

Personal Reflections on The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Special things are happening all of the time but we are too often caught up in the problems or fascinations of the immediate moment to notice them. Sometimes though, they can catch us the right time, with magical results. That happened to me with the first two of Douglas Adams' amazing stories, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and its sequel, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*.

I felt a wonderful sense of delight as Adams' cynical, satirical and often anti-establishment writing matched my readiness as an *Eighties* teenager to be entertained with his rebellious story-telling. I am so glad that Adams' stories found me at just the moment that I was probably most ready to absorb them into my sense of *culture* because they have since been a constant source of fun throughout my adult life.

I first became aware of these stories in either 1980 or 1981. A school friend gave me an audio cassette tape and said "You've got to listen to this!" I did, and I was hooked. The tape had a recording of the original vinyl releases of *Hitchhiker's* and *Restaurant*. I remember listening to it late at night and feeling the sheer brilliance of Adams' wacky world enter my brain like a massively *naughty* 'ear-worm'. That's right: naughty. My mother didn't enjoy the programme and found some of the expressions (like 'a pair of fetid dingo's kidneys', for example) rather offensive. Of course I loved it: here was a legitimate opportunity to rebel in my own way by enjoying something that much of established society found silly and obnoxious. It helped that *Hitchhiker's* was building a cult following and there was a great sense of *belonging to something special* when we talked about it at school.

As a teenager in the early *Eighties* it felt to me like everything was changing, that risk and danger were everywhere, and the future was uncertain at best. At a personal level I was coming to terms with the death of my father in '78, starting to properly grow up and having those first thoughts about the world of work. Many things felt quite bleak at the time: the UK economy had obvious problems and I was starting to realise that getting work might be a problem, awareness of the Cold War hung over me like a dark cloud, casting shadows over the opportunities presented by rapid technological change.

In the outside world a series of momentous events occurred, as they always do, and of course they settled into my personal sense of *culture*. Some of the most noteworthy (for me) included:

- The launch of the comic *2000 AD* and the release of *Star Wars* in 1977,
- The testing and first flights of the Space Shuttle (1977 to 1981),
- U.S. President Jimmy Carter deciding to postpone production of the neutron bomb (it reminded me about the film "Beneath the Planet of the Apes"),
- Margaret Thatcher becoming the first female British prime minister in 1979,
- The rise of the Solidarity movement in 1979 (I remember thinking the people in Solidarity must have been very brave),
- The release of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*,
- The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan,

- The launch of the first European Ariane rocket (it seemed like we were really ready to get into Space),
- The retaking of the Iranian Embassy in London by the SAS in 1980,
- The release of *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*,
- Ronald Reagan (*Ronnie Raygun*, as he became known) becoming President of the United States,
- Production of the first DeLorean car in Northern Ireland (1981),
- John McEnroe's famous "You cannot be serious!" tirade at Wimbledon,
- Riots across the UK that started in Toxteth and Moss Side,
- And of course, the marriage of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.

Lots of other things happened of course, as any online timeline will show today. But these events particularly stand out in my memory and some of the people involved still resonate with me today: Young & Crippen (first shuttle flight – remembering watching *Columbia* landing back at Edwards Air Force Base on the TV still brings a lump to my throat), Thatcher, Lech Wałęsa,

Reflecting on the list above it is obvious that out of the entire spectrum of life at that time, I was more strongly interested in Space, Science Fiction, conflict and technology. Events had clearly prepared me to be very favourably disposed towards *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*!

My first memories of *Hitchhiker's* include the feeling that it assumed that living in space was normal; that life existed throughout the Universe in a multitude of forms and that life in a world like that could be as innately funny as the real world.

I grew up in a vaguely Christian household and loved the jibes at religion. A sense of constant mocking of religion flows through the entire *Hitchhiker's* series with its pursuit of a central theme of trying to reveal the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything.¹ Take, for example, the *Jatravartid people of Viltvodle VI*² who apparently believe that the entire Universe was sneezed out of the nose of the being called the Great Green Arkleseizure. The *Jatravartids* live in fear of the 'Coming of the Great White Handkerchief'. This little scene linked perfectly with comedian Dave Allen's satirising of Catholic rituals that I'd seen in his TV series *Dave Allen at Large*. At the time everyone knew that something was wrong within the Catholic Church and I thought this humorous satirising was very healthy.

