The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Study Guide

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

When *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was first broadcast as a 12-part radio series on the British Broadcasting System in 1978, it was successful. No one could have guessed, though, that it would mushroom into a multimedia phenomenon that would encompass five novels, a television series, a stage production, and, more than twenty years later, dozens of websites created by devotees who could not get enough of its bizarre universe. Douglas Adams's novel based on the series, T*he Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* concerns the exploits of Arthur Dent, an average British citizen who gets caught up in a myriad of space adventures when his house, and then the Earth, is demolished. With no planet to call home, he is left to hitchhike through space with his friend Ford Prefect, whom he thought was an outof-work actor, but who is really a researcher for the intergalactic guidebook named in the title. Adams's book is one in which literally anything can happen, with the only rule being that what comes next will probably be the last thing the reader would expect and is bound to be amusing.

Author Biography

Douglas Adams was born in 1952, in Cambridge, England. He attended school at John's College in Cambridge, where he began his career writing comedy sketches, and received his master of arts degree. In 1978 he began writing radio scripts for the British Broadcasting System. One of the series he created was *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which he produced and wrote. The series ran in twelve installments in 1978. For two years he was a script editor and writer for the worldrenowned, long-running *Dr. Who* television show.

Because of the popularity *The Hitchhiker's Guide* had on radio, a publishing house approached Adams to turn the series into a novel—up to that point, he had never even considered writing a novel. The book sold an astounding 100,000 copies in the first month of its publication in 1979.*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has inspired four sequels—*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe; Life, The Universe and Everything; So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish;* and *Mostly Harmless*. Collectively, more than fourteen million copies of the five books have been sold. Because of the huge popularity of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it has also been adapted to a stage play, a television series, and a computer game, and the scripts from the original radio series have been published.

Douglas Adams has also written another science-fiction series that is similar in style to *The Hitchhiker's Guide* books. In *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency (1987)* and *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul (1988)*, Dirk Gently, a timehopping detective, encounters a range of humanity that includes troglodytes, Norse gods, and the ghost of poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In spite of his success as a novelist, Adams thinks of himself as a humor writer, but he is serious about environmental concerns: he has donated his talents to a number of charities and has cowritten a book called *Last Chance to See* about places and animals in Indonesia, Zaire, New Zealand, China, and Mauritius that are being destroyed by industrialization.

Plot Summary

Earth

As *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* opens, Arthur Dent wakes to discover bulldozers ready to tear his house down in order to build a freeway bypass. He goes out and lies in front of the bulldozers. The foreman cannot convince Arthur to move. The foreman insists that the plans have been on display for months and that Arthur could have filed a complaint if he wanted to, but Arthur says he knew nothing about the plans until the day before, and when he did learn of them, he found them "displayed" in a locked file cabinet in the dark basement of the local planning office.

Ford Prefect is a friend of Arthur's. Arthur doesn't realize that his friend is an alien who has been stranded on Earth for fifteen years. He is a researcher for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a book explaining how to travel the galaxy on less than thirty Altairian dollars a day. Ford drops by Arthur's house and asks Arthur to join him for a drink. Ford manages to convince the foreman to take Arthur's place lying in the mud so that the house will not be torn down. Once in the bar, Ford explains to the disbelieving Arthur that the world is about to end.

Overhead, huge yellow spacecrafts are hovering, but no one on earth notices, except for Ford Prefect. The ships are Vogon spacecrafts, and the Vogons announce to Earth that they are there to demolish the planet in order to build a hyperspatial express route, as stated in plans that have been on display in the local planning department on Alpha Centauri for fifty years. The Vogons destroy the earth.

The Heart of Gold-1

Meanwhile on the opposite spiral arm of the galaxy, Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed President of the Imperial Galactic Government, is attending the unveiling of the *Heart of Gold* ship, a top-secret project that is only today being revealed to the public. Zaphod steals the ship, taking with him Trillian, a girl he recently picked up at a party on Earth.

Hitchhiking

Seconds before Earth is destroyed, Ford hitches a lift on one of the Vogon ships, taking Arthur with him. The Vogons hate hitchhikers, but luckily they employ the Dentrassis people as their caterers, and the Dentrassis love to annoy the Vogons, so they gladly picked up the hitchhikers and hid them in a small cabin in the ship. Ford explains this to Arthur, and hands him *The Hitchhiker's Guide* to the Galaxy so that he can learn more. He also puts a Babel fish in Arthur's ear. The fish allows Arthur to understand any language.

The Vogons discover Ford and Arthur. They torture the hitchhikers by reading them Vogon poetry. Then they throw them off the ship. According to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it is possible to survive in deep space for thirty seconds if you hold your breath, but it is highly improbable that one will be picked up by another ship during those thirty seconds. Twenty-nine seconds after being thrown into deep space, Arthur and Ford are rescued.

The Heart of Gold-2

Arthur and Ford are picked up by *the Heart of Gold*, which is powered by the Infinite Improbability Drive. Once the ship is out of improbability drive, Trillian and Zaphod order a depressed robot named Marvin to fetch the hitchhikers and to bring them to the control cabin. Ford already knows Zaphod because they are cousins. Arthur already knows Zaphod and Trillian because he was at the party where Zaphod picked up Trillian, also an earthling, after Arthur had spent the whole night trying to talk to her.

They all retire to separate cabins to sleep and think about the day's events. In the middle of the night, however, they reconvene in the control cabin, where Zaphod reveals that he found the planet Magrathea.

Magrathea

Magrathea was once the home of an industry that built custom-designed planets for the very wealthy. When the wealthy ran out of money, Magrathea disappeared. Ford does not believe that it ever existed. As they approach the planet they hear an answering machine on the planet announce that Magrathea is temporarily closed for business. Subsequent recordings ask them to leave, and then inform them that two guided missiles are headed towards their ship. They attempt to evade the missiles, and finally Arthur turns on the improbability drive.

The ship continues on as though nothing has happened, except that its interior has been redesigned. The missiles have turned into a bowl of petunias and a whale, both of which fall to the planet below. The ship lands. Zaphod, Ford, Trillian, Arthur, and Marvin (the depressed robot) all exit the ship, Trillian pausing only briefly to bemoan the fact that the white mice she brought with her from earth have escaped. They find the planet barren and desolate, but the whale's impact has opened a crater into the surface, and Zaphod, Ford, and Trillian set off to explore this, leaving Arthur and Marvin on the surface.

While heading down the passageway Zaphod reports that he has discovered that his brains have been tampered with and that the person who did this left the initials "Z. B." burned into the synapses. Before he can say more, a door shuts behind them, and gas begins to pour into the chamber.

Meanwhile on the surface, Arthur encounters a Magrathean named Slartibartfast, who takes Arthur to the factory floor of the planet and shows him that a new earth is being

built. The original Earth, he explains, was actually an organic computer commissioned by mice, who ran the planet and used it to conduct experiments on men. Because Arthur looks confused he explains further. Long ago some very intelligent beings had designed a computer to figure out the answer to the big question of life, the universe, and everything. The computer took seven-and-a-half million years to conclude that the answer was forty-two. Unfortunately it was not able to come up with the precise question for which this was an answer. But it designed another computer that could find the question. That computer was Earth, and all the creatures living on it during its ten million-year program were part of the computer, except for the mice, who were the creatures running the computer. Unfortunately, the earth had been destroyed only minutes before it came up with the correct answer, and so the mice needed a new computer.

After Zaphod, Ford, and Trillian wake up and recover from the gas, they discuss Zaphod's brain. Zaphod believes that he altered his own brain, but he does not know why. A man enters and announces that the mice will see them now.

Arthur is also brought to see the mice. He finds his friends sitting at a table along with Trillian's mice. The mice inform him that they want his brain as they think it may have the question encoded in it. They have been asked to appear on a television show to reveal the question.Arthur and his friends try to escape, but the doorway is blocked by armed guards. Just then an alarm sounds and a voice warns that a hostile ship has just landed on the planet. In the confusion Arthur and his friends escape. The mice decide to make up a question.

The intruders, however, turn out to be cops after Zaphod. They fire on Zaphod and the others until suddenly their life support systems fail. Zaphod, Ford, Trillian and Arthur return to their ship, where they find Marvin, who explains that the cops' ship committed suicide when he talked to it. They leave Magrathea, and Ford suggests that they stop at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe for a bite.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Arthur Dent is a thirty-year-old Englishman who is tall, with dark hair and "never quite at ease with himself." One Thursday morning he wakes up with a hangover and vaguely remembers he had learned something unpleasant the previous afternoon, but can't remember what it was. As he stumbles hazily through his morning routine, he is dimly aware of the presence of a big, yellow bulldozer as he periodically glances out through his window – but at first fails to understand the significance. Suddenly, he remembers why he went to the pub the night before to drown his sorrows, and the memory prompts him to sudden action.

Well, perhaps "inaction" is a better word, because "fifteen seconds later" we find Arthur Dent lying in the mud in front of his house, determined to prevent the bulldozer's razing it to the ground to make way for a new bypass. Mr. Prosser, the project foreman, tries to convince Arthur to give up, reminding him that the plans for the bypass have been available in the local planning office for the past nine months. Arthur agrees that as soon as he'd found out about the plans (the previous afternoon) he had gone straight to the planning office, and sure enough, found the plans on "display" in the "bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying *Beware of the Leopard*." Additionally, this lavatory is in a dark basement that happens not to be equipped with stairs.

As his discussion with the foreman continues, one of Arthur's closest friends turns up. Arthur thinks his friend is an out-of-work actor, but he is really a stranded space traveler from "somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse," who has been trying to blend inconspicuously into earth society. Choosing what he believed was a common earth name, "Ford Prefect" spends his time watching for any flying saucer that might be able to take him back home, while at the same time collecting research for a book called, "The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy."

Ford Prefect wants Arthur to go to the pub with him to discuss something very important. Naturally, Arthur is reluctant to do this, considering the bulldozer might tear down his house while he's gone, but fortunately Ford Prefect is able to convince the foreman to lie down in Arthur's place, promising that when they come back they'll stand in for Mr. Prosser, so he can have a turn at the pub. This all seems vaguely logical to Mr. Prosser, and even to Arthur – who consents to accompany his friend to the pub. Nevertheless, he's compelled to ask Ford whether he really thinks they can trust Mr. Prosser to keep his word. When Ford assures him that he'd trust him to the end of the Earth, Arthur digests this, but asks his friend, "and how far's that?"

"About twelve minutes away," Ford answers. At this point, the reader is pretty sure that Ford Prefect is being quite literal.

