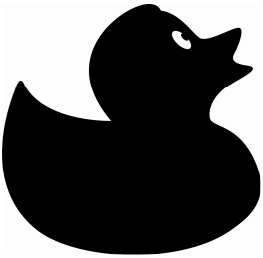
One is Never Alone with a Rubber Duck

One is Never Alone with a Rubber Duck: Douglas Adams's Absurd Fictional Universe

By

Marilette van der Colff



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by Marilette van der Colff

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This book is dedicated to:

My husband—for constantly reaffirming my madness (a necessary prerequisite for writing!) and for laughing with me.

My supervisor and friend (Molly Brown)—for ten years of support and inspiration, and for believing that books about unicorns are true books.

My parents, siblings and their dogs—for always saving one more space in the crowded nut-tree.

Snif-Snaf and Mé-Mé (my cats)—for entertaining themselves with specks of dust and for occasionally running across the keyboard.

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FOREWORD

In 2004 I started teaching at a small high school for kids with learning disabilities. I soon realised that in order to get them through tenses and sentence analysis and other labyrinths of potential boredom I had to do something fantastic (literally). I have always been a fantasist of sorts, so I started teaching tenses and actives and passives etc. etc. with the help of JRR Tolkien's Galadriel, Frodo and several Ents. Soon the kids realised that I was indeed "into" fantasy, and one of them ceremoniously presented me with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy—A Trilogy in Five Parts*, with the words "ma'am, you have GOT to read this". And so I did. And that's where it all started. I kept it for such a long time, because I had feverishly started making notes on Existentialism and the brilliant absurdity of the "Trilogy", that the kid eventually told me to go ahead and keep the book. For that I am eternally grateful. Some weeks later I phoned Molly Brown, who had always been the most "froody" lecturer at the Department of English, University of Pretoria, and announced that I wanted to do an MA study on Douglas Adams. She was ecstatic and immediately presented me with more hilarity in the forms of *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* and *The Long Dark Teatime of the Soul*.

Today I'm teaching first-years who will eventually be teaching high school kids. Students, to my knowledge, experience a form of anaphylactic shock when they hear the term "linguistics", and therefore I use all the nuttiest passages from the first *Hitchhiker* novel as well as Pan-Galactic Gargle Blasters (not really) to show them that linguistics is not that "zarking" daunting once you get the hang of it. Some of them LOVE it, some think I'm closely related to Wonko the Sane. But who cares – they get to learn linguistics aboard The Heart of Gold.

I hope you enjoy this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

—Marilette van der Colff

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to *Literator* for permission to reproduce my article 'Aliens and Existential elevators: absurdity and its shadows in Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker* series' in the form of 'Chapter Three–Aliens and Existential Elevators' in this book. The article was originally published in *Literator* (accredited 1988), Volume 29, Number three, December 2008.

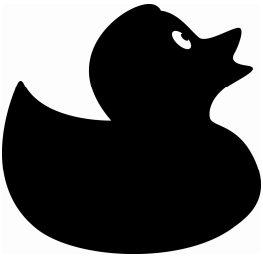
I would like to thank everybody who directly and indirectly contributed to this book. In particular, I would like to thank my MA supervisor and friend, Molly Brown, for her patient support, expert advice and creative input. Without her constant inspiration and constructive criticism I would never have managed to turn a couple of 'aha' moments into something remotely legible!

I would also like to thank Dr Ralph Goodman from the University of Stellenbosch for doing a critical reading of my manuscript on very short notice!

To my colleagues at the North-West University in South Africa, thank you for supporting me in all "projects launched out of nothingness".

CHAPTER ONE

THAT'S JUST THE WAY THE COOKIE GETS COMPLETELY STOMPED ON AND OBLITERATED…



"The Galaxy's a fun place. You'll need to have this fish in your ear."
—*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

1.1. "Hang the sense of it" and join a flying party

Welcome to Douglas Adams's universe:

> There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable (Adams, 1995: 153).

This is the universe of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, but this is also our universe—and that is the beauty of Adams's *Hitchhiker* books.

So, how does this bizarre universe work, according to Adams? Well, first of all, it is not a universe, but a "multiverse", meaning that the bizarreness is not singular but infinitely plural. Secondly, you don't get to choose which universe inside the multiverse you inhabit; of course you also do not get to choose whether you are a human or a Vogon (assuming there is a difference between the two). Thirdly, the "multiverse" and all

life that happens to exist inside it do not mean a thing. So, you might as well "hang the sense of it" and join a flying party.

