bacteria, and a god of everything there is. However, there are many territory disputes and a bitter competition rages between the different gods. They are smallish creatures and want more authority and to expand their territories so they appear more powerful. But the gods are fond of people and often observe how they handle disputes among one another. Humans are the only beings that the gods can empathize with.

Chapter 30: Impulse

People are the same as computer chips. They have no afterlife and neither do humans. Three cosmic Programmers are the experts who build the human computer grids. Signals are sent from one human to another at lightening speed and no one knows that the messages are computer-generated. What the programmers didn't expect was a rogue algorithm that caused humans to have a deep emotional yearning for companionship.

Chapter 31: Quantum

In the afterlife, everything exists in all possible states at the same time. This allows those in the afterlife the ability to enjoy all things at once since they are living multiple lives simultaneously. A man is riding a bike at the same time he is not riding a bike. An angel checks on the progress of the transition of the people and sees that there is much confusion. The people are given jobs in the afterlife and are more confused because they are doing multiple jobs at the same time. When they are placed in a room with a lover, there are mixed signals back and forth and confusion still rules but the people seem to find that scenario more familiar.

Chapter 32: Conservation

The universe was not created by a big bang. It came from the production of a single quark. Every atom in the human body is the same quark in different places at the same moment. Everything that exists originated with that one quark. The quark created the stories of all time. But things changed when the quark realized it had to save energy. That was the day the world started to drift into "incompleteness." The quark is taking a break until it can recover energy and begin again. There is no afterlife and only a long interruption.



Chapters 33 through 36

Chapters 33 through 36 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 33: Narcissus

In the afterlife, people finally learn that their true purpose was to collect data. The advanced cameras that human eyes are equipped with take high quality images. Humans were created by Cartographers who carry holy books that contain volumes of maps. The humans were created to cover the earth and capture images of every corner of earth for the Cartographers. In the afterlife, the lifetime of these images and data are downloaded. The afterlife is located in the center of the earth where the Cartographers, who are much smaller than humans, exist. But the Cartographers are disappointed in the progress. It seems that the humans are more interested on focusing on other people and directing their eyes or cameras on other people instead of the terrain.

Chapter 34: Seed

God created man by accident. He created atoms which bonded with electrons and then became molecules. Cells formed next and began to create living things including man. God got lucky when he placed earth at just the right distance from the sun so this process would be successful. Humans marveled at his skill in creating cyclones and lightning bolts and other phenomena. They worshiped and loved God and quickly became his favorite creations. But the smarter man has become, the more difficult it is for God to impress him. Afraid that he would be exposed as an amateur magician and because he had run out of new tricks, he slipped into seclusion. But after observing humans who openly confess to their shortcomings, God felt more comfortable with humans and spends man hours with them in the afterlife.

Chapter 35: Graveyard of the Gods

The hereafter is populated with every species of animal and insect. Things that man created are also included in the afterlife—furniture, electronics, games, everything. If it was created, it finds its way into the afterlife. Literary creations and myths are also found in the afterlife. There are scores of gods including the Greek god Apollo, the Lizard God Bakonawa, the Babylonian death god Nergal and the Chinese Monkey King Sun Wukong. These gods and icons are snobbish and refuse to stay in the general housing provided in the afterlife. Instead, they gather together at night and sleep in the meadow. They really despise each other and each one thinks he should rule the afterlife. They are miserable and feel that they are all in Hell.

Chapter 36: Apostasy

In the afterlife, God is a woman with grandeur beyond anyone's imagination. She is excited to hand everyone entering the afterlife a copy of the Book of Truth. God always feared that some people would have figured out the answers before she had a chance



to reveal them. But people's biases and and cultural traditions kept them from figuring them out. She fears apostates the most since they are known to be seekers of the truth. As soon as God suspects that an apostate has arrived in the afterlife, he is sent down in an escalator and never allowed to return. But the Loyals who are allowed to stay ultimately do not embrace the Book of Truth and hold on to their old beliefs. God ends up in leading an isolated life and feels unappreciated.