Chapter 1 Analysis

A blend of science-fiction and comedy, the Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy began as a BBC radio show in 1978, and was written episode by episode by its creator, Douglas Adams. This circumstance presents a challenge to anyone who is looking for deep meanings or complex messages in the series. In a foreword of a 1992 anthology of his Hitch Hiker books, Adams says, "Writing episodically meant that when I finished one episode I had no idea about what the next one would contain. When, in the twists and turns of the plot, some event suddenly seemed to illuminate things that had gone before, I was as surprised as anyone else." Nevertheless, the comedy is masterfully done and in the British style – replete with understatement, parody and absurdity.

In the first chapter, we are introduced to the two main characters of the story: Arthur Dent, and Ford Prefect. Both of these names are interesting and tell us something about the characters. "Arthur" is a distinguished name, although not a particularly imaginative or uncommon one, and other literary and legendary characters (such as King Arthur) have given it a sense of unexciting respectability. "Dent" suggests several characteristics, depending on the reader's experiences. "Dents" such as those one might find on a car, suggest a certain degree of carelessness. The word "dense" has a similar sound, and this is not highly complimentary either. Nevertheless, the name sets up the character perfectly for the way the author paints him. He seems even-tempered and easy-going, but more due to his lack of imagination than anything else. Solutions and conclusions are rather slow to dawn on him, but he muddles through even the most devastating events with an admirable stoicism.

Douglas Adams says of Arthur that, "to the English, he is a hero. Terrible things happen to him, he complains about it a bit quite articulately, so we can really feel it along with him – then calms down and has a cup of tea."

Of Ford Prefect's name, the author says, "this is a joke that missed American audiences entirely of course, since they had never heard of the oddly named car." It was made by the British division of the Ford Motor Company, released only in the UK, Canada and Australia.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Having succeeded in dragging Arthur down to the pub, Ford Prefect orders six pints of bitter (since he can't get a Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster anywhere on earth), and tells the barman he needs them quickly because, "the world's about to end." Three of the pints are for Arthur, and Ford recommends these as an effective muscle relaxant. He then asks Arthur what seems to be a hypothetical question, "How would you react if I said that I'm not from Guildford after all, but from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse?" This doesn't seem to make a dent in Arthur's comprehension, so Ford gives up and suggests that his friend should drink his beer quickly, adding again that "the world's about to end." Arthur decides it must be Thursday – since he's never managed to get the hang of Thursdays.

Chapter 2 Analysis

By the end of this chapter, the reader is sure Ford Prefect knows what he is talking about. The world is going to end – but one is not quite sure how (or whether) Ford and Arthur are going to escape this event. The two men apparently only have twelve minutes left, and it seems they will be spending it in a pub drinking three pints of bitter each. That's about the extent of the information given to the reader in this chapter, unless one counts the recipe given for Pan Galactic Gargle Blasters, which is interesting by itself, but doesn't quite seem relevant somehow.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

As the huge yellow "slablike somethings" moved toward Earth, Ford Prefect's "Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic winked away in his satchel, telling of their approach. Also in his satchel, he carried a copy of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, published in the form of a micro sub meson electronic component, the words "Don't Panic" printed on it "in large friendly letters." Thirdly, in his satchel, Ford Prefect carried a large bath towel – the most "massively useful thing an interstellar hitch hiker can have." Apparently thinking of this, Ford asks Arthur whether or not he, too, has a towel.

Just then, they hear a crash coming from outside the pub. It's Arthur's house being torn down by the yellow bulldozers, and he rushes out to try to stop them. Suddenly a silence hits the Earth. Into the silence, a voice calls out in quadraphonic sound from the yellow "somethings" in space. "As you will no doubt be aware, the plans for development of the outlying regions of the Galaxy require the building of a hyper spatial express route through your star system and regrettably your planet is one of those scheduled for demolition…"

Chapter 3 Analysis

Although Chapter 3 ends with the demolition of the Earth, we are somehow sure that Ford has gotten himself and Arthur away, although we don't yet know how. Very likely it has something to do with towels. At any rate, we have learned that the general nature of things (and beings) is very much universal. Just as Arthur's house has been scheduled for demolition by incompetent bureaucrats, so has the entire planet. We are told the plans for its demolition have been posted at the local planning office in Alpha Centauri for fifty earth years, and if only Earth's inhabitants hadn't been such an apathetic bunch, they may have been able to stir up enough "interest in local affairs" to discover this. It is lines like these that make some literary analysts classify this book as a satire. In fact, some of the jokes do effectively point out human folly, which is the intent of satire. However, while there are some satirical elements to the *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the work is generally considered a parody, since it uses the rules and conventions of its genre, in this case, Science Fiction, to produce comedy. In the author's own view parody was the intention, since he said of himself, "I'm not a Science Fiction writer, but a comedy writer who happens to be using the conventions of science fiction."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The reader is left to wonder about the fates of Ford and Arthur while Chapter 4 concerns itself with Zaphod Beeblebrox, President of the Imperial Galactic Government. The President is best described as a three-armed, two-headed, smooth-talking, "adventurer, ex-hippy, good timer, manic self-publicist," who is "terribly bad at personal relationships," and "often thought to be completely out to lunch." This charmingly described leader is on a nearly deserted island, about to unveil the new *Heart of Gold* to three billion people through the eyes of a small robot tri-D camera. The *Heart of Gold* is a huge starship that carries within it a special, small gold box. The most "brain-wrenching device ever conceived." The three billion people watching him on tri-D are not aware that Zaphod's plans include stealing the new starship with its gold box. As the chapter ends, he throws a Paralyso-Matic bomb to the ground and runs forward to take the ship right out from under their "suddenly frozen beaming smiles."

Chapter 4 Analysis

Zaphod Beeblebrox is a parody of thousands of political leaders as portrayed in thousands of movies and books. The charming and fun-loving but sleazy "good-ole' boy" who has ulterior motives and a selfish agenda. Though this chapter is short, it's illuminating, and the reader knows there will be much more of Zaphod Beeblebrox to come.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Arthur Dent regains consciousness in the bowels of a Vogon flagship, thanks to Ford Prefect's quick thinking and knowledge of inter-galactic hitch hiking. It was the Vogons who had bulldozed Earth, and while Ford knows they hate hitch hikers, he also knows they employ Demitrassis as catering staff. Demitrassis are a "wild but pleasant bunch," who are willing to take on and hide hitch hikers because more than anything they love to annoy Vogons.

Traumatized, Arthur asks Ford where they are, and his friend assures him they are safe, adding that they are in one of the spaceships of the Vogon Constructor Fleet. "Ah," Arthur responds, "This is obviously some strange usage of the word *safe* that I wasn't previously aware of." Devastated at the news that Earth no longer exists, Arthur tries to orient himself to his new situation. Ford helps out by lending him *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and offering him a little yellow fish to put in his ear. To Arthur's astonishment, the fish enables him to understand a Vogon announcement suddenly being broadcast throughout the starship.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Arthur may not be having a good time, but the adventure isn't a picnic for Ford Prefect either. In fact, it's through Prefect that Adams makes his observations of human folly. For instance, he notes that "One of the things Ford Prefect had always found hardest to understand about humans was their habit of continually stating and repeating the very very obvious, as in *It's a nice day*, or *You're very tall*, or *Oh dear you seem to have fallen down a thirty-foot well, are you all right?*" Despite his confusion about them, however, Prefect seems very fond of humanity in general and sorry about their loss. Fortunately, he has managed at least to save Arthur Dent, and now tries to convince him that all is not lost – the Galaxy is a fun place to be. (Although, of course, he would now need to have a fish in his ear.)

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The fish in Arthur's ear turns out to be called a Babel fish, which through a complicated survival mechanism involving the absorption of brain waves, enables its host to instantly understand anything said to them in any form of language. The immediate convenience is that Arthur is able to understand the captain's announcement: the Vogons are aware there are hitch hikers on board, and are sending a search party to find them. The captain announces that when they are found they will be put instantly off the ship, although if they are lucky, he will read his poetry to them first. Although this last threat sounds harmless, Arthur has already read the section on Vogons in the *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It says, "On no account allow a Vogon to read poetry at you."

As Arthur tries to come to grips with the incomprehensible loss of Earth, and everything he knows, he is gripped with the desire to see what the *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* says about Earth. He looks up the entry and is stunned to find only the word "Harmless." Ford Prefect assures him that after fifteen years on earth he was able to extend the entry a bit, and the revision would appear in a future version. Arthur wants to know what the revised version will say. Ford tells him, "Mostly harmless." Suddenly, the two hitch hikers hear the sound of steel-tipped boots stopping outside the door. It appears the Vogons have found them.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Even though this is meant as comedy, one is still relieved that Arthur has a somewhat believable reaction to Earth's destruction. It is too big of a loss for him to take it in all at once, and he exhibits reasonable indications of shock. Fortunately, however, the reader doesn't have to dwell too long on the implications of this devastating event, as we are quickly carried off by the next challenge Arthur and Ford will have to face. Up to this point, Arthur doesn't stand out as the hero – Ford Prefect is the one with all the answers and Arthur follows along with little or no protest. But after having gone through two major ordeals in one day (the bulldozing of his house, and then the bulldozing of Earth), Arthur's less-spineless side seems about to emerge.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The Vogon captain (known as Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz) has found Ford and Arthur in their hiding place and has taken them as prisoners. They are strapped to a battery of electronic equipment designed to fully heighten the experience of the poetry they are about to hear. After subjecting them to complete and utter nonsense, which is every bit as excruciating as Ford Prefect had anticipated, the Vogon captain demands that they either tell him how good they thought his poem was, or be tossed into outer space to die in its vacuum. Arthur has a flash of brilliance and pretends to believe the poem was wonderful. Ford is suitably impressed, as he has never considered faking such a reaction. Unfortunately the ploy doesn't work, and they are ordered off the ship. As they wait in a cylindrical chamber waiting to be ejected, Ford reminds Arthur that if they take a lungful of air before they go, they will be able to last for up to thirty seconds. This could allow them time to be rescued, but Arthur is not hopeful as they finally pop into outer space "like corks from a toy gun."