I also loved the idea that the *Hitchhiker's Guide* itself could be '*... more controversial than Oolon Colluphid's trilogy of philosophical blockbusters Where God Went Wrong, Some More of God's Greatest Mistakes and Who is this God Person Anyway?*'³

Adams described himself as a radical atheist and there are several moments when he gives religious dogma a really strong poke. For example, he lets the Guide tell us a story about how man outwits God in a debate about the *Babel Fish*⁴:

¹ The Restaurant at the End of the Universe – chapter 1

² The Restaurant at the End of the Universe – chapter 1

³ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – prologue

⁴ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 6

"I refuse to prove that I exist," says God, "for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing."

"But," says Man, "The Babel fish is a dead giveaway, isn't it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don't. QED."

"Oh dear," says God, "I hadn't thought of that," and promptly vanishes in a puff of logic.

There is a view that “sarcasm is the lowest form of wit”⁵ but Adams frequently uses a cynical, sarcastic wit to great effect in his writing. One image that has stayed in my mind since I first read it was this:

“...And then, one Thursday, nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change, a girl sitting on her own in a small café in Rickmansworth suddenly realized what it was that had been going wrong all this time, and she finally knew how the world could be made a good and happy place. This time it was right, it would work, and no one would have to get nailed to anything. Sadly, however, before she could get to a phone to tell anyone about it, a terrible, stupid catastrophe occurred, and the idea was lost for ever.”⁶

Nobody can deny that the world would be a better place if people were nice to each other. However, in this passage Adams expresses that idea in an irreverent yet humorous style which almost mocks Christ’s teachings and subsequent crucifixion. It makes me laugh in a *knowing* way about how people can manage to trivialise almost anything, but I am ultimately left uncomfortable with the joke about crucifixion, because it is such an agonising way to die.

So, if the Universe is a largely Godless place in Adams’ eyes, one might expect it to be consequently more absorbed with practical matters like everyday living, logic and science. Indeed, we find that the universe of the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is full of references to science and technology. Take as examples:

1. The Vogons destroying the Earth to make way for a hyperspace bypass⁷,
2. Ford Prefect using a teleport device to hitch a lift onto a Vogon spaceship (an “electronic sub-etha signalling device”),
3. The starship *Heart of Gold* which is powered by an infinite improbability drive⁸,
4. The chronically depressed robot Marvin,
5. The idea that the legendary planet Magrathea used to manufacture luxury planets for the galaxy’s richest men⁹, The idea that the Earth was actually a supercomputer, commissioned “by a race of hyper-intelligent, pan-dimensional beings” and made by the Magratheans, in order to calculate the Answer to Life, the Universe, and Everything¹⁰,

⁵ Often attributed to Oscar Wilde but the actual source is unknown

⁶ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy – prologue

⁷ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 3

⁸ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 10

⁹ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 15 - 16

¹⁰ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 24 - 25

6. The idea of Milliways, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*¹¹,
7. The *Total Perspective Vortex*, a torture device which annihilates you by showing you just how infinitesimally small you are compared to the Universe¹².
8. The idea that the ‘crew’ of Ship B of the Golgafrinchan Ark Fleet turn out to be the real ancestors of modern humans and not the Neanderthals originally inhabiting the planet¹³.

There are of course many other examples of sci-tech in the books; did I mention the existence of the *Guide* itself? Or the fact that it “... was probably the most remarkable book ever to come out of the great publishing corporations of Ursa Minor.”¹⁴

In terms of everyday living, what could be more natural than going to the restaurant? In Adams’ Universe nothing about that is normal, even selecting your meal can be a philosophically and ethically challenging event:

“...A large dairy animal approached Zaphod Beeblebrox’s table, a large fat meaty quadruped of the bovine type with large watery eyes, small horns and what might almost have been an ingratiating smile on its lips.

‘Good evening,’ it lowed and sat back heavily on its haunches, ‘I am the main Dish of the Day. May I interest you in parts of my body?’ It harrumphed and gurgled a bit, wriggled its hind quarters into a more comfortable position and gazed peacefully at them.