1.2. "That hoopy Douglas Adams….Now there's a frood who knew where his towel was"

Douglas Noel Adams is best known for his very first novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), which was developed from a radio series and sparked the composition of several sequential narratives such as *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980), *Life, the Universe and Everything* (1982), *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* (1984) and *Mostly Harmless* (1992). In addition to the *Hitchhiker* novels, Adams wrote a couple of novels starring Dirk Gently. These are *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (1987) and *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul* (1988). The *Dirk Gently* novels are a blend of fantasy, science fiction, myth, comedy and the traditional detective story. Adams's body of work also includes a dictionary defining things there aren't words for yet. *The Meaning of Liff* (1983), co-written with John Lloyd and revised by Adams and Lloyd as *The Deeper Meaning of Liff—A Dictionary of Things There Aren't Words for Yet, But There Ought to Be* (1990), is perhaps a product of Adams's fascination with the random relationship between signifier and signified. *The Meaning of Liff* provides words for certain feelings or events that are all too familiar, but for some reason have not been named. For example, the word "abercrave" refers to the "desire to swing from the pole on the rear footplate of a bus" (1983: 7), and the word "duddo" refers to the "most deformed potato in any given collection of potatoes" (1983: 43).

Adams's body of work also reflects an intense ecological and social consciousness. Between July 1988 and April 1989, Adams and zoologist Mark Carwardine traversed Indonesia, Zaire, New Zealand, China and Mauritius and subsequently produced *Last Chance to See* (1990), a book about endangered species such as the Komodo dragon, the Rodrigues fruitbat and the Baiji dolphin. According to MJ Simpson, not only was this Adams's favourite book; it was also his best written one (2003: 244). In this regard, Adams remarked:

> I think one of the reasons I was very interested in doing this is, when I was doing *Hitchhiker* I was always trying to find different perspectives on everyday things so that we would see them afresh. And I suddenly realised that the animals in the world, because they all have completely different perceptual systems, the world we see is only specific to us, and from every

other animal's point of view it's a completely different place (Simpson, 2003: 250-251).

In addition to the works mentioned above, *The Salmon of Doubt—Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time*, which is made up of eleven chapters of a *Dirk Gently* novel Adams was working on at the time of his death, as well as a selection of short stories, letters and articles, was published posthumously in 2002. It is a pity that his insightful voice had to be silenced so soon. Numerous websites and forums that celebrate Adams's work bear witness to a persistent hunger for his insights. Each year, fans across the globe pay homage to a beloved author by celebrating Towel Day on May 25th. The Towel Forum invites fans worldwide to carry their towels with them everywhere they go on Towel Day, in memory of "the late great one", "that hoopy Douglas Adams….Now there's a frood who knew where his towel was" (SystemToolbox and KOJV.NET**,** 2004).

It would prove a complex if not impossible task to "summarise" the achievements of someone as diverse and multitalented as Douglas Adams, so a brief profile will have to suffice. Douglas Noel Adams was born in Cambridge on 11 March 1952. Adams later described himself as "quite a neurotic child, twitchy, inclined to live in a world of my own". He adds, "I didn't learn to speak until I was almost four. My parents were so concerned they had me tested for being either deaf or educationally subnormal" (Simpson, 2003: 6). In *Don't Panic—Douglas Adams and The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Neil Gaiman (friend of Adams) mentions in a very *Gaiman* tone that "Douglas was considered a little strange, possibly even retarded" (Gaiman, 2003:3). According to Gaiman, Adams thought of himself as the child who stumbled into lampposts with his eyes wide open.

As it turned out, Adams indeed inhabited "a world of his own" and was at one stage appointed as "Chief Fantasist" for his own dot-com organisation. In view of his many comic and yet philosophical books, his being "educationally subnormal", on the other hand, is clearly debatable.

Adams entered Cambridge University in 1971 and earned a BA with honours as well as an MA in English. He was therefore exposed to an array of philosophical ideas, and shouldn't be regarded as a mere advocate of light entertainment. Adams's university years were characterised by the so-called theory wars of the 1970s and 1980s, which culminated in the Colin McCabe scandal in 1981 (Snapper, 2007:114). McCabe was opposed to the Leavisite approach to literary study which emphasised the importance of "creating within universities, and particularly within English Departments, an informed, discriminating, and highly-trained intellectual élite whose task it would be to preserve the cultural continuity

of English life and literature" (Drabble and Stringer, 1996: 330). FR Leavis believed that the intellectualism of English literature was threatened by mass media and popular culture. Even though Adams functioned in the realm of the "highly-trained intellectual élite", he decided to join the exclusive undergraduate Footlights Society, which established a sort of counter-culture. This society was emblematic of a shift from theory and intellectualism towards popular culture, irony and self-mockery. Adams, having been exposed to the seemingly polar opposites of intellectualism and popular culture, was therefore able to communicate philosophies in a palatable format.

Adams's idol, John Cleese, a Monty Python star, had also once been a member of the Footlights Society and a supporter of the counter-culture it represented. Adams was a British radio comedy enthusiast, and in *The Salmon of Doubt—Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time,*Adams is reported to have realised that "...being funny could be a way in which intelligent people expressed themselves" and a way in which they could "be very, very silly at the same time" (Adams, 2003: xxi-xxii). Sketches composed by Adams during his Cambridge years were described as "quirky" and "individualistic" (Adams, 2003: xxii), and were shaped by his own fantastically absurd imagination. Adams's work is permeated with elements of the absurd, and often conjures up landscapes from the Theatre of the Absurd. It is certainly worth mentioning that Adams's great-grandfather, a German actor-director named Benjamin Franklin Wedekind (1864-1918), was a precursor of the Theatre of the Absurd in his creation of contorted scenes and use of fractured dialogue and caricature (Simpson, 2003: 7). Adams's *Hitchhiker* books feature many characters and situations that are similar to ones portrayed in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, for example, his characters often take on qualities of madness in their futile attempts to make meaning and amuse themselves in an essentially meaningless multiverse.

