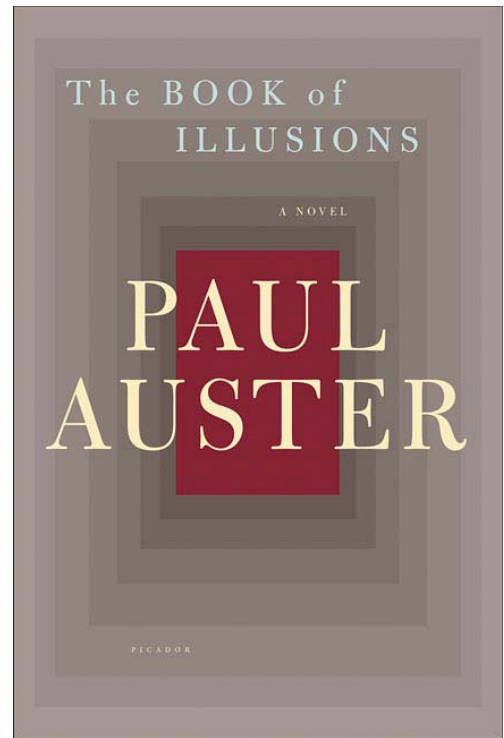


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Book of Illusions

by Paul Auster

ISBN: 0-312-42901-0



Introduction to The Book of Illusions

Six months after losing his wife and two young sons in an airplane crash, Vermont professor David Zimmer spends his waking hours in a blur of alcoholic grief and self-pity. Then, watching television one night, he stumbles upon a clip from a lost film by the silent comedian Hector Mann. Zimmer's interest is piqued, and he soon finds himself embarking on a journey around the world to study the works of this mysterious figure, who vanished from sight in 1929.

Who was Hector Mann? An Argentinean-born comic genius, with a signature white suit and fluttering black mustache, a master of “backpedals and dodges...sudden torques and lunging pavaues...double takes and hop-steps and rhumba swivels.” Presumed dead for sixty years, he had flashed briefly across American movie screens, tantalizing the public with the promise of a brilliant future, and then, just as the silent era came to an end, he walked out of his house one January morning and was never heard from again.

Zimmer's research leads him to write the first full-length study of Hector's films. When the book is published the following year, a letter turns up in Zimmer's mailbox bearing a return address from a small town in New Mexico – supposedly written by Hector's wife. “Hector has read your book and would like to meet you. Are you interested in paying us a visit?” Is the letter a hoax, or is Hector Mann still alive? Torn between doubt and belief, Zimmer hesitates, until one night a strange woman appears on his doorstep and makes the decision for him, changing his life forever.

Written with breathtaking urgency and precision, this stunning novel plunges the reader into a universe in which the comic and the tragic, the real and the imagined, the violent and the tender dissolve into one another. With *The Book of Illusions*, one of America's most powerful and original writers has written his richest, most emotionally charged work yet.

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. David Zimmer, upon first viewing Hector Mann's films, comments of the work: "It wasn't slapstick or anarchy so much as character and pace, a smoothly orchestrated mixture of objects, bodies, and minds" (p. 11). While this may be an unusual interpretation of comedy, it's more easily applicable to storytelling and performance in general. What sort of "orchestration" is at work in *The Book of Illusions* at large? What sort of orchestration is at work in David Zimmer's or Hector Mann's life?
2. The story of Hector Mann's transformation into Herman Loesser, of David Zimmer's transformation following the death of his family, points to the idea that there are larger forces at work in these people's lives. If the characters in *The Book of Illusions* seem to be defined by others or by occurrences beyond their control, who are they, really? How might Hector Mann or David Zimmer choose to define themselves?
3. Hector was a maker of silent comedy. How does comedy (or the idea of it) resonate throughout the novel?
4. Zimmer claims that his "life begins again" when he first watches Hector's films, and through much of Auster's novel, lives are both ending and recommencing. What do you believe this says about Auster's vision of identity, and if such reversals may occur, what does this say about his idea of fate? Furthermore, who are we if our lives may be reduced "to a pile of fragments, a jigsaw puzzle whose pieces no longer connect"(p. 83)?
5. Why do you think Zimmer chose to name his critical study of Hector Mann *The Silent World*? What does the title mean to the rest of Auster's novel?
6. "The moment you see a man walking down the street in a white suit, you know that suit is going to get him into trouble...he is turning himself into a target."(p. 30-31) Both David and Alma, Hector and Frieda, seem targeted for greatness and doom. Through which lens, Hector's or Auster's, might these be one and the same? What does this say about their author(s)?
7. David Zimmer says towards the novel's close that he had known Alma for only eight days. How does Auster play with time in the book?
8. What is real and what is imagined in *The Book of Illusions*? "If I never saw the moon, the moon was never there," Zimmer says of his time at the ranch. Later, he confesses: "This is a book of fragments, a compilation of sorrows and half remembered dreams."
9. Why does Hector insist on destroying his later films? What do you think Alma's motivation is for actually carrying through with their destruction?
10. What is the significance of the parallels between Hector Mann and David Zimmer?
11. On the night of Hector's death, the phone rings in Alma's cabin. Alma leaves David to answer it, but when she brings the receiver to her ear, no one is at the other end of the line. Who do you think phoned Alma?

Author Biography

Paul Auster's previous novel, *Timbuktu*, was a national bestseller, as was *I Thought My Father Was God*, the NPR National Story Project, which he edited. He lives in Brooklyn, New York. *The Book of Illusions* is his tenth novel.

Praise for *The Book of Illusions*

"A nearly flawless work...and the best argument among many that Auster will be remembered as one of the great writers of our time." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Through all its dark and delightful twists and turns *The Book of Illusions* is suffused with warmth and illuminated by its narrator's hard-won wisdom. This artful and elegant novel may be Auster's best ever." —Peter Carey

"Mr. Auster's elegant, finely calibrated *The Book of Illusions* is a haunting feat of intellectual gamesmanship.... Hector is an inspired creation...more immediate than many flesh-and-blood actors." —*The New York Times*

"One of his finest [novels]: an elegant mediation on the question of whether an artist or his public 'owns' the work he creates, and a thickly plotted succession of interlocking mysteries reminiscent of his highly praised New York Trilogy...gripping and immensely satisfying." —Kirkus Reviews

"An older and wiser Auster has added a new ingredient to the metaphysical play and deft storytelling, a sadness that colors all illusion, that creates a stunningly moving and very real portrait of a man over-marked by death.... It is a story of unspeakable grief told with virtuosic brilliance, which Auster finally brings safely to Earth with a very human simplicity." —*Los Angeles Times*

"An enthralling new summit in Paul Auster's art." —Jonathan Lethem

"His most compulsively readable, lushly imagined, and deeply pleasurable novel." —*Chicago Tribune*

"An arresting and captivating novel and certainly one of Auster's best... A truly convincing love story, and a good old-fashioned mystery." —*Esquire*

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