Chapters 37 through 40

Chapters 37 through 40 Summary and Analysis

Chapter 37: Blueprints

In the afterlife, we are given the opportunity to view the underlying code. Numbers represent every aspect of our lives. Everyone can see the numbers of those who they are close too as well. The Rewarders use the code to give those in the afterlife the gift of revelation. The Punishers use it to diminish the pleasures of life by reducing them to numbers.

Chapter 38: Subjunctive

In the afterlife, a person is judged on what he could have been as opposed to comparing him to others. The person will be physically confronted with different versions of himself. The less successful a person is in life, the more versions of himself he will have to deal with. It is clear that failing in life is the punishment that one faces in the afterlife.

Chapter 39: Search

At the moment of death, the trillions of atoms that operated your system begin to drift apart and unravel into all different directions. Those cells were assigned specifically to you and they continue to be wherever they travel. They may become parts of different living creatures. But once every millennia, all your atoms pull together again, traveling from far distances to do so. The reunion is joyous but soon the cells miss their freedom and the disperse again to search for their next venue.

Chapter 40: Reversal

There is no afterlife but everyone will live again. At the point when the universe begins to contract, time will go backwards and everyone will live again. Everyone has great expectations about his second chance at life. But there is a snag. Your memory has manufactured myths about your life and in your second life you meet reality. You find out who you really were.



Characters

The Giantess

In the eponymous story, the Giantess is an immeasurable living mass. The Giantess holds together the planets, stars, and the universe and calling this huge thing by one name might lead one to believe that there was a possibility of understanding or determining her size. The celestial beings in the afterlife explain that it was eons before they realized that the Giantess even existed. It was so large that they could not "see" it. Just like a worm deep in the earth knows nothing about the large planet that surrounds it.

After the beings in the afterlife discovered the Giantess, they decided that it would be beneficial to have a relationship with the Giantess. They made plans and devised an intricate way in which to send her a message. After the message was sent, it took literally years for the message to run through her vast system and reach her consciousness. When the Giantess was in receipt of the transmission, it took her aback. She was not expecting a message and perhaps didn't even know that there were beings in the afterlife. The jarring impact that the message had on the Giantess caused her to shift which resulted in a residual shift in the orbits of the planets and nudged them closer together.

In the end, the beings realized that it was too dangerous to communicate with the Giantess. The size disparity made it impossible and meaningless and quite risky.

Mary Shelley

In the story entitled, "Mary," God is obsessed with Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's "Frankenstein." When the newly arrivals enter the afterlife, they are stunned to see that Mary Shelley is seated on an elevated throne. She is also protected by a band of angels. She was given this lofty position in the afterlife because she was the author of God's favorite book. God carries the book with him and sits up each night and reads from the worn pages. As he reads it, a serious look comes over his face as he reflects on Shelley's words.

God relates to the book because he feels an affinity to one of its central characters, Victor Frankenstein, the scientist who created the monster. He feels a connection to the story because of its main theme which is the creation of life. While God had been good and clever enough to create man, he had sadly not gotten much appreciation or understanding in return. After reading Shelley's book, he realized that he had finally found someone who understood him in the form of its author. That is when he made a special place in the afterlife for her. She had honored the process of creating life so he, in turn, would honor her.



There was another element of Shelley's book that God related to. As he looked down on earth at his creations, he saw that they had gone off on their own and had turned their back on him, just as the monster had done to Victor Frankenstein. Shelley captured God's reality in her book.

The Cast

In "The Cast," the newly arrivals to the afterlife discover that half the people in their lives on earth were just actors. They were inhabitants of the afterlife who were recruited for the acting roles.

The Callers

In "Metamorphosis," the Callers are workers in the afterlife who call the people's names who have completed the third and final phase of death.

The Creators

The creators in "Spirals," were discovered to be a species of small and dim-witted creatures who look vaguely human but are much smaller, ill-mannered and very dumb.

The Maker

In "Distance," all newly arrivals in the afterlife are allowed to ask the Maker one question of their choosing.