After Adams's Cambridge years and the production of a few absurd sketches, he worked with Monty Python member Graham Chapman for a spell. Amongst others, they worked on a television comedy show called *Out Of The Trees*; "it involved a man picking a flower—a seemingly innocuous act which triggers off a series of events: the police complain, the fire brigade turns up, then the army and so on until the world blows up" (Bbc.co.uk, 2005). The script for *Out Of The Trees* was, however, not very good, seeing that Adams was still inexperienced and "slavishly imitating *Python*" (Simpson, 2003: 64).

Overall, Adams's attempts at writing humorous sketches and the work he produced with Graham Chapman turned out to be unsuccessful.

However, he still honed his writing skills during the period he worked with Graham Chapman, and with the launch of the *Hitchhiker* Radio Series in 1978, he proved himself to be a comic voice with a distinct intellectual character. A few months after the radio series was released, Adams began writing yet another radio series, a television series and the first *Hitchhiker* novel. He always found it difficult to submit manuscripts on time, and claimed that he loved deadlines: "I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by" (Adams, 2003: xxv). And so he often found himself in locked hotel rooms where he had to finish his manuscripts a.s.a.p. Nevertheless, he managed to write nine books in his lifetime.

After 1992, Adams wrote very little. Why? Well, perhaps he was going through an introspective phase in the Jungian cycle of Self; perhaps a "mandala" season that "tends to draw [one's] focus back to the centre" (Boeree, 2006). Nonetheless, Adams lectured frequently during this period, and also started a London production company named the Digital Village, which produced advanced computer games. So, he had one foot in the academic environment, and the other firmly planted in popular culture and multimedia.

One of Adams's unfulfilled dreams was to help produce the *Hitchhiker* film. In 1999 he moved to Santa Barbara, the hub of the film industry, to realise his dream. However, this was not to be. On May 11, 2001, Douglas Adams died suddenly of a heart attack while exercising, and fans across the globe were devastated. Adams was cremated, along with his towel, at 7:30 pm British time on 16 May, 2001, in Santa Barbara. Around that time, fans across the world enjoyed either a cup of tea or something that resembled a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster (Bbc.co.uk, 2005). In *The Unravelling of DNA: Douglas Noel Adams, 1952-2001*, Tim Wynne-Jones says, "In closing, one can only quote the title of that next-to-last book, and say to Douglas, in whatever dimension he now finds himself, with great affection and a final wave of the towel, 'So long, and thanks for all the fish' " (2001: 632).

1.3. Why the *Hitchhiker* books?

You may wonder why this work analyses only the *Hitchhiker* books. Why not, for example, not the Dirk Gently novels? Well, these books were chosen for a number of reasons. First of all (and this is, of course, highly subjective), these novels best reflect Adams's uniquely comic voice. Secondly, these books really lend themselves to an analysis of the functions of fantasy (more about this later). Thirdly, the *Hitchhiker* series was chosen because of its explicit and implicit references to Existentialist

philosophy and the absurdity of the human condition. And fourthly, this series was selected because it is a scintillating example of contemporary satire.

1.4. A summary of the *Hitchhiker* books

Adams's plots are often fast paced and consist of multiple layers of improbability. Even though his plots are not the most important thing here, a brief summary of each of the books in the *Hitchhiker* series is provided to clarify narrative events. I will also occasionally refer to Eoin Colfer's "rather unexpected" *And Another Thing…Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy—Part Six of Three*, published in 2009 to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Therefore, a brief summary of his addition to the series will also be provided.

1.4.1. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy tells the story of Englishman, Arthur Dent, who escapes the demolition of Earth by an alien race called the Vogons. His friend, Ford Prefect, with whom he escapes, turns out to be an alien from a small planet in the vicinity of Betelgeuse. Ford is a researcher for The Hitchhiker's Guide. After they are teleported to and discovered on a Vogon spaceship, the Vogons try to dispose of Arthur and Ford. However, the two of them are rescued, against all possible odds, and end up on Zaphod Beeblebrox's stolen spaceship, *The Heart of Gold*, powered by the "Infinite Improbability Drive". Beeblebrox is Ford's flamboyant, double headed semi-cousin, who also happens to be the Galactic President. Arthur is reacquainted with both Beeblebrox and Trillian, having previously met them both at a fancy dress party in Islington. Trillian has literally been whisked away by Zaphod to another planet. Marvin, the perpetually depressed robot, is also introduced to Arthur at this stage.

