

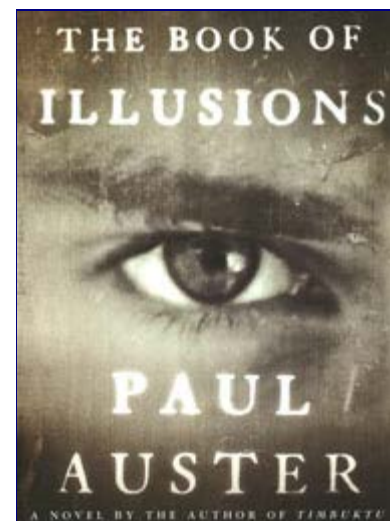
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A READER'S JOURNAL

The Book of Illusions
A Novel
by
Paul Auster

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for
Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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Norman Cousins, while the editor of Saturday Review magazine, came down with an unknown illness. Doctors were unable to help him, so he ordered some Marx Bros. movies and watched them in almost constant laughter and his disease symptoms went away. Nicola Tesla was in school and developed a mysterious disease and he started reading Mark Twain which caused him to laugh and he was cured(1). Along comes the hero of this book, David Zimmer, who loses his wife and two sons in a plane crash, and goes into a deep depression until he saw a clip of Hector Mann in an old silent movie which made him laugh. David tells us:

[page 9] That might not sound important, but it was the first time I had laughed at anything since June, and when I felt that unexpected spasm rise up through my chest and begin to rattle around in my lungs, I understood that I hadn't hit bottom yet, that there was still some piece of me that wanted to go on living.

Hector Mann after making twelve silent films stepped out one day for a walk and never returned. That was in 1929 and only 3 of his 12 films survived, but in 1981 one after another of his films began to arrive in different countries, each mailed from different places, and now David was grabbed by this project: watching all or as many of Hector's films as possible. The man was born in 1900 and was not likely to be alive in 1989, but his films were available, and David decided to fly to these places and watch the films. He thought it best to identify himself as an English professor, which he was, and when one curator asked if he was writing a book about Hector Mann, he said yes, and that unexpected question led him to begin writing a book about Hector's films. He wrote the definitive book about them, and one day a letter arrived from New Mexico from Hector's wife saying her husband had read his book and wants to meet him. This letter launches the string of incredible adventures which will pull us through to the end of the book.

The author describes silent film comedies as follows:

[page 15] Most silent comedies hardly even bothered to tell stories. They were like poems, like the renderings of dreams, like some intricate choreography of the spirit, and because they were dead, they probably spoke more deeply to us now than they had to the audiences of their time.

These were the thoughts of David Zimmer, whose memories of his family haunted him and spoke deeply to him, and somehow the silent comedies were filling the huge gap in his life caused by the lost of his family. He became a fanatic about seeing all the films and watched some for days or weeks before moving on to the next film, memorizing every one of Hector's brilliant moves, the way he moved his thin moustache speaking volumes, it was "the instrument of communication, and even though it speaks a language without words, its wriggles and flutters are as clear and comprehensible as a message tapped out in Morse code." (Page 29)

The single open eye which fills the book cover seems to be Paul Auster's eye staring out at us, and it reminds me of a book by another Paul, Paul Brooks' [Into the Silent Land](#), which also has a closeup of a single right eye, but it is a closed eye. However, "Into the Silent Land" would be a great title for Auster's book, given its focus on a silent movies' star, and the amount of time David Zimmer spends watching Hector Mann's silent movies in various places around the world.

Along with his mustache, Hector's signature white suit made him instantly recognizable. We wince every time some potential splash, split, or mud takes aim at Hector. We smile at his mustache and we wince at his suit's vulnerability, all of which makes watching his movie an interactive role-play with us in our seats and Hector up on the screen. Thank goodness there's no dialogue to listen to at the same time, because his antics in averting one disastrous situation after another keeps viewers too busy to attend to any verbal inputs. I write as if I have seen Hector's films, which of course I have not, but my writing this way is a testament to Paul Auster's antics in the words on the page which enable one to feel the direct experience of watching those silent films.