Chapter 7 Analysis

Ford takes a brief back seat to Arthur's brilliance for once, as they face the Vogon captain. Ford is more at home in space than Arthur, however, so he is soon reinstated as the source of critical information needed by the reader to follow the action, although this reinstatement may be short-lived if they indeed are meant to die in the vacuum of space. Fortunately, the reader is somehow sure this is not going to happen.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

This chapter tells us a little more about the remarkable book called *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. It has been compiled and recompiled many times over many years under many different editors, with contributions from countless travelers and researchers. We are also told that the *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* says that if you hold a lungful of air you can survive in the total vacuum of space for about thirty seconds, although with "space being the mind-boggling size it is the chances of getting picked up by another ship within those thirty seconds are two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand seven hundred and nine to one against." Coincidentally, we are told, that is the phone number of a place where Arthur once met a very nice girl at a party, although she left with "a gatecrasher." Equally coincidentally, twenty-nine seconds after being ejected, Ford and Arthur were rescued by a passing ship.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Staggering coincidences are actually one of the main themes Douglas Adams plays with in this Science Fiction comedy. The story began with the staggering coincidence that Arthur's house was being demolished to make way for a bypass on the very same day that Earth itself was being demolished for nearly exactly the same reason, but now the staggering coincidences are piling up in an equally staggering manner. It seems quite possible the "very nice girl" and the "gatecrasher" are likely to show up in another staggering coincidence at some point further on in the story.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Ford and Arthur are not sure where they are when they come to. At first it looks like the sea front at Southend, in England. But it seems to them the universe is undulating, and a man with five heads and an elderberry bush full of kippers passes by, so they are pretty sure they are not actually in Southend. After hearing several measurements of probability from an unidentifiable voice and noticing bulges in the fabric of space-time, Ford realizes what is causing the odd effects around them. The have been picked up by a ship powered by the Infinite Improbability Drive. The voice tells them they have been picked up by the *Heart of Gold*, and Arthur informs Ford that an infinite number of monkeys are trying to get into their cubicle to talk to them about a script for *Hamlet* they've worked out.

Chapter 9 Analysis

As it turns out, there is a good explanation for so much improbability in the writings of Douglas Adams. He referred to himself as a "radical atheist" but stated that he was fascinated by religion. He said, "I've thought about it so much over the years that that fascination is bound to spill over into my writing." One of the discussions between religion and atheism has involved measurements of improbability that are required for the theory of Evolution to have a basis in fact. Adams plays on this argument using the comedic value of extraordinary improbability in a way that readers on both sides of the argument can appreciate.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

This chapter is a flashback to the invention of the Infinite Improbability Drive, to provide more information about it. It was discovered by a lucky chance (naturally) by a student who had been left to sweep up the lab after a party. He thought it might make sense to feed the finite improbability of developing such a Drive into the logic circuits of a Bambleweeny 57 Sub-Meson Brain hooked up to an atomic vector plotter suspended in a strong Brownian Motion producer (a nice hot cup of tea). And he was right. But shortly after being awarded the Galactic Institute's Prize for Extreme Cleverness he got lynched by a rampaging mob of respectable physicists who couldn't stand being outsmarted.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Like an English home, no English book, movie, television show or radio series can persist very long without the introduction of a nice hot cup of tea. The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy is apparently no exception.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Ford and Arthur have been picked up by the *Heart of Gold*; a ship which we remember from Chapter 4 has been stolen by Zaphod Beeblebrox. Zaphod tells his girlfriend, Trillian, that it probably wasn't wise to pick them up since the police are after the ship, but Trillian tells him she didn't pick them up. The ship did it, all by itself while they were in Improbability Drive. She tells Zaphod not to worry and sends the perpetually depressed robot, Marvin, down to the number two entry bay to bring them up. The robot mutters and complains the entire way, and when Ford asks which government owns the ship, he snaps that no one does. It has been stolen. Ford is shocked and amazed when the robot names Zaphod Beeblebrox as the thief.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Marvin's comedic value lies in the fact that he is a robot, but is almost completely incapacitated by his depression. Mankind's most legitimate reason for inventing robots is efficiency. How much could be accomplished if we could create a man who didn't have to sleep, and wasn't distracted by human difficulties? Yet Marvin is rendered almost entirely useless because the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation decided to build robots "with Genuine People Personalities."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Zaphod is listening to a news broadcast about himself when Trillian interrupts to point out that Ford and Arthur were picked up by the ship in the same sector where Zaphod had once picked her up. They agree that is highly improbable and Zaphod decides he wants to know the exact improbability ratio. He consults the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation Shipboard Computer, but its attitude of pleasure and happiness annoys him so much that he decides to do it the old-fashioned way – on paper. In the end, he isn't able to do the numbers, so he again consults the computer. This time it gives him the random fact that most people's lives are run by telephone numbers, which seems to spark a thought in Trillian. She knows Ford and Arthur are on the way up to the bridge with Marvin, and decides to view them on the ship's internal monitors.

Chapter 12 Analysis

The reader instinctively knows (from hints thrown out by the author) that we are about to confront another overwhelming improbability, most likely involving Trillian and one or another of the hitch hikers. Considering a phone number is involved, and we have already encountered mention of a phone number in Chapter 8, we begin to suspect Trillian may be about to recognize someone on the ship's monitor.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Marvin, still depressed and complaining about everything from the doors on the ship to the dullness of his life, brings Arthur and Ford to the bridge. Ford introduces Zaphod as his "semi-cousin," but Arthur doesn't need an introduction -- he too already knows the man. He tells Ford that Zaphod came to an Earth party in London and asked "a beautiful, charming, devastatingly intelligent" girl if she was bored with Arthur and wanted to talk to him instead. That girl was named Tricia McMillan, and Arthur discovers, as Trillian now moves into his line of sight – the two women are one and the same. Trillian explains that she had hitched a ride with Zaphod just as Ford and Arthur had. Just then, the computer interrupts with the (finally) completed Improbability sum. "Infinity minus one," the computer determines. Zaphod, stumped, asks Trillian if this sort of thing is going to happen every time they use the Improbability Drive. "Very probably, I'm afraid," she says.

Chapter 13 Analysis

A truly improbable number of improbabilities are packed into Chapter 13. More importantly, however, we now know that an Earth woman has been saved from the planet as well as Arthur. This could be the saving of the species, in the event that Arthur gets a second chance to wow her with his conversation. However, judging by events as recorded so far in this story, it seems highly improbably that this will actually ever happen.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Everyone but Arthur has trouble sleeping that night. Trillian taps on Zaphod's door and tells him she thinks she has found the thing they came to this part of the Universe (the Horsehead Nebula) to discover. They go to the bridge, where Ford wanders in and finds them a few minutes later. Zaphod and Trillian show him a planet on the computer screen. Ford is uncomprehending, so Zaphod tells him, "That is the most improbable planet that ever existed."

Chapter 14 Analysis

We discover what we have already suspected – Zaphod has an ulterior motive for stealing the space ship and traveling to this particular part of the Universe.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

This chapter is an Excerpt from Ford's *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, page 634784, Section 5a. Entry: *Magrathea*. It tells of a time when the Empire was first forged, when "men were real men, women were real women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri were real small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri." In those days, men returned home very rich from doing mighty deeds and Magrathea became the center for a new industry: custom-made luxury planet building. Eventually the system broke down, due to inequities between rich and poor, and the memory of Magrathea became a legend that no one actually believes any longer.

Chapter 15 Analysis

The reader is being cunningly led to suspect that the planet Zaphod has been looking for is none other than the legendary Magrathea.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Even Arthur wakens now, and joins the others on the bridge to argue over whether the planet below them actually is the legendary Magrathea. Zaphod is positive he has found it, but Ford is skeptical it even exists. Trillian has to explain the entire concept to Arthur, as he is in his usual clueless state, wishing he could just have a cup of tea. Still, he's held in suspense, as is the reader, and it's at this point that story narration is introduced to relieve this. "Stress and nervous tension are now serious social problems in all parts of the Galaxy," it says, "and it is in order that this situation should not be in any way exacerbated that the following facts will now be revealed in advance." Then the reader is told that the planet IS Magrathea, and that it will shortly be launching an automatic missile attack, but no one on the ship will be hurt.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The sudden introduction of story narration at the end of this chapter is crucial to maintaining the comedic quality of the story. If suspense is allowed too much room for development, we may forget we are involved in a comedy and begin to believe we are reading serious Science Fiction.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

As yet, the characters don't know they are about to be attacked by missiles, so Arthur finds a Nutri-Matic machine where he gets a cup of something that is almost, but not quite, entirely unlike tea. Just then a recorded message is broadcast from the planet, politely inviting them to leave. As they continue their approach (since Zaphod doesn't believe anything will happen) the messages become more insistent until the last finally informs the visitors (very politely) that they are about to be killed by missiles. Unable to outmaneuver the missiles, the occupants of the *Heart of Gold* naturally assume they are about to die. Fortunately, Arthur has the brilliant notion of using the Improbability Drive, and flips it on. The author then tells us that, "The next thing that happened was a mind-mangling explosion of noise and light."

Chapter 17 Analysis

Arthur is the character we least expect to come up with the solution to their problem, since he is the newest to the Universe beyond Earth, and seems completely disoriented. This is a common device used in all types of literature, but the effect of comedy is especially enhanced by use of the unexpected.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

After the explosion of noise and light, the Heart of Gold returns to its previous orbit, but this time with the same interior effect Ford and Arthur had noticed when they were first taken on board and had thought they were on the sea front in Southend. Everything in the ship is temporarily transformed into half-familiar but absurd forms, and after some moments the travelers are able to determine that the two missiles have turned into a bowl of petunias and a surprised-looking whale. The rest of the chapter contains a complete record of the thought process of the whale from the time it comes into existence to the time it lands on the planet's surface with a sudden, wet thud.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The good thing about Improbability Drive is that nothing is what it seems to be. But Arthur and Ford are finding that state to be much better than when things actually *are* what they seem to be – especially if they seem to be bad. However, the main point of this chapter is that the four travelers have escaped with their lives.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

The *Heart of Gold* has landed on Magrathea, and the travelers are preparing to disembark the ship, taking Marvin (the paranoid android) with them, when Trillian realizes the white mice she has brought from Earth have escaped. Zaphod is not concerned, although Trillian (who had Earth degrees in Math and Astrophysics) was much attached to her lab mice. Nevertheless, they exit the starship, not realizing that the hatchway opens and closes again behind them for no apparent reason.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The sole purpose of this chapter is to make the reader wonder what the mice are up to.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

On their walk, Trillian thinks she notices movement out of the corner of her eye, but sees nothing. She is distracted from thinking about this when the group comes upon a large crater made by the impact of the sperm whale that had once been a missile. Zaphod is excited, because he notices that the impact had broken open the planet's crust to reveal an underground network of tunnels. They decide to go in, leaving Arthur out to stand guard with Marvin, the paranoid android. Marvin turns himself off, and Arthur is left more or less alone.

