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opening extract from

The Rough Guide to the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

written by

Marcus O'Dair

published by

Rough Guides Ltd

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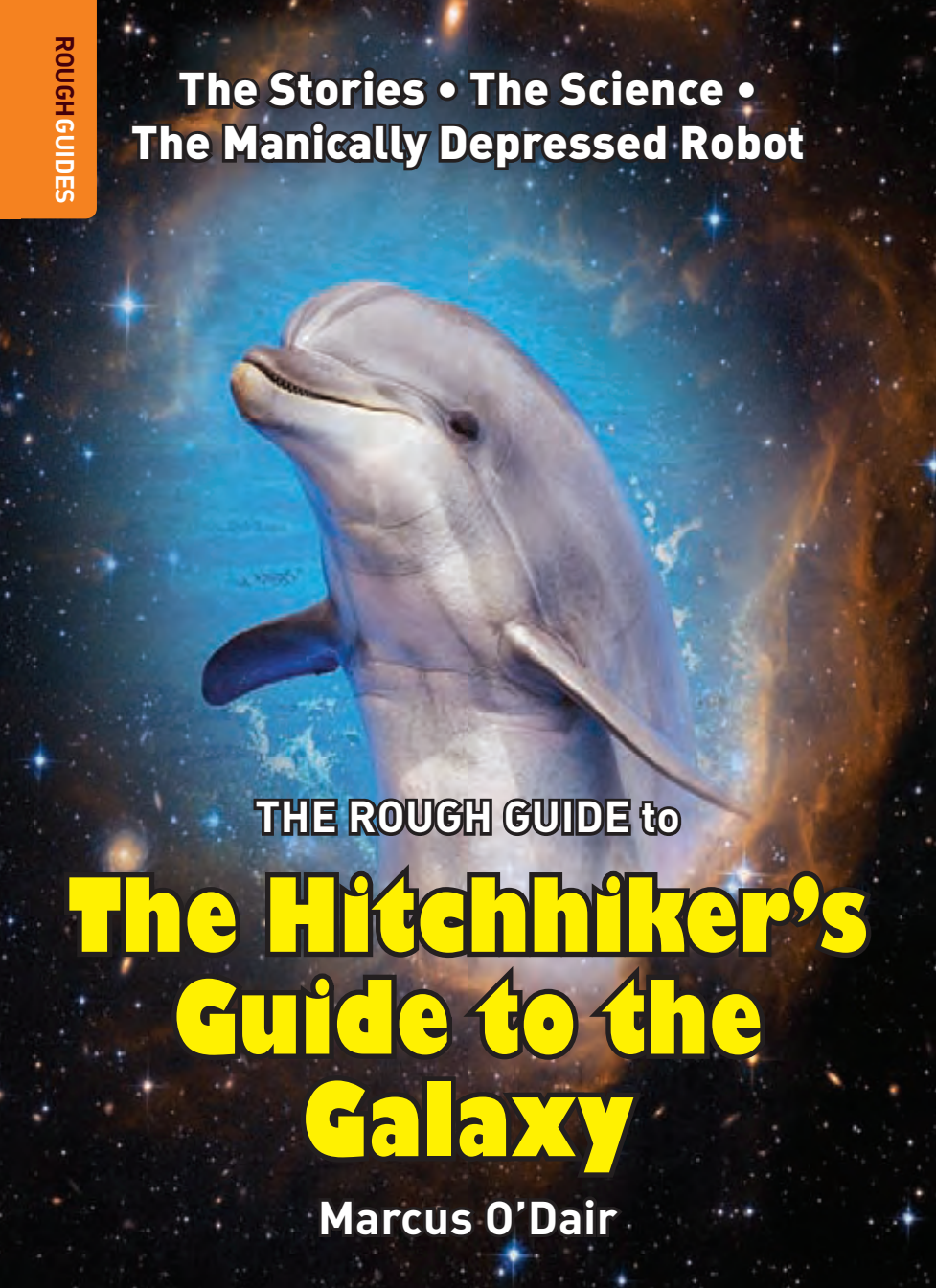
ROUGH GUIDES

The Stories • The Science •
The Manically Depressed Robot



THE ROUGH GUIDE to

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Marcus O'Dair

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Introduction

Don't Crash, the documentary about the *Hitchhiker's* movie, bears the tongue-in-cheek subheading "The Documentary of the Making of The Film of The Book of The Radio Series of The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy". *The Rough Guide to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is not quite as ridiculous a title, but it might still sound uncomfortably like pop culture eating itself. ("A guide to the Guide?", would ask the hypothetical dinner party hostess, just before her undergarments leapt one foot to the left in accordance with the Theory of Indeterminacy. "Darling, how very postmodern.")

Yet over thirty years since Douglas Adams's original radio series was broadcast, the *Hitchhiker's* universe continues to absorb and amuse on a tremendous scale: around 16 million novels have been sold alone. More remarkably, the best part of a decade after Adams's tragically early death, the canon is still expanding. Three further "Phases" of the radio series have appeared since 2004, while a film version finally arrived in 2005. Four years later, a sixth *Hitchhiker's* novel, by bestselling children's author Eoin Colfer, is about to be published as we go to press.

For a certain generation, that novel, entitled *And Another Thing…*, will represent a first taste of *Hitchhiker's*. This book aims to fill in some background for such a reader, who is looking to understand the size and scope of the curious phenomenon upon which they've stumbled. Equally, however, the intention is to offer something for the longtime fan, hooked ever since the first radio episode was aired on 8 March 1978 and familiar with every subsequent development in every format from computer game to comic.

