

An Elegant Theory

Noah Milligan

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A mind-bending literary Rorschach test of a novel, An Elegant Theory evades strict conclusions.

Noah Milligan's *An Elegant Theory* is a grand experiment of a novel, as much about the breathtaking grandeur of string theory and the beauty of a complex universe as it is about the difficulties of straining reality out from intricate delusions, particularly for those who hold their secrets close.

PhD candidate Coulter grapples with his ambitious dissertation, often working against the desires of his committee, and tries to balance the demands of his work with the mundane needs of his wife, Sara. Sara feels detached and alone in their Boston suburb, and Coulter, for whom connection has always been more elusive than theory, is at a loss when it comes to helping her. The return of his estranged mother only complicates matters, as do his increasingly more frequent lucid dreams. As Coulter draws near to a universe-altering scientific breakthrough, his own reality only becomes more muddled.

Just beyond the reach of scientific observation, the following things may or may not be true of Coulter's life: His mother left him to join a cult. He is dealing with a pyromaniacal teenager. He is expecting his first child. He is suicidal. He is at risk of being expelled from MIT. His life is coming together. He is preparing to accept a Nobel Prize. He is grappling with loneliness and a dangerous obsession. He has just murdered his pregnant wife.

Milligan's narrative crackles with a mix of danger, disassociation, hope, and despair. Coulter sometimes narrates; some scenes come via an omniscient observer. It becomes difficult, thrilling, and troubling to determine which scenes are reliable and which are mere misfires in the experiment of Coulter's life, resulting in a novel that, while it proffers few certain answers, never ceases to engage.

An Elegant Theory is a literary Rorschach test, a mind-bending ride, in which "real" conclusions are elusive, and discovery always waits just beyond the next page.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Winter 2017)

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