As the three others make their way through the tunnels, Zaphod reveals to Ford that he doesn't really know what he's looking for. Zaphod says he gets ideas to do things, not knowing why, and it always works out, even though he doesn't plan very well. He has become suspicious about this and had decided the previous night to go to the ship's medical bay and plug himself into the encephalographic screen to examine his own head. He discovers that "someone" has modified his brain, and their initials burnt into the cauterized synapses as a clue for him to find. The initials were Z.B. At that moment the three travelers realize the door behind them has slammed shut and the chamber they are in begins to fill with gas.

Chapter 20 Analysis

Evidently, Zaphod Beeblebrox has been operating on his own brain. Of course, with all the improbability floating around the universe, there is always the possibility there is someone else with the same initials who cares what goes on in Zaphod's head – however it seems clear that the reader is meant to assume Zaphod has actually been messing around with his own synapses, although we are left to wonder why for the moment.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

While Arthur is waiting for the others to return, he whiles away the time reading The *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, particularly an entry discussing an interesting theory about what happens to lost biros. (Biro is a term used in many countries to refer to a ball-point pen. It is named for Laszlo Josef Biro, who is considered the inventor of ball-point technology). Eventually, Arthur tires of reading the Guide and after unsuccessfully attempting a pleasant conversation with Marvin, he lets the robot go back to sleep and decides to warm himself up by walking around a bit. Night has fallen, so Arthur nearly walks into an old man before noticing him.

Chapter 21 Analysis

This is another interesting comedy technique. Instead of addressing a large, universal issue like starvation or world peace, one can substitute a ridiculously insignificant but still universal issue – such as where lost pens end up.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

The elderly man doesn't introduce himself, assuring Arthur that his name is not important. He does tell Arthur that when he and his contemporaries understood that the planet-building business was going into a recession, they decided to put themselves to sleep and to program the computers to wake them up when the economy was able to support luxury services again. He then says that Arthur must come with him in his aircar, and it is obviously not a suggestion. There is a hint of an order to the request. Arthur finally insists on knowing his name, so the man reluctantly answers that it is "Slartibartfast." When Arthur repeats the name in disbelief, the man looks at him gravely and adds, "I said it wasn't important."

Chapter 22 Analysis

Douglas Adams answered many questions about his books before his death in 2001, and one of these was about the name "Slartibartfast." While he indicates the name was mainly chosen for its absurdity, Adams also stated that he enjoyed using names that were long and difficult in order to tease the secretary who was required to type up the material.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

The narrator once again takes over to give us some important background information. We are told that on Earth, dolphins had always considered themselves more intelligent than man, and that they had known of Earth's impending destruction in enough time to leave Earth by their own means before it occurred. The last ever dolphin message to mankind was misinterpreted as a double-backward-somersault, but in fact the message was meant as: "So long and thanks for all the fish." We then learn that there was another species even more intelligent than dolphins and equally misunderstood by man. This species spent lots of time in laboratories running around inside wheels and mazes.

Chapter 23 Analysis

Once again the reader is encouraged to be suspicious of the mice. We know we will be hearing more about them in the future. Another interesting note for future reference relates to the dolphins' last message to man. "So long, and thanks for all the fish." This is also the title of the last book in the Hitch Hiker series.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

Slartibartfast takes Arthur deep into the tunnels to the factory where the luxury planets were made. When Arthur asks whether they have started production again, Slartibartfast tells him they have only been awakened by a special client to perform a single commission. He points out a planet that Arthur recognizes as Earth. Slartibartfast says they are making an exact copy from the original blueprints. It dawns on Arthur that Slartibartfast is telling him that Earth was a custom-made luxury planet to begin with. Because he had actually won an award for the work he did creating Norway, Slartibartfast was very upset when he'd heard of its destruction. Slartibartfast then adds that the mice were even more so. They were furious, in fact. Arthur is astonished when he is next told that the original Earth was commissioned, paid for, and run entirely by the mice, which are actually "hyper intelligent pan-dimensional beings." The humans were only part of a ten-million-year research program. Slartibartfast recommends Arthur settle down to hear the entire story.

Chapter 24 Analysis

Once again the comedy is supplied by the absurdly unexpected twist. The smallest, seemingly most helpless creature is actually the one pulling all the strings. At least there is the satisfying thought that it isn't quite all over for Earth after all, although the reader might not have predicted it would be restored by a couple of little, white laboratory mice.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

As Slartibartfast relates the story of Earth to Arthur, we learn that it all began "many many millions of years ago" when a particular race of hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings became determined to discover the meaning of life. They built a huge, amazingly intelligent computer called "Deep Thought," and when it was finished, its two programmers, Lunkwill and Fook sat themselves "deferentially" before it, saying: "O Deep Thought Computer….We want you to tell us the Answer." When the computer asked them to elaborate, they added, "To Life! The Universe! Everything!"

The computer admitted this would be tricky, but agreed to do it, despite the protests of two philosophers (Vroomfondel and Majikthise) who complained that if the Answer to Life were known, it would put them out of a job. Nevertheless, the computer told them its circuits were already working on it, and it was too late to stop. Deep Thought would be able to give them the answer in Seven and a half million years.

Chapter 25 Analysis

Although the connection between this story and Earth is not yet entirely clear, it's obvious at least that bureaucracy, incompetence and selfishness are universal characteristics. The philosophers (the very ones who should care the most about finding the Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything) are especially concerned with preventing it coming to light. They are delighted they will have seven and a half million years in which to profit from the general ignorance about the subject, and leave happily to embrace a lifestyle "beyond their wildest dreams."

Incidentally*, Life, the Universe and Everything* turns up as the title of the third book in the Hitch Hiker "trilogy in four parts."

Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary

Arthur compliments Slartibartfast on his story, but tells him he doesn't understand the connection between the computer, Earth and mice. The old man invites Arthur to his personal study where he can experience the rest of the story from Sens-O-Tape records and discover what happened seven and a half million years later, on the day of the Great Answer.

Chapter 26 Analysis

This chapter is merely a bridge to the next part of the story, but it is helpful to know that Arthur feels just as the reader does. The author reassures us that we will make the mental connection soon enough.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary

Plugged into the Sens-O-Tape record, Arthur turns invisible to himself and is suspended in mid-air above the historical action as though it is happening now and he is there. He sees a crowd gathered waiting to hear the enlightening Answer from Deep Thought. Two men sit in front of the computer. After a long, expectant pause, and an exchange between the computer and the waiting men that lasts far longer than a simple answer should require, the computer tells them the Answer to the Great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything. It is Forty-two.

Chapter 27 Analysis

The absurd simplicity of the answer is appropriate – any attempt at a real answer would have been too serious to be entertaining.

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 Summary

Arthur is still in the Sens-O-Tape record, and he notices the crowd does not like the answer at all. The computer realizes this as well, and justifies itself by saying the problem isn't with the answer, it's the question. He says once they figure out what the question actually is, they'll know what the answer means. Unfortunately, Deep Thought – though he is a very advanced computer – is not advanced enough to work the question out for them. But he offers to design a greater computer than himself. "A computer of such infinite and subtle complexity that organic life itself shall form part of its operational matrix." The computer, he tells them, will be called "The Earth," and they themselves will take on new forms and go down to navigate the ten-million-year program.

Chapter 28 Analysis

Now Arthur gets it, and so do we. Earth was a vast computer, built to compute the Great Question. The mice were the hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings that were to navigate the program. Unfortunately, Earth was destroyed before the program had been completed, which is why the mice have commissioned a copy of Earth. They still want to know the Great Question.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 Summary

Arthur is left pondering all this while the story returns to the other three travelers. Trillian and Ford are trying to awaken Zaphod because they are sure he will appreciate the fact that the ground beneath him is made of pure gold. Before he gets too excited, however, they clarify the fact that it isn't real – they are actually standing in a Sens-O-Tape catalogue. At that moment, their surroundings change, and they are standing by a purple sea on a beach composed of yellow and green pebbles. They quickly tire of watching the changing landscape, and Zaphod returns to the subject of what has happened to his brain. He remembers that the former President, Yooden Vranx – an acquaintance of his and Ford's from their childhood – had come to visit him before his death and suggested he run for President and steal the *Heart of Gold*. Zaphod suggests that afterward he must have modified his own brain so that whatever he was thinking wouldn't show up on the Presidential brain-screening tests.

At this point the landscape around them vanishes and they find themselves sitting in a waiting room full of design awards. A Magrathean man tells the three travelers that the mice will now see them.

Chapter 29 Analysis

We know we are reaching some sort of a climax in the story, since the mice are obviously central to everything that has happened so far. The travelers are finally being summoned to see them, so it seems we are about to learn something important.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 Summary

Meanwhile, Arthur and Slartibartfast are commiserating about the Earth's destruction, made even more futile by the fact that it happened only five minutes before the computer program was to be completed. "Well, that's bureaucracy for you," Slartibartfast comments. Then a light begins to flash on the wall, and the elderly gentleman tells Arthur he is being summoned to meet the mice. They are excited to have Arthur there, since he was on Earth just before its destruction and may be able to tell them something important.

Chapter 30 Analysis

Bureaucracy and incompetence continue to show up as a central theme alongside random, improbable coincidence. It is beginning to sound a bit like Chaos theory, which holds that order can be found in seemingly random data. One aspect of chaos theory is a phenomenon called sensitive dependence on existing conditions. The thought is that small changes in initial conditions can have drastic effects on the outcome. Douglas Adams' Hitch Hiker series could be considered in some ways a humorous study of Chaos theory..

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 Summary

Arthur and Slartibartfast arrive at the design center waiting room where they meet up with Ford, Trillian and Zaphod who are devouring the exotic dishes that have been laid out for them. Trillian introduces Arthur to "her" two white mice, "Benjy mouse" and "Frankie mouse." The mice are inside motion devices that look like whisky glasses. When their whiskers stroke a touch sensitive panel inside the glass, it moves. The mice dismiss Slartibartfast, after telling him they have decided they won't need the new Earth any longer. Slartibartfast leaves the room, aghast and saddened to think how much time he has put into developing Africa.

The mice are ready to get down to business. They can't return to their dimension without the Ultimate Question. But they don't want to return to Earth all over again, because they've been offered a 5D chat show and lecture circuit back home and feel inclined to take it. They've decided that since Arthur was on the earth until the moment of its destruction, the Question may be encoded in the structure of his brain. They propose to surgically remove it, and dice it up to find out. Arthur doesn't seem keen to cooperate, so the mice maneuver their glass transports into the air and begin to swoop toward him. As a small pack of ugly Magratheans come to the aid of the mice, the situation begins to look hopeless for Arthur and his friends. Fortunately, at that moment a distraction comes in the form of an earsplitting alarm.

Chapter 31 Analysis

The mice seem to have no concept that Arthur might not like to have his head cut open so his brain can be removed. However, it is easy to see that if the tables were turned, Arthur might be just as calloused toward the mice.