The Collectors

The Collectors in "Adhesion," were the creators of humans. They live on outer asteroids and run billions of experiments on the universe and the galaxies.

The Technicians

In "The Unnatural," newly arrivals in the afterlife are greeted by Technicians who hand out pamphlets about the personal choices that can be made for a return trip to earth and another life.

The New Crusaders

God has gone missing in "Absence." There is resultant turmoil in the afterlife. The New Crusaders mount attacks against those who believe that God is returning.

Cosmic Programmers

In "Impulse," humans are created by cosmic Programmers. Human life is just like a computer chip since neither one has an afterlife once its energy is depleted.



Objects/Places

Afterlife

There are a multitude of different scenarios for the "afterlife," in the book, "Sum." The author uses his creative imagination to create unique takes on the subject of the afterlife.

Quark

In "Conservation," everything is created such as the universe, stars, planets, life by a single quark.

Book of Truth

In the story, "Apotasy" the female god greets all the new arrivals into the afterlife by giving them a copy of the Book of Truth that contains all the answers to creation.

Center of the Earth

In "Narcissus," the creators who are called Cartographers live in the center of the earth where the afterlife is located.

Asteroids

In "Adhesion," man is created by large beings called "Collectors," who live on asteroids.

Heaven

When people wake up in the afterlife in "Perpetuity," they find themselves in the suburbs and they realize they are considered sinners. Even so, they learn that the place is called Heaven.

Death Switch

In "Death Switch," a mechanism is applied to everyone's computer in the event that a person passes away without leaving his password behind.



Prism

In "Prism," those in the afterlife are split into prism-like sections so that they can relive every aspect of their lives at one time.

Graveyard of the Gods

In "Graveyard of the Gods," all the gods ever imagined or created by man have a place in the afterlife. For example, the Greek God Apollo is in the afterlife as is the Norse Odin and the Babylonian sea goddess Tiamat just to name a few.

Blueprints

In "Blueprints," those arriving in the afterlife have the opportunity to view the coding of their lives and that of their loved ones. These blueprints of the living are giant collections of numbers.



Themes

God's Many Personas

In "Sum," there are many and varied descriptions of the All Mighty, the God and the Creator. They range from a traditional all-powerful image of a male God to several who are female gods one of whom is so large, it is impossible to even get a sense of her enormity. The god in "Mary," is obsessed with Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein." The god has an honored throne in the afterlife for Mary Shelley because she is the only human he has encountered who understands the downside of creating life. In "Pantheon," there are a multitude of gods. In fact, there is a god for everything: a god of bacteria, a god of telephones, a god of bubble gum.

The gods described in "Sum," also struggle with issues that no earthlings could have imagined. For example, in "Prism," god wants everyone to have an afterlife but struggles with what age should be assigned to each person. Is it fair when an old man dies that he should be forced to exist for eternity as an old man or should he be returned to a younger age? In "Narcissus," the creators are called the Cartographers. They created man with high-resolution cameras in their eyes so that they could take photos of the earth's terrain. Upon a person's death, his photos are be downloaded so the Cartographers can make their maps. But the Cartographers were disappointed since it was obvious from the photos that humans preferred to look at each other than at the ground.

The female god in "Egalitaire," struggled with how to determine who was good and who was bad and who should be allowed in the afterlife. She decided to rely on computer-generated reports to handle the decision-making. In "Microbe," the creator is so small that he cannot be seen by the naked eye. In "Quark," everything in the universe including humans all originated from one single quark.

Unlike the traditional image of "God," the gods in "Sum," are not necessarily all-powerful, are not all men and are besieged with problems that they cannot solve.

Afterlife Connections to Life on Earth

There are many references and comparisons in the stories in "Sum" about the afterlife to life on earth. Some stories feature a creator or god who struggles with issues and finds solutions by "looking down" and observing how his creations - the humans - handle similar problems. These are cases in which the father learns from his children.