After this improbable reunion, the characters embark on a quest to locate the mythical planet of Magrathea. After discovering that the Mythical Magrathea, a planet used for the sole purpose of building tailor-made planets, does indeed exist, Arthur meets Slartibartfast, a coastline designer responsible for the spectacular Norwegian fjords. By means of archival recordings, Slartibartfast gives an account of the race of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings who once built a computer called Deep Thought, to calculate the answer to the "Ultimate Question of Life, the

Universe, and Everything". Because the answer proved to be 42, they were compelled to design a more sophisticated computer to determine the original Ultimate Question. Improbable as it seems, this sophisticated computer turns out to be the Earth itself. Unfortunately, this computer, being mistaken for a planet, is destroyed by the mindless Vogons five minutes before the completion of its ten-million-year calculation. Two of the hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings, Frankie and Benjy (Trillian's mice), try to dissect Arthur's brain to regain the question, seeing that he is the only survivor of the Earth's demolition. Fortunately, Arthur and his companions manage to escape the sinister purposes of the pan-dimensional beings. The mice, not having succeeded in removing Arthur's brain, "an organic part of the penultimate configuration", and not wanting to wait for yet another ten million years, fabricate the following question to which the ultimate answer may be 42: "How many roads must a man walk down?"

1.4.2. The Restaurant at the End of the Universe

The Restaurant at the End of the Universe begins with the protagonists' decision to dine at Milliways. Unfortunately, they are attacked by the Vogons and are unable to defend themselves, because the computer's circuits are all occupied with the problem of how to concoct the perfect cup of tea for Arthur. Arguing that desperate times call for desperate measures, Zaphod decides to contact his deceased grandfather via a séance. The ghost of Zaphod Beeblebrox the Fourth saves the protagonists, although Zaphod disappears during the spaceship's subsequent lurch through the dimensions of time and space.

It turns out that Zaphod has been transported to Ursa Minor Beta, "a west zone planet which by an inexplicable and somewhat suspicious freak of topography consists almost entirely of sub-tropical coastline" (1995: 173). Ursa Minor Beta also happens to house Megadodo Publications, home of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Zaphod remembers that he has left a secret message engraved in his own brain, and, although he cannot remember the exact details of this, he somehow feels compelled to visit Mr Zarniwoop, editor of The Hitchhiker's Guide, in connection with finding the man who rules the universe. On a forced visit to the most pernicious planet in the known universe, Frogstar B, Zaphod meets Zarniwoop and is reunited with Trillian, Arthur and Ford. Together they visit Milliways, The Restaurant at the End of the Universe. The parties are once again separated, as Zaphod, Trillian and Zarniwoop discover that the

universe is in fact governed by a lunatic living on a remote planet in a wooden shack.

Ford and Arthur, meanwhile, travel backwards through time and find themselves on a spacecraft transporting the outcasts of the Golgafrinchan civilisation. The ship has been programmed to crash on prehistoric Earth, and Ford and Arthur are stranded. It soon becomes evident that the daft Golgafrinchans are the ancestors of humanity. Apparently, this unfortunate event disrupts the Earth's programming. So, when Ford and Arthur try to tap into Arthur's subconscious to reconstruct the Ultimate Question, the following question is posed: "What do you get when you multiply six by nine?" (Note that the question should actually be "what do you get when you multiply six by seven?")The characters fail to reconstruct a meaningful question, and Arthur concludes that the universe is perfectly insane.

1.4.3. Life, the Universe and Everything

The third novel in the *Hitchhiker* series, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, starts with Arthur waking up, and discovering to his horror that he is living in a dank cave in Islington on prehistoric Earth. Just when Arthur decides that he will indeed go mad, he is reunited with Ford (which may have the desired effect). Ford explains that he has travelled to Africa, where he occupied himself with pretending to be a lemon and being cruel to animals. The two of them manage, by means of eddies in the space-time continuum, to travel from prehistoric Earth to Lord's Cricket Ground on a Chesterfield sofa. Upon arriving there, they witness a sudden attack launched by a troupe of lethal robots. Fortunately they meet Slartibartfast, who aids them in the prevention of galactic war.

The story concerning galactic war and the lethal robots is once again related by Slartibartfast using Virtual Reality archives. The story goes that long ago, upon discovering that they were not the only living creatures in the known universe, the people of Krikket tried to annihilate all life in the universe during a spell of severe xenophobia. But, they were prevented from accomplishing their mission, and were imprisoned on their home planet in a Slo-Time envelope. The key to the envelope was blasted into the space-time continuum, supposedly never to be found again. However, it turns out that the mission of the lethal robots is to reconstitute the key and to free the Masters of Krikket from the Slo-Time envelope. However, with the assistance of Marvin, Zaphod and Trillian, Arthur and Ford prevent the obliteration of the known multiverse (for now).