Chapter 32

Chapter 32 Summary

The alarms have gone off because a hostile ship has landed on the planet and armed intruders have entered the interior. The four travelers have disappeared, leaving the mice stranded on the floor, their glass transports shattered and scattered around them. Benjy and Frankie have no alternative now but to invent a plausible Question to take back to their dimension. After a couple of false starts that don't really fit the answer (which, of course, is "forty-two"), they settle on, "How many roads must a man walk down."

Meanwhile the four friends are running for their lives, pelted by a hail of Kill-O-Zap bolts. They are being missed so far, but an amplified voice demands that they stop and give themselves up. The cops have finally caught up with Zaphod Beeblebrox. Soon, Zaphod and his friends are cornered by the two murderous but nevertheless enlightened, liberal cops who "know all about sensitivity and everything." Just as the pursuers are about to let loose another electric barrage that is sure to end the lives of the four friends, the chapter ends.

Chapter 32 Analysis

The four travelers have eluded one enemy only to be set upon by another. Suspense builds, but we can only wait and hope for some kind of improbable intervention.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 Summary

Intervention comes in the form of a sudden silence. When Ford ventures out to do some scouting, they find the two cops collapsed in a heap. Ford's examination reveals that the two men were methane-breathing life forms, requiring a life-support system computer attached to a space suit for survival in the oxygen atmosphere of Magrathea. Unfortunately, the life-support computers seemed to have given out quite suddenly. Taking advantage of the fortunate (for them) situation, the four comrades find Slartibartfast's aircar waiting for them, with a note pinned to its instrument panel. It has an arrow drawn on it, and the words, "This is probably the best button to press."

Chapter 33 Analysis

The mice have antagonized Slartibartfast by withdrawing their order of a new Earth, which turns out to be a good thing for the crew of the *Heart of Gold*. Evidently they can now count on the elderly Magrathean's full support.

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 Summary

The aircar deposits them next to their ship, and then returns the way it came. Parked next to the *Heart of Gold*, the four notice the policecraft seems unnaturally dark and silent – as dead as its two former occupants. While his three companions hurry out of the cold into their own ship, Ford nearly trips over Marvin as he stops to examine the Blagulon ship. Marvin, depressed as usual, tells Ford that he had tried to talk to the policecraft's computer, and explained his view of the Universe to it. When Ford asks him what happened, Marvin answers, "It committed suicide."

Chapter 34 Analysis

Thanks to Marvin, another improbable coincidence saves the four Galactic adventurers. His habitual manic depression induces the policecraft's computer to commit suicide, killing its two-man crew at the same time since they were dependent on their computerized life-support system.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 Summary

That night on the ship, everyone enjoys some hard-won relaxation. Arthur flips through Ford's copy of *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, to learn more about his new home. He comes across an entry describing the three phases every civilization goes through: Survival, Inquiry and Sophistication. The first phase, it says, is characterized by the question "How can we eat?" The second by "Why do we eat?" and the third by "Where shall we have lunch?" Just then Zaphod buzzes over the intercom asking if Arthur is hungry. At his affirmative reply Zaphod answers, "OK baby, hold tight…We'll take in a quick bite at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe."

Chapter 35 Analysis

The book's final philosophical musings about the three phases of civilization may be facetious, but there is also a ring of truth that takes the humor to a higher form. At the same time it provides a convenient bridge to the next book in the Hitch Hiker Series, which is named in the final sentence.

Characters

Zaphod Beeblebrox

Zaphod is described as having two heads and three arms, the third arm having been attached "to improve his ski-boxing." As the President of the Imperial Galactic Government, Zaphod was presiding over a ceremony unveiling the *Heart of Gold*, which was the first ship to run on Infinite Improbability Drive, when, on impulse, he paralyzed all of the onlookers and stole the ship.

Zaphod is not sure what compels him to do the things he does. For most of the book he assumes that his freewheeling, happy-go-lucky personality drives him to seek danger and allows him to talk his way out of it. "And then whenever I stop to think—why did I want to do something?—how did I work out how to do it?—I get a very strong desire just to stop thinking about it." Thinking about this, he runs a brain scan on himself, to see if someone else has put ideas into his mind: after careful searching, he finds that his brain has been tampered with, and that the culprit signed his initials. They are his own initials, indicating that he was the one who altered his own brain, without knowing it. He is convinced that he had himself made President of the Galaxy just to steal the *Heart of Gold* and travel to Magrathea, but he does not have a clue as to why it was necessary to do that.

Arthur Dent

Arthur was born and raised on Earth, and he is the book's protagonist. When the novel begins, Arthur wakes up to find that bulldozers outside of his house in England are ready to demolish it so that a bypass for the expressway can be built. While he is trying to stop the demolition by lying in the way of the trucks, his friend Ford Prefect comes and convinces him to go to the pub with him. It turns out that a similar event is happening on a much larger scale—that the Vogon race is about the demolish the Earth in order to build a new bypass—and that the beer that Arthur drank at the pub was necessary to prepare his muscles for space travel.

Arthur's main function in the novel is that of an observer. He is the one to ask questions, to bring out facts that the other characters are already familiar with. Throughout the novel, Arthur is referred to derogatorily as "Earthman" and "Monkey Man," the latter because of humans' relationship to their ancestors, the primates.

Eddie

Eddie is the computer on board the *Heart of Gold*.He is as annoyingly cheerful as Marvin is depressed. As the ship plummets toward the surface of Magrathea, for example, the crew is terrified, but Eddie sings a happy song, interrupting itself frequently

to tell them how many seconds there are until impact. Later, Zaphod programs it with an "emergency back-up personality," but that personality is whiny and argumentative.

Flook

One of the computer programmers who was responsible for programming Deep Thought, the second greatest computer in the Universe of Time and Space, to solve the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything.

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz

The commander of the Vogon ship that provides Arthur and Ford an escape from the destruction of Earth. He first tortures the stowaways by reading his awful Vogon poetry to them, then orders them thrown out of the ship into space.

Loonquawl

One of the officials in charge of the ceremony on the Great and Hopefully Enlightening Day, when Deep Thought, after seven and a half million years of computation, is supposed to reveal the Answer.

Lunkwill

One of the two computer programmers who was responsible for programming Deep Thought, the second greatest computer in the Universe of Time and Space, to solve the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything.

Majikthise

The elder philosopher from Cruxwan University. At a ceremony when the computer is ready to give its answer to the question of life, the universe and everything, Vroomfondel and Majikthise are honored as "the Most Truly Interesting Pundits the Universe has ever known."

Marvin

A robot, referred to sometimes as the Paranoid Android, Marvin is a prototype of the Sirius Cybernetics Corporation's new Genuine People Personality feature: unfortunately, the personality he has been given is terminally depressed. He is capable of solving complicated problems when asked, but he is also inclined to complain when asked to do the simplest tasks.

Tricia McMillan

See Trillian

Benjy Mouse

The mice of planet Earth are revealed to actually be from the ancient race that commissioned the Magratheans to create the Earth. Slartibartfast explains: "They are merely a protrusion into our dimension of vastly hyperintelligent pandimensional beings." When they find out that Arthur Dent was born on the planet and lived there up until a few minutes before its destruction, they offer to buy his brain in order to read the information imprinted there.

Frankie Mouse

The mice of planet Earth are revealed to actually be from the ancient race that commissioned the Magratheans to create the Earth. When they find out that Arthur Dent was born on the planet and lived there up until a few minutes before its destruction, they offer to buy his brain in order to read the information imprinted there.

The Paranoid Android

See Marvin

Phouchg

One of the officials in charge of the ceremony on the Great and Hopefully Enlightening Day, when Deep Thought is supposed to reveal the Answer.

Ford Prefect

Ford is a researcher for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.* For years, he traveled from planet to planet by begging free rides, but as the novel starts he has been stranded on Earth for fifteen years. On Earth, he assumed the name Ford Prefect, thinking that it would allow him to blend in (although his cousin, whom he knew in childhood, calls him "Ford" in a later chapter, an inconsistency that is not explained). His disguise on Earth, that of an out-of-work actor, has satisfied the curiosity of people who might otherwise wonder about him. Because he is mostly used to introduce the concept of space travel and of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to Arthur, Ford's role in the novel drops off sharply in the book's second half.

L. Prosser

Mr. Prosser is a descendent of Genghis Khan, although he does not know it. He is in charge of the demolition crew sent to destroy Arthur Dent's house.

Slartibartfast

Described as a very old man, Slartibartfast is a resident of Magrathea, the planet where other planets are created. He is a planet designer, specializing in coastlines. He won an award for his work on Norway on the original Earth, and he has designed Africa on the replacement Earth with fjords—"I happen to like them," he explains, "and I'm old-fashioned enough to think that they give a lovely baroque feel to a continent."

Trillian

Trillian is a girl that Zaphod Beeblebrox picked up at a party on Earth, while she was talking to Arthur Dent. She is introduced in the novel as being "slim, darkish, humanoid, with long waves of black hair, an odd little knob of a nose and ridiculously brown eyes." She travels with Zaphod and is with him when he steals the *Heart of Gold*. The odds against picking up Arthur and Ford floating in space as they did are the same as her phone number on Earth.

Vroomfondel

Vroomfondel is the younger philosopher from Cruxwan University. Vroomfondel and Majikthise are honored as "the Most Truly Interesting Pundits the Universe has ever known."

Themes

Absurdity

One of the guiding principles of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is that of absurdity, of things happening randomly without cause or meaning. This does not mean that the whole book is a series of events that occur in random order. Most of the extreme examples of meaninglessness, in fact, do have a cause—they are the products of the Infinite Improbability Drive on the *Starship Heart of Gold*. The fairly logical explanation of the Improbability Drive in Chapter 10 allows the novel to introduce its most fantastic oddities and coincidences.

For instance, the *Heart of Gold* picks up Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect when they are dangling in space because it is highly improbable it would happen. The same force makes Arthur's limbs dissolve and turns Ford into a penguin; it redecorates the bridge of the ship with mirrors and potted plants; and it causes a whale to materialize in the skies above Magrathea. All of these events are notable for being shockingly unpredictable. These elements of absurdity would not have nearly as much impact if they occurred in an atmosphere of total absurdity, but the novel highlights them by placing them alongside of a struggle for reason, which makes the lack of reason stand out. Characters are constantly trying to explain the sense of their actions, ignoring the chaos around them.