Once Hector seduces two women at the same time, an older woman whose jewels he plans to lift as she swoons under his flirting, and a young beauty, the sheriff's daughter, whose dress he plans to lift at some early opportunity. The camera is placed so that we can see both women, but neither can see the other, and each sees Hector's eyes pointing at her alone. Two birds with one eye shot.

In the film *Mr. Nobody* we observe Hector Mann turning into No Mann, watching as he seems to meditate on his own upcoming disappearance. When he is finally visible again in the mirror, his mouth breaks into a large smile, his mustache twitching for a few seconds as camera comes closer, a circle enclosing his smile and gradually becoming smaller till it disappears. Hector has vanished like the Cheshire Cat, leaving behind only a waning smile. When the words, The End, appear on the screen, it is the first time and last time in a Hector Mann silent film. He is gone. The man who disappeared in the film has disappeared in life.

Prof. Zimmer begins to work on another project, translating a long memoir from French into English, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. Zimmer felt the title *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave* was too awkward, too literal, and too hard to understand, so he chose *Memoirs of a Dead Man*, which I feel is too awkward, too literal, and too easy to understand. "Beyond the Grave" implies a memoir being communicated from the beyond which gives it a cachet that "dead man" does not. After all, what's a metaphor for, if it's not for creating some elegant and mysterious connection carried over into words? Here I am criticizing a fictional writer's choice of a title, how weird is that? A dead man has had a life once, but a fictional writer, never. How about *Memoirs of a Fictional Author*?

Later, on page 67, the dead man speaks in the Introduction to his memoir, "I have been urged to allow some portions of these Memoirs to appear in my lifetime, but I prefer to speak from the depths of my tomb." Now there's a metaphor with punch, "From the Depths of My Tomb". If the fictional writer were only a real writer, I would send him this suggestion *post haste*, but darn it, he's not even *post humous*!

Zimmer take *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* down from a shelf in his home and three days later he gets the letter asking him to translate, written on the same day he had been looking through the book. He takes this as a sign, a cosmic coincidence, and I agree, such "winks of Fate" reveal that [It All Happens at the Same Time](#), a process I discovered decades ago and incorporated in my Matherne's Rules as No. 4. Whose mind did

the book pop into first? Both at the same time. In any event, there is no way to determine precedence. Try to do it yourself when it happens, you'll soon be convinced that it's impossible. We think it's possible to align events in the material world as to which happened first, but even that is impossible as Einstein's Law of Relativity shows, but try to align mental events as to priority, hah! Rotsa Ruck! Can't be done. MR#4!.

Translation, Zimmer reports, is like shoveling coal. Never thought of it that way.

[page 70] You scoop it up and toss it into the furnace. Each lump is a word, and each shovelful is another sentence, and if your back is strong enough and you have the stamina to keep at it for eight or ten hours at a stretch, you can keep the fire hot. With close to a million words in front of me, I was prepared to work as long and as hard as necessary, even if it meant burning down the house.

Deep into his coal-shoveling, a letter arrives from Frieda, tantalizing Zimmer with the prospect of viewing films made by Hector after he disappeared if he will only come to New Mexico. But the professor in Vermont writes back that he must have proof that Hector is still alive before he will travel to some unknown location in remote New Mexico. This works for the plot, but it seemed a strange response to Frieda's letter when Zimmer had flown to Europe without any more proof than the words of curator that a Hector film was there to be viewed. Soon he receives a visit from a gal named Alma saying that she was sent by Frieda to tell him that Hector's in bad shape and he had better fly to New Mexico the next morning if he wants to see him still alive.

Zimmer refuses to hear Alma out and his excuse to himself went this way, "The only person I knew how to be with now was myself -- but I wasn't really anyone, and I wasn't really alive. I was just someone who pretended to be alive, a dead man who spent his days translating a dead man's book." Seems the translator was also operating "From Beyond the Grave" or "From the Depths of a Tomb".

Alma finally gets Zimmer to hear that she is Charlie Grund's daughter, knowing that Zimmer would recognize the name as Hector's cameraman during those first twelve films. We get to hear Alma's incredible story of how she has been working for years on Hector's biography. Zimmer's book was the story of Hector's films, and Alma's the story of Hector's life. There was an appealing symmetry between the two of them as if they were fated to meet and make this trip to New Mexico the next morning.