1.4.4. So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish

In *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*, Arthur returns to Earth in another dimension. He falls in love with Fenchurch, whose house turns out to be located at the exact coordinates of Arthur's cave on prehistoric Earth. Together, Arthur and Fenchurch not only perfect the art of flying, but learn from a very reliable source, Wonko the Sane, that this version of Earth is a substitute supplied by the dolphins in their "Save the Humans" campaign. This information explains Arthur and Fenchurch's mysterious gifts, fishbowls engraved with the message, "So long, and thanks for all the fish".

Eventually, Arthur remembers something he learnt from a man called Prak, concerning the ultimate Reason. According to Prak, God's Ultimate Message to humankind is written "in thirty-foot-high letters of fire on top of the Quentulus Quazgar Mountains in the land of Sevorbeupstry on the Planet Preliumtarn" (Adams, 1995: 458). So, Arthur and Fenchurch travel to the planet of Preliumtarn to see God's Final Message to His Creation. There, they are reacquainted with Marvin, who has deteriorated greatly, and eventually shuts down permanently. Arthur and Fenchurch defy the heat and dust of the land of Sevorbeupstry, only to discover that God's final message to humankind reads, "We apologise for the inconvenience" (Adams, 1995: 588).

1.4.5 Mostly Harmless

In *Mostly Harmless*, the fifth novel in the *Hitchhiker* series, Vogons usurp The Hitchhiker's Guide for the purpose of finally demolishing the Earth. After suddenly losing Fenchurch in the space-time continuum, and traversing the universe in an attempt to find meaning, Arthur ends up on the planet Lamuella. Here he is appointed as maker-of-designer sandwiches, of which the secret ingredient is the meat of the Perfectly Normal Beast. In the meantime, Ford Prefect meets The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Mark II: an artificially intelligent guide that is present in all dimensions of the multiverse. Ford sends this sinister guide to Arthur Dent for "safekeeping".

This novel also tells the story of Tricia McMillan (Trillian) in another dimension/parallel universe. The space-travelling version of Trillian decides to have someone's child at random. From DNA tests Trillian learns, to her astonishment, that Arthur Dent is in fact the random sperm donor and, thus, the father of her child. She abruptly leaves her daughter,

Random Frequent Flyer Dent, with Arthur, seeing that her schedule is rather busy.

Random's curiosity compels her to steal The Guide Mark II, and she uses it to travel to Earth. Arthur, Ford, Trillian, Random and Tricia McMillan (Trillian, in this alternate universe) follow her to Club Beta, where Random tries to shoot her father. However, the bullet misses Arthur and kills the creature Agrajag in its human form (Agrajag is an alien creature who claims to have been killed by Arthur on numerous occasions and in various forms). The sinister purpose of The Hitchhiker's Guide Mark II is revealed: it causes the obliteration of all possible dimensions of Earth. All the protagonists except for Zaphod Beeblebrox are killed, and the Vogons' mission is finally accomplished (or so it would seem…)

1.4.6 And Another Thing…Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy—Part Six of Three (By Eoin Colfer)

It turns out that the protagonists are not in fact killed in the shower of Grebulon death-rays in *Mostly Harmless*, but are kept alive in a virtual realm by the artificially intelligent Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Mk II. So, the Hitchhikers think that they have lived their lives on various planets and in various forms, whereas they actually haven't been "anywhere or anywhen" (Colfer, 2009: 27). Arthur thus awakes from a virtual life in which he has roamed a solitary beach and nursed his insanity for many years (or so he thinks). Ford Prefect awakes from his virtual life in one of Han Wavel's "ultra-luxury…naturally eroded hedonistic resorts"; Random Dent awakes from her simulated life as Galactic President, and Trillian Astra awakes from a life of reconstructive surgery and Sub-Etha reporting. They all wake up in Club Beta, no "real" time has passed and they are still at the wrong end of Grebulon death-rays. Not surprisingly, Zaphod Beeblebrox arrives at the scene and entirely fails to save his fellow-hitchhikers. It is up to Wowbagger the Infinitely Prolonged to carry the protagonists to a planet called Nano in his Longship, the Tanngrisnir, which happens to consist of dark matter and which is powered by dark energy. In return for this favour, Zaphod sets out to find the Thunder God, Thor, to bestow certain death on Wowbagger, who, after all the incessant years, wishes to be infinitely dead. As usual, things do not entirely proceed as planned, and Wowbagger falls in love with Trillian. The protagonists end up on Planet Nano and witness an epic battle between Thor and the persistent Vogons, and a less spectacular feud between Thor and Wowbagger. When the Nanolites/Nanonians witness Thor's "self-sacrificial" bravery, they denounce their god, The Big Cheese

—in spite of their fear of the great "Edamnation"—and accept Thor as the new god of Nano. Wowbagger's mortality is restored, and he is able to pursue his romantic interests. Random reluctantly starts calling Arthur "dad" and Ford Prefect settles (for a while) to write a couple of guide entries. In spite of Arthur's history of extreme bad luck, he once more embarks on a trip through hyperspace and ends up on a beach very much like the one from his virtual life…

1.5. "This is the way the world ends…"

In Colfer's addition to the series, Earth is once again demolished and various virtual existences are shattered with the click of a button, so to speak. In the *Hitchhiker* books, this is the way the Hitchhikers' world ends every time—not with a bang… but with a bigger bang. Ultimately, the *Hitchhiker* books succeed in showing us our world: not only the world as we know it, riddled with flaws, but also the possibility of other worlds and inner worlds.