This pattern is established in the opening chapter, with the demolition crew coming to take down Arthur Dent's house. While Mr. Prosser is convinced that Arthur was given a fair and sensible warning of the demolition, to Arthur the fact that the plans for destruction were "on display" in a locked filing cabinet in a disused lavatory in the darkened, stairless cellar of the planning office, behind a sign reading "Beware of the Leopard," represents an absurd form of "giving notice." Throughout the book, bureaucratic thinking struggles against the natural absurdity of the universe and often creates its own, even more frustrating, kind of absurdity.

Nature and Its Meaning

Rather than being a source of meaning, as is frequently assumed, humanity is presented in this book as a taker of meaning, acting out the roles that are assigned by the animals around us. This is most evident in the interactions with the laboratory mice: scientists believe that they are manipulating the mice's behaviors in order to learn more about nature, but the mice are actually manipulating the scientists' behaviors to learn more about humans. To these mice, the meaning of the Earth and its tenmillion-year history comes down to one particular instant, when, at a pre-programmed date and time, Earth will produce the Question to the Answer.

To the dolphins, the second most intelligent species on the planet (ahead of humanity), human life is worth saving, but when humans misinterpret their warnings of the coming cataclysm—whistling and backward somersaults—for tricks, the dolphins get into the spaceship they have constructed and leave. Even the topography of Earth has a meaning that is vastly different than what is usually ascribed to it by humans. The fjords of Norway, for example, are not a result of glacial development, but they instead have the appearance that they do because they were designed by Slartibartfast, who happens to like making fjords and in fact won several design awards for his work. In this way, the novel tells its readers that all of the things in the natural world do have a particular meaning, just as the greatest thinkers are prone to speculate, but that humans would never to be able to determine these meanings with the limited information at hand.

Permanence

The book begins with what would ordinarily be considered the end of all that we know—the destruction of the Earth—but then it goes on to explain a broader context in which the Earth's existence played only a small part. The Earth came into existence because it was manufactured by the Magratheans, who would never have done it without being paid for the job. So its destruction, like the demolition of Arthur Dent's house or the crumpling of a piece of paper, is irrelevant to the people who have used it. With this perspective of Earth, and the limitless varieties of life forms that Arthur Dent encounters in his travels, the fact that Earth's existence is not permanent is treated as insignificant.

Culture Clash

In a sense, this novel presents the entire universe as belonging to a different culture that citizens of Earth just do not understand. The non-Earth characters, from Vogsphere, Betelgeuse, and Magrathea, all seem to understand each other, even in cases where they have not been introduced to each other's culture before. For example, both Ford Prefect and Zaphod Beeblebrox believe the planet of Magrathea to be a myth, but soon after they arrive they accept it for what it is with little further conflict. Even Trillian, who was born on Earth but has been traveling the universe for roughly six months more than Arthur Dent, is unshaken by the strange occurrences that she observes.

There are several explanations for the different attitudes displayed. One is that Earth is an insular culture, unfamiliar with the other races existing throughout the universe, and so Earth people are more prone to be surprised by new circumstances and more awkward in their reactions. Another might be that the customs of Earth people are, in general, uptight, and look even more so when placed beside the carefree attitudes of the rest of the occupants of the universe. Strategically, it helps this work as a comedy to have Arthur Dent come from a repressive culture and to have his sensibilities and drive for order offended by the casualness of those he meets. This follows a comic tradition at

least as old as Shakespeare that pits sophisticates against the good-natured people with simple common sense.

Style

Parody

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is a parody of traditional science fiction adventure stories. A parody is a work that takes the conventions and rules of one form and uses them for comic effect. It is distinguished from a satire in that satire usually tries to point out human folly and vices in order to reform them, while the subject of parody is the style of writing itself.

Traditional science fiction takes the reader, often through the adventures of a common person like Arthur Dent, into a world where the universal laws of physics as we know them have been stretched beyond current capacities. Space travel is often associated with science fiction because introducing beings from other planets allows writers to account for the fact that they are able to manipulate reality in ways that are currently unheard of; time travel is often an important element for the same reason. Most good science fiction uses the different physical rules it presents to explore constants in behavior, while most bad science fiction introduces bizarre elements for their own sake, just to show off the author's active imagination. This book derives its humor from reversing the usual results that readers have come to expect.

For example, readers might expect the Earth to be destroyed in a war, so its destruction is presented here as a result of petty bureaucracy; the President of the Galaxy is not a fearsome sovereign but a joy-riding party animal; traveling through space, which has been the goal of multibillion-dollar government programs, is presented as hitchhiking; something usually as insignificant as bad poetry is one of the most terrifying weapons used in the book. Traditional science fiction stories expend much energy explaining how things work under the rules they have created: this story adds preposterous elements at will, and does not insult its readers' intelligence by pretending that they make sense.

Episodic Plot

The story that this book is based on was originally written as a 12-part radio series for the British Broadcasting System. Being presented in installments created certain requirements for its plot structure. The action had to reach a peak every so often, raising the curiosity of listeners who would not be able to simply turn the page to find out what would happen next. At the same time, the individual segments each had to tell an independent story, in case someone heard just one episode in the middle of it all.

When adapting the series to a novel, Douglas Adams rewrote the story so that it would not just read like a string of events but more like a story; still, signs of the original structure are not hard to find. Points of heightened interest, such as when Arthur and Ford are seemingly doomed to drift in space, or Zaphod Beeblebrox's teaser at the end

of a chapter that foreshadows description of the most improbable planet that ever existed," show the original strategy meant to hold readers' interest for a week.

Also, instead of following one broad stretch, the plot follows several distinct, sequential arcs: the destruction of Earth; the theft of the *Heart of Gold*; the encounter with Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz; the rescue from space; the approach to Magrathea and escaping its attack; the encounter with Slartibartfast; and the explanation of the ancient race seeking the answer to the Ultimate Question. Any of these episodes could be skipped without doing sustained damage to one's understanding of the whole story.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the practice, common in literature, of giving human thoughts, motives and behavior patterns to non-human things, such as animals or inanimate objects. It is most evident here in the thoughts that are ascribed to animals. This does not apply to the mice, because it is explained that they are not really mice but humanoid aliens in disguise. Yet no such explanation is offered to explain why the dolphins would be able or willing to conceive of a warning about the Earth's impending doom, or why the sperm whale that materialized in the air would think of the extended monologue that runs through its mind in Chapter 18.

In addition, the book derives continuous humor from the human-like personalities of the chronically depressed robot, given the common human name Marvin, and from Eddie, the sickeningly cheerful computer that becomes whiny after Zaphod activates its "back-up personality." Science fiction stories often speculate that advanced civilizations will program computers to interact with humans on human terms, which would mean that they would display some sort of personality—as the book explains, Sirius Cybernetics Corporation had programmed Marvin with a Genuine People Personality. *The Hitchhiker's Guide* takes that assumption to an extreme by giving the machines undesirable personalities.

Historical Context

Space Exploration

By the time *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was published in 1979, many people had tired of the American and Soviet race for dominance in space. Twenty years earlier, there had been excitement and anticipation in the United States, spurred on by fear that the Soviet Union would be the first country to conquer space.

The first evidence of real progress in the exploration of space was witnessed in 1957, when the citizens of the world woke up one day to find that the Soviets had put an artificial satellite, *Sputnik I*, into orbit. In many parts of the world people could step outside and, looking into the sky, watch the satellite pass by. America, which was the only other country of comparable military might to the Soviet Union, entered into a competition meant to preserve national pride, as well as to prevent the Soviets from gaining superior missile technology.

Through the 1950s the lead in the space race shifted back and forth. The Russians put a living being, a dog, into space in 1957. The U. S. Congress established The National Aeronautics and Space Agency in 1958. The first human to go into space was a Russian, in 1961; the first American went into space the following month. During the 1960s, Russia fell behind and America progressed steadily. The race was finally won on July 20, 1969 when an American was the first human being to walk on the moon. After that, both countries continued to explore space, but public interest dropped off.*Apollo* missions landed on the surface of the moon five more times; the Soviets built a space sta tion in 1971; an American space station, *Skylab*, was built in 1973.

Because the missions were generally successful, public interest dwindled until danger or irregularities occurred. In 1979, the most covered story in space exploration was that *Skylab* was due to fall out of orbit. Since nobody could accurately predict where it would land, the world anxiously watched forecasts for months—a far cry from the expectant days when new boundaries were being broken, new challenges being surpassed. When it did come down, it rained debris over western Australia and over the Indian Ocean, but no one was hurt by the falling wreckage.

The Internet

The basic concept of the Internet had started in 1969, when the Defense Department of the United States ordered that information that was crucial to national defense should not be held in one place where it could be vulnerable to a nuclear attack. In response to the order, the University of California at Los Angeles organized a "node," a network that could disperse information to decentralized locations. Soon, other universities linked their databases with UCLA's, as did government research facilities, so that by 1975 there were nearly 100 nodes with international connections.

At the same time, advances were being made that would bring personal computers into homes. By the 1970s, word processors using cathode ray tubes had become available, offering offices ways of handling the flow of written materials economically. In 1976, Wang Laboratories produced computers that could connect terminals within offices, while that same year Apple Computers was formed. In 1977 the Apple II personal computer became the first economically feasible computer for home use—it ran through the screen of the common television and backed up its memory on simple audio tape, but its $1300 price was much lower than anything seen up to then. In 1979, CompuServe Information Systems was launched, making on-line linkups available to people outside of the Defense Department/University system.

Critical Overview

Initially, reviewers praised *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, pleased to have found a book that attempted to be humorous and was, for the most part, successful. "This hilarious and irrepressibly clever book is one of the best pieces of humor to be produced this year," applauded Rosemary Herbert in *Library Journal*.

Richard Brown, writing in *The Times Literary Supplement*, characterized Douglas Adams's writing as having "a posh-school, wide-eyed, naive manner related, perhaps, to the primitive manner currently in vogue in high-brow poetry circles." The main point of Brown's review, though, was to explore the relationship between the *Hitchhiker* books and the media, television and radio, that Adams was writing for when the books came into existence. Most reviewers categorized this book with science fiction novels and, in that context, found much to appreciate.

Because science fiction is a genre that often takes itself too seriously, critics have tended to take *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and its sequels as a breath of fresh air. Lisa Tuttle, writing in the *Washington Post*, compared the book's relationship to traditional science fiction novels and concluded that "it's extremely funny—a rare and precious conjunction in a field where what usually passes as humor is a bad pun at the end of a dull story."