Its gaze was met by looks of startled bewilderment from Arthur and Trillian, a resigned shrug from Ford Prefect and naked hunger from Zaphod Beeblebrox.

‘Something off the shoulder, perhaps,’ suggested the animal, ‘braised in a white wine sauce?’

‘Er, your shoulder?’ said Arthur in a horrified whisper.

‘But naturally my shoulder, sir,’ mooed the animal contentedly, ‘nobody else’s is mine to offer.’”

One of the great things about Adams’ writing is that although these sci-tech ideas are obviously very unlikely fictions, he always goes to some length to explain how they might work. In the example above the ‘Dish of the Day’ tells Arthur that it “...actually wanted to be eaten and was capable of saying so clearly and distinctly.”¹⁵

Adams’ *hows* might be complete bunkum, but they at least explain the rest if you assume they are true. Take, for example, the explanation of how the Babel Fish works:

‘The Babel fish,’ said The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy quietly, ‘is small, yellow and leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the Universe. It feeds on brainwave

¹¹ The Restaurant at the End of the Universe – chapter 15

¹² The Restaurant at the End of the Universe – chapter 11

¹³ The Restaurant at the End of the Universe – chapter 31 - 33

¹⁴ The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy – prologue

¹⁵ The Restaurant at the End of the Universe – chapter 17

energy received not from its own carrier but from those around it. It absorbs all unconscious mental frequencies from this brainwave energy to nourish itself with. It then excretes into the mind of its carrier a telepathic matrix formed by combining the conscious thought frequencies with nerve signals picked up from the speech centres of the brain which has supplied them. The practical upshot of all this is that if you stick a Babel fish in your ear you can instantly understand anything said to you in any form of language. The speech patterns you actually hear decode the brainwave matrix which has been fed into your mind by your Babel fish.' ¹⁶

The rendition of this explanation in the 1981 TV series is a particularly memorable piece of fun.

Adams' writing contained humour that resonated with my sense of *culture* and *identity*, as well as copious references to space, science and science fiction. All that was needed was a theme of conflict and *Hitchhiker's* would lock into my consciousness like a jigsaw piece custom-designed for my psyche. Adams did not disappoint in this area: the Vogons are in conflict with everyone, there is war between the Vl'hurgs and the G'Gugvuntts ¹⁷, Zaphod is frequently needling Arthur, the Great Circling Poets of Arium attack unwary travellers ¹⁸, the Galactic Police shooting at Zaphod & Co on Magrathea ¹⁹ and threatening to "... blow up this entire planet and possibly one or two others we noticed on our way out here...", and so on. The Universe is a dangerous place and you really need to know where your towel is. (I will let the reader enjoy finding that reference!)

It is probably true to say that the *cult following* of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy has passed its peak. When I talk with younger people about it today they tend to nod politely in a slightly bored way at the reference, but the humour and rebellion don't excite them in the way it did for me in the *Eighties* – time moves on. *Hitchhiker's* has already been absorbed into our *culture* (I think Adams might have resented that a little) and the next generations are selecting the new works that are relevant for them. That is all part of the healthy natural progression of society and today's key themes are not the same as I saw thirty years ago: the Cold War has (mostly) finished, technological wonders are commonplace and most people (in the developed world) have access to most of the riches of the world.

As our society continues its march of continuous progress I am quietly pleased that *Hitchhiker's* helped me to make so much sense of the world. I often listen to both the Original Radio Show recordings and the vinyl versions, and I occasionally watch my treasured copy of the TV series. I read the books infrequently and have both paperback and e-book copies. The only telling of Adams' stories that I do not like is the 2005 film version from Touchstone Pictures and Spyglass Entertainment: in my opinion it is simply *not funny*, and humour sits at the core of Adams' writing.

I have enjoyed reflecting on what these stories mean to me. If you are a fan already I am sure you are nodding your head with a smile on your face. If you have yet to discover them why not give *Hitchhiker's* a try? You might be surprised for the rest of your life!

End

¹⁶ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 6

¹⁷ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 31

¹⁸ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 25

¹⁹ The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy – chapter 32

Readers please note: This essay is an expression of my personal responses to Douglas Adams' stories *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, in all the forms in which they have been presented (written, audio and video recordings). I assure you, the reader, that the opinions expressed in this essay are my own.

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