So, it is hoped that the next three chapters will say something significant about:

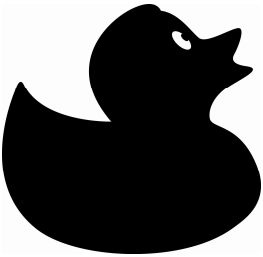
- Adams's fantasy. Chapter Two—Reason is in Fact Out to Lunch analyses Adams's fantastic landscapes and dreamscapes in view of contemporary theories about fantasy. It also investigates the notion of subjective realities in Adams's *Hitchhiker* series.

- Questions about "life, the universe and everything". Chapter Three—Aliens and Existential Elevators explores the philosophical foundation of the *Hitchhiker* series, particularly in terms of Existentialism and attendant notions of absurdity and absurd heroism.

- The way in which "the cookie is completely stomped on" in contemporary society. Chapter Four—Rome Wasn't Burnt in a Day comments on Adams's crafty mockery of twentieth century evils. It also analyses the general human tendency to ignore moral codes as well as Adams's self-spun morality in the *Hitchhiker* books.

CHAPTER TWO

REASON IS IN FACT OUT TO LUNCH…



> What is life? A madness. What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story, and the greatest good is little enough, for all life is a dream….
> —Calderón de la Barca, *Life is a Dream*

> The [Hitchhiker's] Guide is definitive. Reality is frequently inaccurate.
> —Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*

Theoretical works by Brian Attebery, Tzvetan Todorov, Rosemary Jackson and Ursula le Guin (among others) continue to play a seminal role in the field of fantasy and science fiction. Their theories and observations about the genre of fantasy are (in my experience) just as relevant to Neil Gaiman's *American Gods* as they are to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*.

This chapter explores several works of contemporary fantasy in view of theories proposed by Attebery, Todorov, Jackson and Le Guin as a sort of prelude to the analysis of the *Hitchhiker* books. Themes related to fantasy in the *Hitchhiker* series, such as dreaming (Descartes), simulation (Baudrillard) and madness (Foucault) are also investigated.

2.1. Attebery's "functions of fantasy"

Brian Attebery asks the following questions about the functions of fantasy in literature:

> Is the fantastic a function of language, as JRR Tolkien suggests: based on our ability to separate modifier from substantive and recombine them to produce *green suns* and *flying serpents*? Is it a function of psychology, based on the suppression and subsequent disguising of intolerable realities?....Is it a sort of game? A structure reflecting the brain's own ordering mechanisms? A survival of myth into a rational age? (1992: 4-5).

Attebery attempts to answer these questions by saying that some fantasies indeed deal with language, while some of them represent psychological processes. Other fantasies mirror society, and yet others communicate an author's or society's philosophy (1992: 5). Attebery's "functions of fantasy" are apparent in a variety of stories ranging from popular culture and graphic novels, to high art.

In Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's graphic novel, *Mirrormask* (2005), for example, Helena Campbell disguises "intolerable realities" by dreaming of a world made up of the pictures she has drawn. In a sense, she invents and controls this dream world in the same way that she invents the pictures in her room. In her dream, she becomes two girls: the daughter of the White Queen, and, on the other side of the Mirror Mask, the daughter of the pernicious Dark Queen. "There's a park on the borderlands, between the city of light and the wilderness of shadows. It's a dream park. I'm not sure that I can describe it properly. It looks like dreams" (2005: no page reference, graphic novel). Helena designs her own fantasy dreamscape: "And if it was my dream, then I'd put a little building—a little white dome—in the middle of the pool—just like I'd done when I drew this place. It was on my wall, and in that drawing, it had a little dome in it. So I knew it was there…" (2005: no page reference, graphic novel). Helena eventually realises the following: "I don't think life as a sort of doll prepares you for very much except for running away". When her nemesis says, "I just wanted a real life", Helena retorts, "Real life?....You couldn't handle real life" (2005: no page reference, graphic novel).

It is clear that one side of Helena's persona wants to crawl into a "disguised" dream world, while the other wants to face reality as she knows it. I think that this graphic novel, for example, illustrates the notion that "humanity cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot, 1963: 190, *Four Quartets*, *Burnt Norton*, lines 44-45). A graphic fantasy such as this one may, paradoxically, also guide readers to a better understanding of the reality they are trying to evade.

