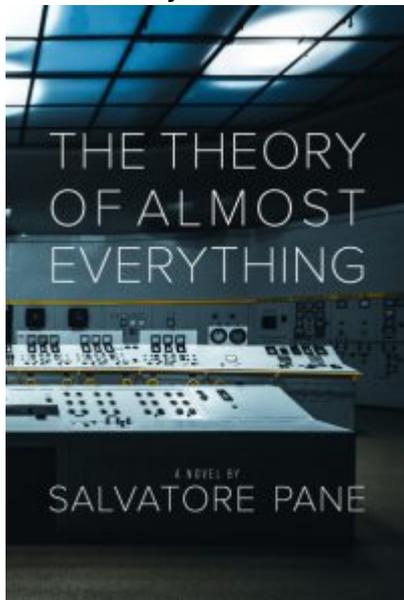


Multiverse, Unlimited: Salvatore Pane's The Theory of Almost Everything

written by Guest Contributor | November 26, 2018



The Theory of Almost Everything, by Salvatore Pane
Braddock Avenue Books, 2018
267 pages – [Braddock Avenue Books](#) / [Amazon](#)

The premise of Salvatore Pane's second novel, *The Theory of Almost Everything*, will recall a frantic hope shared by many survivors of the 1980s and 1990s: namely, that there must be *some* alternative to those long decades of partisan bickering and neoliberal pandering that accelerated modernity's death drive toward mass extinction, irreversible climate change, and a return to nuclear détente. We dreamed of multiverses: universes parallel to our own, where we could write and revise our actions infinitely, until we got it right. It's why so many of us would convene under oak trees at recess, retreating from the garish fluorescents of our classrooms, so that we could plot out every course to the good endings of Choose Your Own Adventure books.

Pane's narrator—the young, PhD-wielding cosmologist Teddy Copeland—reveals that he's a fellow seeker of those fissures into the multiverse, a fellow spelunker in its cavern of unknown, inconceivable futures. "My journey to parallel realities, a secret laboratory hidden beneath the red mountains of New Mexico, and even the end of the world itself began," Cope admits in the novel's first sentence, "with a lonely glass of bourbon in the saddest bar in Indianapolis." At the hotel bar, where he masks his sense of scholarly impostor syndrome with serious bourbon, knit ties, and a simmering disdain for the performances of academia, Cope could be almost any other millennial who answered the siren call of a field's luminaries to graduate school and beyond. It hardly matters if those masters are scientists like J. Robert Oppenheimer or Albert Einstein, critical theorists Michel Foucault or Jacques

Derrida or Simone de Beauvoir, or any discipline you like: when sculpted into idols by our uncritical dreams, all geniuses offer the same hollow promise, that we too can have an “intervention” in the field.

So, Cope has ample reasons for the dour tone, beyond the unique despondency that arises only from academic conferences gone awry. Just twenty-eight, a widower still smarting from the loss of his “secret” wife Wren Wells to leukemia, and a post-doc languishing at the University of Alaska, Cope’s personal and professional existence seems prematurely stalled and isolated in the forbidding space of academe. His research has similarly run out of gas. His last major contribution—the Copeland Principle—came from his graduate research, which determined slight (yet significant) distinctions between black holes and wormholes. Convinced that his scholarly credentials are simply evidence of more broken promises, Cope has dialed back his ambitions:

I yearned to slip back into the embarrassing sci-fi novels of my youth, the terrible covers and overwrought prose that made me feel as if my life was barreling toward some strange and futuristic destiny [. . .]. It was a boyish impulse I should have long ago outgrown, but what I really wanted was to continue my impractical research on Einstein-Rosen bridges and the cosmological Multiverse, the scattershot chance that somewhere, beyond our stars and reality, there existed an alternate version of me, a better Teddy Copeland [. . .].

