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On an spring afternoon in 1978 in the loft of a church outside Cambridge, England, an organ tuner named Malory loses his virginity to a dyslexic math genius named Louiza. When Louiza disappears, Malory follows her trail to Rome. There, the quest to find his love gets sidetracked when he discovers he is the heir to the Kingdom of Septimania, given by Charlemagne to the Jews of eighth-century France. In the midst of a Rome reeling from the kidnappings and bombs of the Red Brigades, Malory is crowned King of the Jews, Holy Roman Emperor and possibly Caliph of All Islam.

Over the next fifty years, Malory's search for Louiza leads to encounters with Pope John Paul II, a band of lost Romanians, a magical Bernini statue, Haroun al Rashid of Arabian Nights fame, an elephant that changes color, a shadowy U.S. spy agency and one of the 9/11 bombers, an appleseed from the original Tree of Knowledge, and the secret history of Isaac Newton and his discovery of a Grand Unified Theory that explains everything. It is the quest of a Candide for love and knowledge, and the ultimate discovery that they may be unified after all.

Septimania Details

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From Reader Review Septimania for online ebook

Jackief says

This was great for a cruise to Iceland, where the sun is out 24/7 and you lose all sense of time. In retrospect, kind-of silly!

Janine says

I found this book difficult to get my head around. Well imagined and well written, it was probably too cerebral for me at this time of life. I did like the characters and loved the descriptions of Cambridge and Rome, both places I have visited.

Holly says

This novel didn't work at all. Sort of Dan Brown mixed with those John Crowley-Aegypt novels that Harold Bloom thinks are so great. But this was completely ridiculous - one lame guy is King of the Jews, Emperor of Rome, Charlemagne, Isaac Newton, Thomas Malory, Haroun al Rashid, I don't know Jesus Christ and then throw in quantum physics and goddess worship and Pope John Paul II and an annoying little apple pip (!). I clearly didn't understand it all or care to, but I know enough history and science to recognize nonsense. Add to that hot mess many cringe-worthily bad sentences. At the 40% mark I began skimming to the end just to see how many wacky things Levi could shoe-horn in - and I was richly rewarded with a lot of verbose crapola. I'm pretty sure I read Levi's *Guide for the Perplexed* back in the early 1990s and though I can't recall much about it I would have remembered if it had been as awful as this. But I probably had more tolerance for this sort of "ambition" back then.

Bibliothekerin says

This book is definitely quirky and fantastical, and I appreciate Levi's imaginative powers. While Entertaining, it also left me with far too many questions. Obviously it's intended to be fanciful, but it's more than that. What's with the abrupt dethroning at the end? Just because Malory's servant died? think I need to read it again to see if something new occurs to me.

The bizarro Romanian couple make Malory and Louiza seem like Ward and Joan (June?) Cleaver. I mean, really. Neither Louisa nor Malory suspected Tibor and _?_ had kidnapped their baby? For 2 otherwise intelligent adults, each must have experienced more than a few misfirings between synapses. Tibor is a sleaze, and knows it. He supposedly blew himself up because he was filled with such self-loathing, right?

(As an aside: his decision to direct a performance of Dante's 9 circles of Hell on Christmas Eve was mighty bizarre. And yet it was such a hit with the populace!)

Speaking of Hell... Louisa gets a bum rap; she experienced her own 9 levels, for decades, while what's-his-face gained a kingdom. She lost everything and was held hostage for years. Malory's later-in-life decision to stop trying to find her just felt wrong. Why do you think he gave up? Just too old and too tired to try again?

Ach, I should have written down my thoughts right after finishing the book, rather than starting a new one. But Why bother writing anything at all if I have so little (of worth) to say? So little of certitude, anyway.

I was first drawn to the book because the press had mentioned that the main character was an organist in Cambridge, and she a math whiz. Both subjects interest me, as did the spy angle (see reference to red-haired man).

It's just bizarre that the malevolent, mysterious red-haired man is never identified, nor are we given an explanation as to why Louiza (supposedly) married his loser-sidekick 'Vince'. I may be naive, so someone please explain: Did they rape her, too? Besides drugging her? To overcome all her defenses until she submitted to their demands? Ugh. (And shame on other reviewers for not deeming this worrisome or worthy of note.)

Meanwhile, Mal-pal has no problems whatsoever; Antonella (sp?) has been in love with him forever, since he first came to Cambridge, anyway. He subsists on biscuits and tea for his entire tenure at university it seems, which she always has at the ready. We catch up with her later in life—when Malory is in his 70s—where she tells him she married and has 3 kids. (Or was it 2? Not important.) Her hubs is dead, but she feels nothing more for Mal now than friendship. And she is a good friend, putting him up indefinitely at her home.