In "Egalitaire," god struggles with who should be allowed to enter the afterlife. She concludes that because there is "good" in everyone, that all people should have a place in the afterlife. However, once everyone is allowed in, the people have the same conflicts with one another in the afterlife as they did on earth. The afterlife is a failure because it duplicates the flaws that exist on earth.



In "Circle of Friends," the only people that someone in the afterlife encounters are those he was close with and those he remembered from his life on earth. Those in the afterlife first enjoy being with just their close circle of friends but then boredom sets in and they realize that they miss the random chances of meeting new people as they did in their prior existence.

In "The Cast," those arriving in the afterlife learn that half the people they knew on earth were actors from the afterlife. It is a duty of those in the afterlife to play roles in the lives of earthlings. In "Missing," those arriving in the afterlife discover that god is a married couple. Their existence is described as that of earthly parents who struggle with how to raise and guide their children.

Reincarnation

There are a number of references to living again or reincarnation in the stories contained in "Sum." For example, in "Descent of Species," those arriving in the afterlife are given the choice of choosing whatever they would like to be in the next life, which is a clear reference to a return to earth. In "The Cast," those in the afterlife are called upon to return to earth and play roles in the lives of earthlings. This step is necessary in order to advance in the afterlife. Those who support the concept of reincarnation also believe that there are stages of reincarnation and the scenario in "The Cast," certainly points to that element of "living again." The narrative entitled "Metamorphosis," also refers to multiple levels of transitioning from the living to the dead. Those arriving in the afterlife learn that there are three stages of death which also connects to the concept of reincarnation.

The frustration of the creators in "Adhesion," is illustrated in their inability to understand relationships on earth and what motivates people to end relationships or try to hold them together. In an effort to gain a more thorough understanding, the creators send people back from the afterlife to earth so that more data can be gathered.

In "Angst," the inhabitants of the afterlife are responsible for physically holding the universe together. The cosmos is on the brink of collapse and it's a difficult job to support it. Every three hundred years, those in the afterlife are given a break and are allowed to take a vacation and spend a period of time back on earth, which is another reference to a return to life from the author.

Another obvious reference to reincarnation is found in the story entitled, "The Unnatural." The new arrivals in the afterlife are told that they can make any change they want—everything between being taller or making everyone on earth have a better sense of humor and return to earth to live again.



Style

Perspective

"Sum, Forty Tales from the Afterlives" is written by David Eagleman and is a collection of forty scenarios that describe the possibilities that may exist in the afterlife. Eagleman is an accomplished author who has written the non-fiction tome, "Incognito," among other professional works. Eagleman's background makes him uniquely qualified in the writing of a book filled with thought-provoking stories and mind-bending possibilities of the type that are contained in "Sum."

Eagleman is not only a writer but also a neuroscientist. He majored in British and American literature at Rice University and earned a Ph.D. in neuroscience at Baylor College of Medicine. He therefore has the benefit of a vast education in literature as well as science, elements of which are contained in many of the short narratives he has written about the afterlife.

There are a number of the episodes included in this collection that describe or hint at a return to life after death. By inserting this concept into several of his stories, it leads the reader to believe that Eagleman may have belief in some form of reincarnation. The author brings his knowledge of science and his unique creativity into the stories, making them compelling and provocative.

Tone

"Sum, Forty Tales from the Afterlives," by David Eagleman, is a collection of forty scenarios about what might exist in the afterlife and the identity and role of the creator. Many of the short tales are written with humor and are light and enjoyable. Other tales have a more ominous tone that even speak in terms of suicide and murder and the decline of god and man. Each tale does have a thought-provoking element and each one is written cleverly with intelligence and often in great detail.

Some concepts that are presented are difficult to grasp making it quite apparent that author Eagleson wanted everyone to pay attention and give the stories some serious thought to understand the intended message. Many of the stories focus on a return to a life which might indicate that the author, who is also a neuro-scientist, may have some belief in a form of reincarnation.

Many of the stories have a moral element. For example, several episodes discuss a form of punishment in the afterlife for either not living up to one's potentials or making the wrong choices in life. The scenarios often parallel life on earth. Wars and conflicts break out in the afterlife. Boredom existing there leads some to lament their former lives as they miss the excitement of not know what's around the corner.