In *The Uses of Enchantment—The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim argues that we achieve an understanding of our conscious and unconscious selves through "spinning out daydreams—ruminating, rearranging, and fantasising…" (1976: 7). The compulsion to

make meaning and to come to grips with reality is often expressed in fantastic form. For example, in Arthur C. Clarke's science fiction novel *The Songs of Distant Earth*, Carina places her ear to the ribbon of gossamer connecting the planet of Thalassa to the great spaceship Magellan, hovering thirty thousand kilometres from the surface of the planet. The sound reminds her of the interstices of empty meaningless at the heart of the universe:

> At first it seemed that she was hearing the deepest note of a giant harp whose strings were stretched between the worlds….The more she listened, the more she was reminded of the endless beating of the waves upon a desolate beach. She felt that she was hearing the sea of space wash upon the shores of all its worlds—a sound terrifying in its meaningless futility as it reverberated through the aching emptiness of the universe (1987: 199).

2.2. The fabric of functional fantasy

Douglas Adams's fantasy may be regarded as a means of making meaning, of reinventing our familiar world and creating alternative dreamscapes to reflect on the fabric of "reality" and to try and understand it at some basic level.

Adams's stories set in motion a number of the "functions of fantasy" mentioned by Attebery: **fantasy as a function of language**, for example. The *Hitchhiker* series often explodes the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. For example, the sentient mattresses inhabiting the swamps of Squornshellous Zeta "flollop" around, they "globber" when hearing distressing news and they "vollue" every once in a while for no sufficiently explored reason (1995: 346-347). Adams's "Squornshellous swamptalk" (1995: 347) ignores arbitrary codes of signification and reflects a fantasy realm in which signifier and signified are separate concepts. Adams's fantasy also explores the labyrinthine human psyche and its most prominent desire, the desire to make meaning from madness. His fantasy therefore also serves a **psychological function**.

However, Adams's fantastic settings and characters also make profound statements about contemporary social dynamics as well as the philosophies at the heart of twentieth century society. Therefore, I think that his fantasy serves yet another function: the **function of alienating the reader from "this world"** in order to really see society, stark and exposed, and from a distance.

So, Douglas Adams comments on "reality" as we know it, be it intolerable or bearable. However, he also explores **alternate "realities" born of dreaming and hallucination.** JRR Tolkien, one of the world's

most acclaimed authors of the marvellous, makes the following observation about alternate "realities" in *Tree and Leaf*:

> Fantasy, of course, starts out with…arresting strangeness. [However]… many people dislike being "arrested". They dislike any meddling with the Primary World, or such small glimpses of it as are familiar to them. They, therefore, stupidly and even maliciously confound Fantasy with Dreaming…and with mental disorders…with delusion and hallucination (1964: 50).

2.3. "Arresting strangeness"

Think about the fabric of narrative reality and the notion of "arresting strangeness" for a moment. What does "arresting strangeness" really imply? Does it imply a dreamscape which is wholly alien and disconnected from "our reality"? Does it imply fragments of fantasy blended with fragments of reality? Tzvetan Todorov, author of *The Fantastic—A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, attempts to answer this question by defining the "heart of the fantastic" as "the ambiguity… sustained to the very end of the adventure: reality or dream? Truth or illusion?" (1975: 25). Todorov's concept of the purely fantastic is rooted in ambiguity: should narrative events be regarded as reality, or as dreamscapes?

> In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us (Todorov, 1975: 25).

It is essential to note that, according to Todorov, the purely fantastic **never** provides the reader with an answer to the true nature of narrative reality. It is never clearly revealed whether or not the characters moving in narrative space are dreaming, or experiencing reality "as it is". Furthermore, the characters themselves may experience reality as something cloaked in uncertainty, "thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to the character, and at the same time the hesitation is presented, it becomes one of the themes of the work" (1975: 33). The reader often identifies with the character in that he/she is also uncertain about the nature of the narrative reality presented.

If the character or the reader were, however, to dissolve the uncertainty by selecting either the dream option, or the reality option, they would be opting for the other sub-genres of fantasy, the marvellous or uncanny, respectively. Todorov asserts that "we cannot exclude from a scrutiny of the fantastic either the marvellous or the uncanny, genres which it overlaps" (1975: 44).

A story written in the marvellous mode, such as JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, clearly classifies events as supernatural. Events occurring in a "marvellous fantasy" are explained by laws dramatically different from the naturalistic ones generally known to us. This mode of fantasy is characterised by an acceptance of the supernatural (angels, hobbits, vampires, werewolves, fairies, etc.) by both the reader **and** the characters inhabiting the narrative space.

According to Rosemary Jackson, the "uncanny" mode of fantasy, on the other hand, indicates "a disturbing, vacuous area" (1981: 63). In "uncanny fantasy", supernatural events are explained in terms of deviant psychological states. Jackson mentions about "uncanny" stories that "…strangeness is an effect produced by the distorted and distorting mind of the protagonist" (1981: 24).

Todorov and Jackson both attempt to establish clear boundaries between sub-genres of the fantastic, although they allow some room for overlap. I think that these genres are much more intricately related. What is "real" or "true" for one person may be "illusory" for another. What appears to be a "dreamscape" or "hallucinatory" state may for another person be his/her fundamental "reality". Or, some narrative event or character may initially be perceived as "illusory", but may eventually *become* part of another character's primary "reality".