He considered Tibor a friend though, too, who could not be more different from Antonella and less worthy of being called Friend. (Why does he hate Malory so much, anyway? For inheriting a kingdom?)

Didn't he and Wifey kidnap Louisa and Malory's baby? Was i the only reader confused by his varied explanations for how they came to have a child? At the beginning, it's because she miscarried, and he found a baby out back in the dumpster. (yeah, right.) (Was that the correct location? I fear I've already forgotten too many details.) An infant that grows up to be gifted in math and is very pale and blonde—obviously a product of someone of Northern heritage, not swarthy like Tibor. somehow Malory misses that. But then I forget the number of years that pass before he next sees Tibor et al. yet they live in the same city, for decades. How could Malory not see their child as it grew up? If he did, surely he would have suspected that she was Louisa's missing child. Even if He didn't see the baby when it was born. Buying Tibor's story about a miscarriage is one thing, but did he never once link the disappearance of Louisa's babe with the coincidental appearance of theirs? Especially after learning that Louisa was immediately wrenched from her infant and hustled from the hospital by the so-called physician, the dastardly Red-Haired Man. Did Malory really never see the child until she was an adult? The whole thing is so far-fetched it's ridiculous—but then this is a work of fiction, and a very imaginative one at that. I guess the reader is just supposed to suspend his/her disbelief.

Definitely need to reread if I have a hope of understanding this book. Or does the author not want us to understand? I.e., is the work just a ramble that is not supposed to make sense? Not meant to have any deeper meaning? I was going to say that perhaps I'm not sophisticated enough a reader to know anything for certain (in this case, anyway), because one review (by a GR author) just blew me away with its erudite conclusions. But who knows whether he is right or wrong. Can any of us say we understand this completely?

This is my 3rd rewrite since GR zapped the second (expletive, expletive). In the 2nd I mentioned another review here, by Boris, who graciously included a link to another recent book, entitled The Messiah of Septimania—which is based on historical fact. There really was a Jewish kingdom of Septimania in southern France, in the 700s. I know, it's mind-boggling. Très cool. Thank you, Boris!

Gerald Weaver says

Reading Jonathan Levi's "Septimania" is like making love to an emotionally or psychologically unbalanced person; in the moment it is extremely enjoyable and even exciting, but upon some sober reflection it is a rather deep matter that is somewhat frightening. Synesthesia is the neurophysiological gift that allows one to see certain musical notes as individual specific colors, quite literally to hear cerulean, or to see a G above high C as orange, in an inherent way that that is similar to the more forced manner in which certain geniuses have been able to make music into mathematics. These recondite and ineffable connecting mechanisms are woven through this gripping and entertaining and layered narrative in such a way that it evolves into a novel that unifies many disparate and varied intellectual and aesthetic elements. It is written in both a major and a minor key. It is the literary astrolabe for the twenty-first century.

The reader is joyously compelled along a clever and gripping story arc that would make Dan Brown wish he were funnier and smarter, while the tale's underlying harmonies not only bring to mind history, astronomy, music, grammar, faith, love, mathematics, logic, sex, rhetoric, science, and art, they make the reader begin to see that perhaps these are all the same one thing. "Septimania" is a suspenseful page-turner that invests you in the developments that grasp a hold of its protagonist and stun him along his and our road to very deep and broad discovery. You cannot take your eyes off of the spectacle. But other realizations play the accompaniment. The whole intellectual world is contained in the map of Rome. Music is making love is literature. We are, each one of us, a Jew, and a Gentile, a Muslim, and a pagan. A violin plays to us in the colors of a Michelangelo or a Titian. Gravity is light and electricity and perhaps God. One woman is all the women in the world.

If you do not find that you cannot put this book down even after you have finished it, you will not long be a virgin. It compels you to read it over again and to draw from it some things that are new or were unseen before. It is a Borgesian smorgasbord of meaning and beauty. Jonathan Levi is the wise shaman, or the unifying field theorist, of all the things that matter to the thinking and feeling heart. "Septimania" will synesthetically leave you seeing red and feeling blue and being green with envy, because it will strike you with the Emersonian truth that genius is the property of convincing us that what we knew all along is what we have just been told.

Boris Feldman says

It would have been a 5 had I understood what was going on....

An important, engaging book on the history of the Jewish state of Septimania in the South of France, around 700. This really happened. <http://www.jewishmag.com/175mag/septi...>

This novel is worth reading but requires some effort to follow.

Frans Pollux says

DNF, opgegeven rond blz 210. Ergens tussen Dan Brown en Umberto Eco in. Ambitueuz, maar volstrekt ongelooftwaardig.