No one could read this book and miss the intent of the author to create a provocative and intellectual work that would leave an impact upon its readers.

Structure

"Sum" by David Eagleman is a collection of forty tales about the afterlife. Each short scenario that is presented is contained in an individual chapter. Other than the main general subject, there is no real connection from one tale to the next. Preceding the first chapter, is a brief biography about Eagleman who is a Ph.D. in neuroscience at Baylor College of Medicine. Since the short narratives are not truly linked in any substantive way, there are no cliff hangers and no need for foreshadowing.

There is a similarity in the structure of each individual story in that the premise is the same: What is afterlife and who is the creator? Each tale begins with what a newly arriving and recently deceased individual discovers in the afterlife. Most of the time it is a surprise as, in general, is the identity and description of the creator or god. After the initial description of afterlife and the creator, there is generally an explanation as to why the afterlife was set up as it was and the thinking behind the creator in his creation of man and other creatures.

At the conclusion of each vignette, there is generally a moral to the story or an unexpected twist that makes the story humorous, meaningful or thought-provoking.



Quotes

"In the afterlife you relive all your experiences, but this time with the events reshuffled into a new order: all the moments that share a quality are grouped together." (Chapter 1, p. 3).

"You cannot appreciate the destination without knowing the starting point; you cannot revel in the simplicity unless you remember the alternatives." (Chapter 4, p. 11).

"And just before before you lose your final human faculties, you painfully ponder what magnificent extraterrestrial creature, enthralled with the idea of finding a simpler life, chose in the last round to become a human." (Chapter 4, p. 12).

"Unlike the other animals, who experienced each day like the one before, Man cared, sought, yearned, erred, coveted, and ached - just like God Himself." (Chapter 6, p. 18).

"And God suddenly bolts up in His bed with a revelation: everything that creates itself upon the backs of smaller scales will by those same scales be consumed." (Chapter 11, p. 33).

"And there you see the face - it is larger than the moon's orbit. It is a sight beyond the pens of lyric poets. It is the ocean in its terrifying power and rhythmic grace." (Chapter 14, p. 39).

"Over the millennia, God has grown bitter. Nothing continues to satisfy. Time drowns Him. He envies man his brief twinkling of a life, and those He dislikes are condemned to suffer immortality with Him." (Chapter 17, p. 46).

"He finds Himself lonely and misunderstood. He often invites over men like Martin Luther King., Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi, and together they sit on the porch drinking tea and lamenting about movements that sweep over the tops of the founders." (Chapter 20, p. 53).

"In this way, death switches have established themselves as a cosmic joke on mortality. Humans have discovered that they cannot stop Death, but at least they can spit in his drink." (Chapter 25, p. 67).

"There is not a single God but many. Each rules a separate territory. Despite the best guesses of erstwhile civilizations, the gods do not hold dominion over categories of war, love, and wisdom." (Chapter 29, p. 77).



"Contrary to the admonition that we cannot take it with us, anything we create becomes part of our afterlife. It if was created, it survives." (Chapter 35, p. 95).

"She is the elephant described by blind men: all partial descriptions with no understanding of the whole." (Chapter 36, p. 99).

Topics for Discussion

In "Absence," god is missing. What are the various rumors concerning his disappearance?

God is asked what question in "Distance?" What is his response? How does the title fit into his answer?

In "Metamorphosis," how many deaths are there? What marks the the first two deaths? What does the last death represent?

In "Circle of Friends," who are the people that a person entering the afterlife will find? What people would not be present? What does the person begin to miss about earth?

What is the attitude of the gods in the afterlife found in "Graveyard of the Gods?" Why do they have this attitude and who do they think should be in charge of the afterlife?

In "Reversal," what event makes it possible for people to live their lives again? What conflict occurs for those living their second life?

What does the god in "Apostasy," hand out to those arriving in the afterlife? What newly arrivals does she most fear? Who does she send away in "down" escalators?