Like Tuttle, many reviewers saw this first book in the series as a reaction to the claustrophobic world of science fiction writing. Gerald Jonas, in *The New York Times Book Review*,pointed out that "[h]umorous science fiction novels have notoriously limited audiences; they tend to be full of 'in' jokes understandable only to those who read everything from Jules Verne to Harlan Ellison." Adams's novel, in contrast, was a "delightful exception." Voice of Youth Advocates reviewer M.K. Chelton felt that *The Hitchhiker's Guide* was "a bizarre, wildly funny, satiric novel," but did not feel that this made it an exception to mainstream science fiction, explaining that it had "lots of in-jokes SF fans will either love or loathe, and a free-floating irreverence which is irresistible."

As the series of books progressed and came to be known as The *Hitchhiker Trilogy*(even after the publication of the fourth and fifth novels), reviewers found it more and more resistible. They started tiring of the tricks that had won Adams their enthusiasm in the first place. John Clute, who reviewed *The Hitchhiker's Guide for The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*,acknowledged that the book was a joy. He also gave recognition to the less clever elements that it involved: "Given its music-hall premises, the tone of *Hitchhiker* is sometimes damagingly sophomoric, and there is a constant taint of collegiate wit in the naming of silly names and the descriptions of silly alcoholic beverages□." He went on to praise the novel as "one of the genre's rare genuinely funny books," but the elements that he pointed out tended to become more obvious to reviewers as they appeared in one book after the next.

Losing the element of surprise did not stop Adams from producing the series' fourth and fifth installments, and though reviewers, taking the series for granted, did not express further delight, there has been growing respect for Adams's growth as a novelist. While the first book in the series was appreciated for what it was not—a traditional science-fiction comedy—Adams's recent works have been praised for their characterization and plotting.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Woodford is a doctoral candidate at Washington University. In the following essay she examines the search for the meaning of life in The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

The first thing that readers and critics usually notice about Douglas Adams's novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, is that the book, written in a sharp and witty style, is remarkably funny. What may seem less obvious to readers, and what has often puzzled critics, is the meaning behind this light, clever exterior. David Leon Higdon has noted that imagining the end of the world has long been a tradition in science fiction, as it has been in myth and theology; and Brian Aldiss has observed the tremendous impact that the invention of bombs, which could conceivably cause the end of the world, have had on science fiction and science fiction writers. But while Adams's book does describe the destruction of the earth, his humorous, irreverent treatment of this subject does not fit neatly into the traditions described by Aldiss and Higdon.

Carl R. Kropf has suggested that the novel should be read as a mock science fiction novel that reverses the expectation readers have of science fiction and "by reversing the usual conventions of the genre also reverses its entire ideological function." In support of this theory, Kropf notes that while traditional science fiction often suggests a meaning and a purpose for human life and civilization,*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and the novels which follow it do the exact opposite: "Instead of confirming that the phenomenal universe implies a meaning or purpose, they affirm its meaninglessness." While Kropf is certainly correct in noting that the novel's characters are constantly thwarted in their attempts to find meaning, this does not necessarily imply that the book as a whole affirms the meaninglessness of human life. Rather, the fact that the characters continue to search for meaning in the universe, even when they are repeatedly confronted by an apparent lack of meaning and purpose, suggests the universality of the desire to find a purpose, and ultimately, Adams's novel suggests that the purpose of life is to search for a meaningful purpose to life, and to find humor in the absurdities one encounters in the search for meaning.

It is true that meaning does seem illusive in the novel. The reader and the characters are frequently given hints that meaning exists, but those promises of meaning always prove to be deceptive. These unfulfilled promises first appear in the novel's introduction, in which the narrator describes the problem that the earth faces: "most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time." The narrator then goes on to describe how many people suggest solutions to this problem, and how finally one girl thinks of a solution to this problem and tries to phone a friend, only to be prevented by "a terrible, stupid catastrophe." But after this lengthy description of the earth, its problem, and the girl who finally found a solution to the problem, the narrator abruptly shifts focus by saying, "this is not her story" and revealing that the story of this girl and her solution have been merely a digression from the real story. Such abruptly ended digressions are a common trope in the novel. They give the reader the sense that meaning is about to be revealed, but then the door to that meaning is closed before the reader can see through.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, for which the novel is named, is another example of how meaning is promised and then denied. The fact that there is a guide to the galaxy suggests that the galaxy can be somehow understood and explained. And while *The Guide* does not promise to explain the meaning of "life, the universe, and everything" is does promise to tell you "everything you need to know about anything" and how to "see the marvels of the Universe for less that thirty Altairian dollars a day." But even this amazing guide is disappointing, since it "has many omissions and contains much that is apocryphal, or at least wildly inaccurate" and since it is "a very unevenly edited book and contains many passages that simply seemed to its editors like a good idea at the time." In fact, one of its best points is that it has the words "DON'T PANIC" inscribed on its cover in "large friendly letters," and "don't panic" is probably a good message to keep in mind when one is exploring a seemingly meaningless and incomprehensible galaxy.

Probably the best example of the constantly thwarted quest for meaning is the plight of pandimensional beings who build two computers in their attempt to discover the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. The first computer, Deep Thought, takes seven and a half million years to determine that the answer to the great question is 42, but that another computer will be needed to determine what the precise question is. The second computer, Earth, spends ten-million years running a program to determine the precise question to which 42 is the answer, and minutes before the conclusion of its program Earth is destroyed by the Vogons so that they can build a hyperspatial express route that the invention of the *Heart of Gold* then makes useless and unnecessary. Each computer is built with the hope of finally understanding the meaning of life, the universe, and everything, and each time the pan-dimensional beings eagerly await the results, only to be disappointed. Even Arthur's attempt to find some meaning in this series of accidents is undercut. He suggests to Slartibartfast that:

All this explains a lot of things. All through my life I've had this strange unaccountable feeling that something was going on in the world, something big, even sinister, and no one would tell me what it was.

But Slartibartfast quickly undercuts Arthur's attempt by telling him, "No... that's just perfectly normal paranoia. Everyone in the Universe has that." And even Arthur's suggestion that if everyone feels that way it must mean something is dismissed by Slartibartfast, who asserts that "the chances of finding out what really is going on are so absurdly remote that the only thing to do is to say hang the sense of it and just keep yourself occupied." And even Slartibartfast's philosophy of happy ignorance is undercut when Arthur asks him if he is happy and he is forced to admit, "No. That's where it all falls down, of course." Nobody in the novel seems to know what the meaning of life really is, and no amount of searching for an answer seems to lead to any revelation. Even after millions of years and two super computers, the hyperintelligent pan-dimensional beings are no more enlightened than the Vogon guard who continues with the "mindless tedium" of "stamping around, throwing people off spaceships" and shouting, without "even knowing why he's doing it."

These continually frustrated attempts to find meaning would certainly seem to support Kropf's suggestion that the *Hitchhiker* books affirm the meaninglessness of the universe rather than finding meaning in it. But this interpretation is still too dark. In arguing that Adams's novels are actually mock science fiction, Kropf cites as a point of comparison Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan*,which parallels *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in many ways. At the end of *The Sirens of Titan*, the protagonist, Malachi, realizes that the "purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved." Although it is not expressly stated, a somewhat similar purpose for life is suggested in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

While meaning and purpose seem impossible to discover, beings of all sorts continue to search for meaning in the universe, and while no one finds a specific meaning, the only ones who are made to look really foolish are those who give up the search. The Vogon guard, for example, who decides to continue with the mindless tedium of his job so that he "can eventually get promoted to Senior Shouting Officer" seems far more pathetic than any of the people who search for meaning unsuccessfully. And the hyper-intelligent pan-dimensional beings who spend millions of years searching for the meaning of life only seem truly absurd when they decide to simply fake an answer to the question of life, the universe, and everything, because they are tired of searching:

Well, I mean, yes, idealism, yes the dignity of pure research, yes the pursuit of truth in all its forms, but there comes a point I'm afraid where you begin to suspect that if there's any real truth, it's that the entire multidimensional infinity of the Universe is almost certainly being run by a bunch of maniacs. And if it comes to a choice between spending yet another ten million years finding that out, and on the other hand just taking the money and running, then I for one could do with the exercise.

If searching for meaning seems pointless, the decision not to search seems pathetic. Furthermore, while the meaning of life is elusive, life is not portrayed as worthless. Though Ford worries about the number of things humans don't know, he decides that he likes them, and he saves Arthur when the Earth is destroyed. While Zaphod teases Arthur about his ignorance of the ways of the universe, he does help to save Arthur from the mice. Even Slartibartfast, who does not believe in searching for the meaning of life, affirms the value of life and friendship when he saves the lives of Arthur and his friends by leaving the aircar in which they escape. It may be impossible to discover the meaning of life, but life does have value and is worth preserving. Finally, the irrepressible humor of the novel reveals a purpose for living. Although the novel portrays the destruction of the earth and a universe in which meaning seems impossible to discover, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* never presents a grim or depressing view of life. Rather Adams depicts a universe full of laughable, amusing creatures and situations. If the point of life in *The Sirens of Titan* is to love whoever is around to be loved, then the point of life in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galax*y is to laugh at whatever is around to be laughed at, or at least to continue searching for a point while enjoying the gifts of friendship, life, and laughter, which even a meaningless universe has to offer.

Source: Donna Woodford, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Brown suggests that Adams's Hitchhiker's Guide *makes a successful transition from audio to printed format.*

Television and radio announcers have a distinctive but necessarily rather limited critical vocabulary. They use up all their superlatives on "gripping sagas", "action-packed crime-busters" and "uproarious, side-splitting" comedies, and have little left with which to package anything more genuinely youthful, imaginative and funny. It reflects rather badly on everyday programming that Douglas Adams's clever science-fiction comedies *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* are unfamiliar enough to be introduced into the domestic arena as "zany" and "madcap", and it is a comment on the mass audience that the enjoyment of such unexceptionable pleasures should be thought of as some kind of cult.

British programmes such as *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again, Monty Python's Flying Circus and Not the Nine O'Clock News* manage to thrive on this special status—on the fact that they are held at a distance from the rest of the evening's offerings. They build up a semi-private language of stock situations, favourite satirical targets and recurring comic triggers, and have established an anarchic, facetious, though also teasingly symbiotic relationship with the fully domesticated mainstream. The good-humour of that relationship shows up clearly in the characteristic play they make with the manners and language of news-readers and announcers themselves.

There is a rich vein of satire here into which Adams's writings fall, suggesting, in general, that some science-fiction takes itself just as appallingly seriously as, and can be exposed as no more imaginative than the reading of the news.□

The mini-genre is one which seems to have evolved within the electronic media. *The HitchHiker's Guide*, with its clipped, up-to-date, joke-aminute style, bristling with gimmickry and microtechnological blobs and bleeps, seemed ideally suited to radio and even more so to television, where its diagrams and print-outs have an appeal somewhere between watching Ceefax and playing Space-Invaders.