2.4. "Primary reality" versus "dreamscape"

Before I continue, is it even possible to discern between "primary reality" and "dreamscape", if both seem to be such shifty concepts? René Descartes asks the following perturbing question about dreams: can you be certain that, at this moment in time, you are not, in fact, merely dreaming? In Descartes' *Meditation 1—Concerning the Things of Which we may Doubt*, he argues:

> …I must bear in mind that I am a man, and am therefore in the habit of sleeping, and that what the insane represent to themselves in their waking moments I represent to myself, with other things even less probable, in my dreams. How often, indeed, have I dreamt of myself being in this place, dressed and seated by the fire, whilst all the time I was lying undressed in

> bed!....I cannot, however, but remind myself that on many occasions I have in sleep been deceived by similar illusions; and on more careful study of them I see that *there are no certain marks distinguishing waking from sleep; and I see this so manifestly that, lost in amazement, I am almost persuaded that I am now dreaming.* (Smith, 1952: 197-198, itals mine).

What Descartes is saying is that it is impossible to know for certain whether or not you are dreaming *from within the landscape of the dream* (Rowlands, 2003: 35). Seeing that we cannot know whether we are dreaming at a given point, we cannot be certain that our entire life has not merely been an extremely vivid and coherent dream: "We are all, in reality, asleep in our pods" (Rowlands, 2003: 37). Descartes refers to dreaming; today the "brain in a vat" hypothesis (Clover, 2004:13) is often referred to. This is a popular theme in some science fiction films such as *The Matrix* (directed by the Wachowski brothers) and *The Thirteenth Floor* (directed by Josef Rusnak).

In *The Theatre of the Dream* Salomon Resnik defines the dream as follows:

> A dream is a complex scenic landscape, made up of several pieces: fragments of houses, bridges, figurative or abstract shapes, which are the expression of a world based on multiplicity, a world that does not respect the conventional rules and is organised "in its own way", governed by the "unreality" principle….(1987: 135-136).

Whether dreams are governed by "reality" or "unreality" principles is not the point, since, as has been mentioned already, "reality" and "fantasy" are highly subjective terms. What is important, though, is the notion that dreams occur in a space which allows the dreamer complete freedom to reinvent and to dream his/her world into existence. This idea is, of course, closely related to the Existentialist argument that the only meaning is subjective meaning; meaning that is invented, constructed or dreamt up by individual minds. I think that the subjective meaning shaped from dreams or fantasies is the important issue, and it turns the "unreality" or "reality" of dreams into mere mists.

2.5. "Primary realities", "dreamscapes" and the "malignant genius" in some contemporary fantasy texts

Jostein Gaarder's philosophically informed fantastic journey *The Solitaire Mystery* (1997) features excellent examples of Descartes' arguments discussed above. The story features an old man called Frode,

who is shipwrecked and lives on a peculiar island all by himself for 50 years. As a result of his painful solitude, he plays perpetual games of solitaire with his pack of cards, and eventually endows each little card with human characteristics to relieve the monotony: "I don't know if you can imagine how lonely I felt. The stillness was never-ending here….After a few days I started talking to myself. After a few months I'd started talking to the cards as well. I would lay them in a big circle around me and pretend they were real people made of flesh and blood like myself" (1997: 154).

One day, however, Frode discovers that his imaginary card-people suddenly start existing independently; outside the borders of his mind. His first reaction is, of course, to argue that he must be dreaming. The following passage from the novel is very distinctly reminiscent of Descartes, in the sense that Frode considers the possibility that life may be a very vivid dream:

> I had been dreaming extra vividly that night. When I left the cabin early in the morning, the dew was still lying on the grass and the sun was rising over the mountains. Suddenly two silhouettes came walking towards me from a ridge of hills in the east. I thought I finally had some visitors on the island and started to walk towards them. My heart turned somersaults in my chest when I got closer and recognised them. It was the Jack of Clubs and the King of Hearts. At first I thought I must still be lying in the cabin asleep and the meeting was just another dream. Yet I was absolutely positive that I was wide awake. But this had happened to me many times when I had been asleep, so I wasn't completely sure….Although I have lived with these friends around me for many, many years, although we have built the village together, worked the land together, prepared and eaten food together, I have never stopped asking myself whether the figures around me are real. Had I entered and eternal world of fantasy? (Gaarder, 1997: 155-156).

It was mentioned earlier that Neil Gaiman and Douglas Adams were friends. Another contemporary fantasy which explores the ambiguous fabric of reality is Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (2005). Richard Mayhew has just returned from the alternate realm of London Below, a place born of magic and the uncanny. However, the "real" London—London Above—suddenly seems less real than the alternate reality in the dark belly of the city:

> The growling was the roar of traffic, and he [Richard Mayhew] was coming out of an underpass in Trafalgar Square. The sky was the perfect untroubled blue of a television screen, tuned to a dead channel….He