But after that scientific conference in Indianapolis, fate would tug Cope away from his lonely habit of mourning his lot in life over a glass of Eagle Rare at the hotel bar. After all, the Copeland Principle has piqued the interest of none other than the preserved consciousness of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who sustains his malingering existence in the form of a *Star Wars*-style hologram rendered corporeal through a “physicality algorithm.” Cope accepts an invitation to join an elite group of scientists—“our little whiz bang collective,” as holo-Oppenheimer dubs the crew—in a massive research facility hidden under the site of the historic Oppenheimer’s New Mexico ranch, Perro Caliente. (It’s worth noting here that good sci-fi *needs* good world-building, and Pane accomplishes something noble here: he brings to the genre a historical novelist’s eye for the most significant elements of Oppenheimer’s biography and demeanor.) The task for all the Perro Caliente scientists: to use the Copeland Principle, in conjunction with the powerful theory of almost everything, to engineer portals to alternate universes that may contain the solution to the political and ecological hazards that imperil our earth.

The theory’s potential entrances Cope, who likens it euphorically to “a perfectly sculpted mathematic sestina that could explain every known phenomenon in the entire universe and Multiverse beyond.” But he’s not

dispatched on this task by his lonesome. Nihilistic Cope partners with other young scientists poached by Oppenheimer from lucrative gigs: the futurist and Google wunderkind Nessa Newmar and the engineer Delbar Javari, the key mind behind "The God Laser," a particle accelerator that can open wormholes to other worlds. Cope and Nessa's first leap into one of the God Laser's portals is itself (to borrow Cope's word) a sestina of panic and ecstasy, of the terminal doubt so necessary to discovery:

In the split-second before we tumbled through the dead-eye portal, I considered the possibility that The Copeland Principle was wrong, that I hadn't figured out the lone perceptible difference between wormhole gateways and black hole dead ends, that in fact, we'd assembled a black hole underground that would now disintegrate our bodies before moving onto the planet and eventually the entire universe itself.

The wormholes take them to a bevy of universes: an alternate Berkeley in a world where China has outstripped the United States as the economic superpower, a post-atomic bomb Alaska, and a global and mechanized Nazi empire (which, in 2018, is all the more harrowing). Together, the trio of Cope, Nessa, and Delbar affirms that science, the future, and hope belong to the young, diverse generation that came of age in the 1990s and 2000s, not to the generation of holo-Oppenheimer, which masks its desire for power behind the punch-drunk whimsy of a midcentury TV dad. "Our generation didn't cause any of these problems," Delbar opines, "but we have to be the ones to solve them. Oppenheimer's been a hologram for twenty-five years. That had to warp him, right?"

But despite their youth, they remain susceptible to the theory's alternate timelines. However, the theory's hold is tightest on Cope. Like a kid with access to a divinely powered ROM editor, Cope moonlights on a new series of equations—the Wren algorithm, which might return him to his curtailed, undergrad love. But as the memories of Wren beckon Cope to his ruined (and ruinous) past, the residents of Perro Caliente discover that the God Laser's promise of antidotes to the apocalypse may be too little, too late. It's left to the triumvirate of Cope, Nessa, and Newmar to patch together a possible future—if they aren't forever ensnared by the petty edicts of holo-Oppenheimer in their reality, or stranded in the post-apocalyptic wastelands of the multiverse.

At this juncture, the sci-fi novels of Cope's youth or the Choose Your Own Adventures of ours would make a wacky turn for a deus ex machina resolution. But Pane's novel has taken those algorithms that novelists call "genres" and discovered in them his own narrative theory of almost everything, in which literature itself generates portals to universes that we have not yet begun to imagine. Pane's deft prose collides the manic, comic, fanboy-energy of a

young Michael Chabon with the otherworldly lyricism of Ursula K. Le Guin, and yet the novel still attains the straight-arrow seriousness that we might expect from the historic novel or the knit ties and Italian loafers of Teddy Copeland, PhD, explorer of the multiverse.

Salvatore Pane's *The Theory of Almost Everything* is galvanic proof that fiction has never strayed from those old Choose Your Own Adventure books. Despite the environmental calamities and political crises that threaten us, we still have stories, stories that press us to strive for a vital, inclusive future. In these dark days, we need those tales—and nihilist-dreamers like the vulnerable Teddy Copeland—more than ever.



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