As followers will know, the formula has been transferred with some success to the printed page. This latest volume, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, is the third, following on from *The HitchHiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. This gives the publishers the opportunity to talk of a "trilogy".

The constant element in Adams's plot is the helpless, semi-clad character of Arthur Dent, last remaining inhabitant of the Earth, which has been demolished to make way for an interstellar by-pass. [In *Life, the Universe, and Everything*], Arthur and his know-all space friend Ford Prefect find themselves caught up in the malevolent plan of the rulers of the planet Krikkit to destroy everything that isn't cricket and to seize the Golden Bail that will give them great power. Meanwhile Arthur hopes to discover the Ultimate Question of Life, knowing already that the Ultimate Answer to the Question is forty-two.

The pair come across a number of extra-terrestrial phenomena, such as the planet of Squornshellous Zeta, whose swamps are inhabited by mattresses, and the Campaign for Real Time. This, though, is only the plot. Much of the comedy arises from a variety of pseudo-high-tech mis-information.□

The Hitch-Hiker's Guide retains its life on the page because much of this humour is primarily verbal, using mild parody, making the everyday absurd by giving it a strange name or simply by giving it a capital letter. It has an imaginative energy which derives as much from its consistent play with a cosy, familiar world—the suburban English world of cricket, dressing-gowns and by-passes— as from the extravagance of its characters and settings.

Adams's writing has a likeable, posh-school, wide-eyed, naive manner related, perhaps, to the primitive manner currently in vogue in high-brow poetic circles. It would be wrong, though, to claim too much for the books. Print shows up also the extent to which the humour depends on a limited repertoire of gimmicks, and this third volume, though by no means lacking in enthusiastic drive, does little to suggest that the idea could or should be taken much further from here.

Source: Richard Brown, "Posh-School SF," in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4147, September 24, 1982, p. 1032.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Kemp offers a positive review of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.

Douglas Adams's book, *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* —a spin-off from his radio series—shot hilariously away from the gravity that so often weighs down modern science fiction, and proved an appropriately astronomical success. Now, he has launched a follow-up, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*.

It contains the same central figures: Arthur and Trillian, who escaped just before the Earth was destroyed to make way for a hyperspatial express route; Ford, who 'was in fact from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse and not from Guildford as he usually claimed'; Zaphod, rogue President of the Galaxy, 'recently voted the Worst Dressed Sentient Being in the Known Universe'; and Marvin the Paranoid Android, an oppressively depressive robot with 'this terrible pain in all the diodes down my left side'.

In *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide* —a sardonically funny exercise in galactic globe-trotting—they hurtled through space. Here, they also speed through time—finally reaching Milliways, the fabled 'Restaurant at the End of the Universe', an ultrachic eatery boasting 'lavatory facilities for all of fifty major lifeforms' and laying on apocalypse as cabaret, since it is situated at the closing moments of the cosmos (for those who want to go to the opposite extreme, there is the Big Bang Burger Bar).

Not that Adams's characters spend much time eating. As usual, they are propelled through a series of interplanetary adventures.□

What makes this book, like its predecessor, almost unputdownable is its surreal, comic creativity. Adams's galaxy blazes with spectacular phenomena like binary sunrises, and swarms with highly coloured worlds—like Golgafrincham, a planet 'rich in legend, red, and occasionally green with the blood of those who sought in days gone by to conquer her'.

To fabricate it, he has taken hints from Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear: there are logical extensions of mad premises, grotesque creatures with crazily evocative names, chattering objects, moments of satiric farce, and picturesquely absurd landscapes. The tone, though—this is often wiseguy sci-fi—owes a lot to Raymond Chandler (one of Arthur's big regrets after the Earth's destruction was that all the Bogart movies had been wiped). In the previous book, the chunky Vogon ships 'hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don't'. Here, there are snappy bouts of repartee: the droning robot is snubbed with the line, 'Stay out of this, Marvin □ this is organism talk.'

Finally, the book comes down to earth—or, in any rate, to a replica of it being repopulated by detritus from another planet: ad-men, middlemanagement consultants and the like. It's not the best of manoeuvres since it means that Adams's weakness—a sporadic tendency to Monty Pythonesque silliness—is given too much scope, while his

genially weird inventiveness rather goes into abeyance. But for most of the book, the characters zoom exuberantly through other worlds.

Source: Peter Kemp, "Wise-Guy-Sci-Fi," in *The Listener*, Vol. 104, No. 2692, December 18-25, 1980, p. 866.

Adaptations

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Videocassette. Six-episode British Broadcasting Corp. (BBC) Television series. BBC Video/CBS Fox, 1981.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Audiocassette. Read by Stephen Moore. Ontario: Music for Pleasure Ltd., 1981.

The Restaurant at the End of the Universe. Audiocassette. Read by Stephen Moore. Ontario: Music for Pleasure Ltd., 1983.

Life, the Universe and Everything. Audiocassette. Read by Stephen Moore. Ontario: Music for Pleasure Ltd., 1984.

So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish. Audiocassette. Read by Douglas Adams. Beverly Hills, CA: Dove Audio Books, 1992.

Mostly Harmless. Audiocassette. Read by Douglas Adams. Beverly Hills, CA: Dove Audio Books, 1993.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: The Complete Audio Books. Set of four compact discs. Beverly Hills, CA: Dove Audio Books, 1998.

Topics for Further Study

Make up a work order for the Magratheans, explaining the kind of world you would like them to build. Be specific about the kinds of geographical features and animals you would like to see, and explain why.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy summarizes the whole Earth with only two words: "mostly harmless." Write up an extended entry for a guidebook that will explain your town in detail to people from other planets.

Write a poem that you think might have been written by Paula Nancy Millstone Jennings of Greenbridge, Essex, England, whose work is identified in the novel as the worst in the universe. Explain the elements of your poem that you think make it so terrifyingly awful.

Suppose that the novel is right in saying that humans are not in control of Earth, but wrong in believing that either mice or dolphins are the most intelligent animals on the planet. Which animals do you think might actually be an intelligent species from another world, controlling human behavior wordlessly? Why do you think so?

Compare and Contrast

1979: Iranian leader Mohamed Reza Shah Pahlevi fled the country. Shiite Muslim leader Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini, returning from fifteen years' exile, took de facto control of Iran. In November, workers at the American embassy were taken hostage by terrorists with state backing. Throughout the 444 days they were held, American morale dropped.

Today: Having played a key role in the 1991 international military action against Iran's neighbor Iraq, the United States government is less hesitant to become involved in international conflicts.

1979: Disco, a musical trend popular in urban areas throughout the mid-seventies, was at its peak. Big hair, big collars, and platform shoes were popular across the country.

Today: Because of the changing nature of fashion, today's trends are destined to look ridiculous to people twenty years from now.

1979: Comedy was very popular: Monty Python's Flying Circus,a British show from the early 1970s, was finishing its first run on American television; the young unknowns who starred on Saturday Night Live were making movies; and comedians like Richard Pryor and Steve Martin were playing to capacity crowds at stadiums.
Today: The proliferation of comedy shows on cable television and of franchised comedy clubs in malls have diluted the impact and popularity of comedy in America.

1979: A partial meltdown at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania forced an evacuation of thousands of nearby residents and left Americans fearful of radiation poisoning from a larger catastrophe.

Today: The larger catastrophe that Americans feared in 1979 has not happened in the U.S., but some experts say that it becomes increasingly likely as the nation's nuclear power plants age.

What Do I Read Next?

This book is just the first in a series about Arthur Dent, Ford Prefect, and the colorful characters that they encounter in their travels through space and time. Fans have followed them through a series of five novels, including this one, *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)*.

For fans who have trouble keeping a handle on the characters and events in the *Hitchhiker* books, Pocket Books published a guide in 1981 that covers the original trilogy, called *Don't Panic: The Official Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy Companion.*

Mark Leyner's novels have been compared to Adams's for their unpredictability and sense of fun. His most recent, 1997's *The Tetherballs of Bouganville*, bounces through a cultural landscape strewn with markers of our time, such as scholarship awards, lethal injection, screenplay writers, supermodels and videos.

The fiction of Kurt Vonnegut has always been admired for its ability to present a comically unreal world in a slightly plausible way. One of his early books, *Cat's Cradle* (1963), is a darkly funny story about the end of the world.

The standard for this type of story, in which a normal person is thrown into a surreal world of tortured logic, was set in 1865, by mathematician Lewis Carroll's fantasy *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Douglas Adams's latest achievement is a collaboration with Terry Jones, a member of the Monty Python troupe, *Starship Titanic: A Novel*, published in 1998. Adams wrote the introduction; and the idea behind the book was his—Starship Titanic is first mentioned in *Life, The Universe and Everything*, one of the original *Hitchhiker's Guide* trilogy; and Adams wrote the interactive CDROM of the same name. Jones wrote the actual book.

Further Study

Douglas Adams, *The Original Hitchhiker Radio Scripts*, edited by Geoffrey Perkins, Harmony Books, 1985.

This book contains the scripts for the original radio show on which the novel was based; an introduction in which Adams talks about his writing; another introduction by the producer of the show, Geoffrey Perkins; and many notes about the script.

Brian W. Aldiss, introduction to *Hell's Cartographers: Some Personal Histories of Science Fiction Writers*, edited by Brian W. Aldiss and Harry Harrison, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, pp. 1-5.

Aldiss discusses the effect that the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima had on science fiction and science fiction writers.

Thomas M. Disch, *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World*,The Free Press, 1998.

To understand how well *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* parodies the science fiction tradition, and how much it follows the rules that it lays out, it helps to understand what that tradition is. Disch has published in almost all genres, and he is a cult figure in science fiction.

John Griffiths, *Three Tomorrows: American, British and Soviet Science Fiction*, Barnes and Noble Books, 1980.

Although this book gives little consideration to the *Hitchhiker* phenomenon, which was relatively new when it was written, it is helpful for those interested in considering how the ideas of science fiction differ on both sides of the globe.

David Leon Higdon, "'Into the vast unknown': Directions in the Post-Holocaust Novel" in *War and Peace: Perspectives in the Nuclear Age*, edited by Ulrich Goebel and Otto Nelson, Texas Tech UP, 1988, pp. 117-24.

Higdon traces developments in Post-Holocaust fiction

Carl R. Kropf, "Douglas Adams's 'Hitchhiker' Novels as Mock Science Fiction," *Science-Fiction Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, March 1988, pp. 61-70.

Kropf suggests that Adams's books could be seen as Mock Science Fiction, much as Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* is a mock epic.

Kurt Vonnegut, *The Sirens of Titan*, Dell Publishing, 1970.

A science fiction work which shares many common plot devices and themes with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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