That night Zimmer (whose name means "room") is in his room musing over her name, Alma, from *almus*, meaning nourishing, bountiful, two things which he had possessed little of since his family went down in flames in that plane crash, when Alma slipped into his bed, and before he could think of anything to say, she kissed him and something nourishing and bountiful entered David Zimmer's life as he entered Alma. On the trip to Logan Airport, David realizes that he is reenacting that fateful last trip when he drove his wife and two boys along this same route. This is the classic phobia cure, take a path you were fearful of, but with a fullness of nurturing so that a fresh new memory completely blots out the phobic fear-filled memory. The entire airplane trip to New Mexico, his first flight without Xanax, is filled with Alma telling her story and Hector's story in great detail, the kind of detail a biographer can relate.

For example, Alma tells us how Hector Mann morphed into Herman Loesser in Spokane, his first and last name welded together as Herman, and his last name denoting him as Herman the Lesser. He met Nora, who was alone in a store, and offered himself as a stockboy. The silent film star and movie producer had turned from a gadfly into a moth, risking exposing his secret identity.

[page 155] He had turned himself into a moth, and he spent the rest of the day fluttering around a hot, burning candle. He knew that his wings could ignite at any moment, but the closer he came to touching the fire, the more he sensed that he was fulfilling his destiny. As he put it in his journal that night: *If I mean to save my life, then I have to come within an inch of destroying it.*

Soon Hector became the *de facto* store manager and Nora's father finally gave up trying find out who

Herman Loesser really is. He wanted Herman to marry his daughter, Herman demurred, and the crisis comes when Nora announces she had received a proposal of marriage. He loved Nora, but could not marry her, so he wrote a goodbye letter and disappeared once more. Like the Cheshire Cat, Hector seemed best at disappearing acts.

His next life with Sylvia was that of being paid to have sex with her in front of live, high-paying customers. Often these took the form of short skirts, which Hector knew how to produce, direct, and star in.

[page 183] The most popular one was the nurse and patient routine. People seemed to like watching Sylvia take off the starched white uniform, and they never failed to applaud when she began unwrapping the gauze bandages from Hector's body. There was also the Confessional Box Scandal (which ended with the priest ravishing the nun) and, more elaborately, the tale of the two libertines who meet at a masked ball in pre-revolutionary France.

To protect his identity, Hector insisted on wearing a mask, disguising, as it were, his best assets, while revealing everything else. Soon the jig was up, and Hector was on a bus. He noticed that the bus would stop in Sandusky, Ohio, which he had used as his place of birth in one of his aliases, so he decided to actually visit Sandusky for real. On a whim, he wants to change his fifty-dollar bills from his last gig into fives for convenience. In the bank, a robbery took place, and he protected a gal named Frieda and received a bullet as thanks. Not the bullet he'd hoped for, which would have labeled him a suicide, but a bullet which labeled him a hero.

Remember the professor, David Zimmer, who is listening to the story told by Alma? She has given David a bounty of hope and nourishment, and, meanwhile in Alma's story, Hector marries Frieda, they move to the New Mexico ranch and Hector finds a way to continue making movies without breaking his promise not to make no more movies: the movies will be burnt by Frieda with 24 hours of his death.

Zimmer who is in no rush to head to Frieda, not believing her story about Hector being alive, now finds that a rush is necessary because Hector is dying. Hector Mann had become Hector Spelling fifty years earlier, taking Freida's last name, and now he was within hours of death. Hector and Frieda had a son who died at a young age from bee stings. It seems as if all of Hector's productions were going to disappear forever. Perhaps even Alma's decade-long work on his biography. Will David reach Hector before he dies? Will he get to see one or more of his new batch of movies? Will Frieda carry out Hector's will and burn his movies shortly after she has him burnt in cremation? Will Alma, who helped return David to life, stay around to enjoy it with him? Let's say that if David were to write about his time with Alma, his title might be, "Six Days of Alma" or "Six Alma Days".

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. See [Tesla — Man Out of Time](#) by Margaret Cheney.

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