Ruthie says

I did not enjoy this book at all. It may be that it was all just over my head, but I also found it boring, disjointed and irrational. The one redeeming thing I took from this novel is that there actually was a King/Kingdom of Septimania - he ruled for approx 140 years, and it is a lost fact of history! Please see Boris Feldman's review (April 12, 2016) for a link to a review of his book for details about the true story!

Katherine says

I carry Septimania with me because in every batch of free time, I want to get back into this intellectually sweeping, magical world. Jonathan Levi's novel is wonderful—adventurous, romantic, learned, complex and daring. Malory, a failed PhD candidate, is surprisingly crowned king of Septimania, His search for Louiza, a mathematical genius who, unknown to Malory, is pregnant with his child, is one of many threads that pull me through this amazing story. When Louiza disappears, Malory's pursuit takes us to Rome. Passages include Newton, Bach, Charlemagne and modern-day life. I am astonished by the questions and quests about Grand Unified Theory, love, quantum behavior, numerology and music. In this fable, I feel I'm traveling the grand and compelling terrain of a romantic intellectual. The conclusion is killer--magnificent.

J.A. says

NoveList Plus gives it these read alike: The Flanders Panel, The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, and The Goldfinch.

Jason Furman says

Best book of 2016, so far. Septimania is erudite but also smoothly written, intricately plotted but not complicated, and a complete pleasure from the first page to the last. While it has much of the character of a time/continent/genre hopping novel by the likes of David Mitchell, it is also a linear narrative with historical interludes that tells the story of a Trinity College Cambridge grad student who is failing out of the physics program who meets his soulmate of a woman and spends a brief moment with her in Cambridge before she is whisked away. He sees her again, briefly in Rome, seven months later when she is about to give birth to their child and he is about to become the King of Septimania, a secret Kingdom, a role that makes him heir to both King David and Charlamagne. He spends the rest of the book following up on his obsession with Isaac Newton, looking for the woman and colliding with 9/11 in New York. The novel has a small number of characters with an intimate feel but also an epic that spans decades--and even centuries--while telling a secret understory to the world we live in, but one that is not fantasy or even really historical fiction. And all of this is interspersed with discussions of physics, math, music, and more--none of which are digressive or showy.

Pgricchi says

Warrants re-reading

I enjoyed reading this strange novel. I found every main character sympathetic in a different way. The Rome setting was very familiar, and the descriptions of the "feel" of Rome at different hours and in different weather were accurate - with a degree of subtleness that few writers could manage.

Many of the mathematical and historic references eluded me. Here is a work of fiction that cries out for annotation as well as illustration. I would by that edition and read the book again.

to'c says

This was certainly not the book I was lead to believe from the little review I had read. I was expecting a grand mystery full of archaeological and arcane lore. A grand tale of travel to foreign lands. A grand discovery at the end.

So perhaps that's why I was disappointed in the story. I kept it expecting to go one way or another and it never did. Truth to tell, I stuck with it because it seemed to keep promising that it would. And by the time I realized I was fooled I figured I may as well stick it out.

Or maybe because it's an allegory. I'm not a big fan of allegory.

But if you are, if you like those old morality plays in which the little girl is whisked away to live with the Saints, leads a life of drudgery and toil, and returns to the real world just in time to die sinless, then perhaps this is the book for you. (that was not a spoiler, btw. Septimania has none of those elements. It just reads that way.)

That said, I think Mr. Levi is a masterful storyteller. I just didn't like the story he told.

Mary says

I could hardly put this book down. It was kind of surrealistic. It had the hidden history thing going on kind of like Dan Brown and some mystical characteristics. The characters were very original. There were joyous and heartfelt times throughout the story. I really enjoyed this story. It was one that you wanted to get to the end to see how things ended but you didn't want the story to end.

Kindleworm Dot Com says

Have you ever found yourself in a dream that is just totally fucked up and makes no sense, but you're dreaming, you have no choice, and the dream just goes on until you finally wake up in a cold sweaty bed needing a change of sheets, a hot shower and mug of cocoa?

Well this is the literary version, and it's someone else's fucked up dream you're stuck in.

I say 'you're stuck in', like you couldn't just delete it from your Kindle if you wanted to, but that's the thing, you just don't want to. Like the fucked up dream, you just seem to be stuck in it and you have to wait until the end when it releases you back to reality.

I won't say more as i wouldn't want to spoil it for any literary masochists out there, other than buyer beware. It will seriously disturb you that you wasted your time reading it, but once you start reading it you'll be in it until the end - you have been warned!