As such a devotee would no doubt tell you – probably at considerable length, until, like the President of the Mid-Galactic Arts Nobbling Council at an Azgoth poetry recital, your only means of survival lies in gnawing your own leg off – *Hitchhiker's* is a story of

considerable depth. This book looks, for instance, at the real-life science behind time travel and the Total Perspective Vortex; the echoes in Adams's writing of Zen Buddhism and existentialist philosophy; and the impact of filtering the story's best-known gag, that the meaning of life is 42, through a tridecimal numeral system.

For the neophyte, however, the overriding instruction is that inscribed upon the cover of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* itself: Don't Panic. *Hitchhiker's* is also a comic space opera, plain and simple; an absurdist but highly accessible intergalactic romp. As well as the series' links to science and philosophy, this book contains thoroughly straightforward information about the main characters and the most prominent versions of the story, including radio, novels, TV and film. No prior knowledge is assumed.

Science fiction can be notoriously geeky, and at times all but impenetrable to those without the time or inclination to familiarize themselves with its mores. Yet despite its cosmic canvas, there's an earthiness – and indeed, Earthiness – to *Hitchhiker's* that is precisely what enabled it to spread so far beyond the usual sci-fi fanbase. Stephen Fry, who would befriend Adams and subsequently provide the voice of the eponymous Guide in the film version, is on record as saying that he became a fan of the early *Hitchhiker's* radio shows without ever thinking of them as science fiction.

That sentiment is shared entirely by the author of this book. More than any two-headed President, for me the initial appeal of *Hitchhiker's* lay in its humour and its Englishness (although the Blimpish national stereotype epitomized by Arthur Dent was almost as outmoded in the immediate aftermath of punk, when Adams was first writing it, as it is today). It's not hard to see why Fry was attracted to a story that makes reference to such quintessentially English phenomena as cups of tea, pints of bitter, games of cricket and the *Guardian* crossword. And notwithstanding the fact that the novels have been translated into more than 35 languages, the humour itself is often described as equally English, with clear antecedents in Monty Python, *The Goon Show* and P.G. Wodehouse.

No doubt other fans have been ensnared by different aspects of *Hitchhiker's*, and any attempt to separate the story's appeal into individual strands is in any case futile. Having mutated into so many different formats in its long history, it's hardly surprising that the story is many things to many people; sometimes, like the formats themselves, these views will flatly contradict each other. It's all part of the charm of a tale that, for all its light-hearted, accessible tone, is so multi-faceted, and so densely packed with ideas.

It does mean, though, that a "guide to the Guide" is perhaps not such a bad idea after all: however well you know the story, there's probably more to learn, and hopefully even the most ardent follower will take something new from this book. Given Adams's oft-repeated (and maybe even true) story that he originally came up with the basic concept for the story whilst hitchhiking around Europe, there's also a certain charm in its being published by a company still best known for its travel guidebooks.

Share and enjoy.

Marcus O'Dair
May 2009

Thanks

To Ruth Tidball and Peter Buckley, for forfeiting the long lunchbreaks that should be compulsory on such a book, and for not locking me in a hotel room whilst writing it; to Alan Sullivan and Sam Duby for their help with the text; to Adam Lavis for the scripts; to Mum, Dad, Loren, Dom, Andrew, Rich and Dr Parsons, for tea and sympathy (if not a sofa); and most of all, to my own personal Infinite Improbability Drive, Kat.

1

An infinitely improbable story

It is no easy feat to summarize the basic plot of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Combining science-fiction staples such as parallel dimensions and time warps with thoroughly surreal humour, it rarely follows a linear or logical storyline. The wildly freewheeling style of the original 1978 BBC radio shows was wholeheartedly endorsed by subsequent incarnations: novels, TV series, records, stage productions, short stories, comics, feature film and even computer game.

Matters are further complicated by the fact that the plot actually changes somewhat between these various formats, so precisely which version one favours is ultimately a matter of personal preference. Obsessives will point to minor differences between British and American versions of the same book, or even between different broadcasts of the same radio episode.

However, much of the broader narrative is in fact common to all versions, so it is just about possible to outline a common narrative thread. Of course, this whole chapter should come with a pretty substantial spoiler warning: to paraphrase Adams, if you don't want to know what happens, skip ahead to Chapter 2, which is a good bit and has Marvin in it. Otherwise – going by the novels, which, although pre-dated by the first radio series, provide the definitive version of the entire saga – the basic story goes something like this…

Book One: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Arthur Dent, a well-meaning if rather dull fellow of about thirty, wakes up one morning to discover that his house is to be knocked down to make way for a bypass. He also learns that his friend Ford Prefect has been on Earth only as a researcher for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and was actually born on a small planet near Betelgeuse (pronounced "Beetle-juice"). Ford informs Arthur that Earth is about to be destroyed to make way for another bypass, this time of hyperspace proportions.

Just before Earth is obliterated, Ford uses his electronic sub-etha signalling device to transport himself and Arthur onto the spaceship responsible for the planet's imminent destruction, crewed by a nasty race known as the Vogons. Unwelcome visitors, they are cruelly tortured by means of a poetry recital by the Vogon captain before being thrown into space.

Arthur and Ford are picked up by another spaceship, the spectacular *Heart of Gold*, and thus we are introduced to most of the

book's remaining major characters. Most immediately striking is Zaphod Beeblebrox, the painfully cool, two-headed President of the Galaxy, who has stolen the ship for reasons he can't quite recall. With him is Trillian, a fellow human whom Arthur once tried to chat up at a party but who, to his considerable chagrin, ended up leaving with Zaphod. Also on board are Marvin, the eternally pessimistic robot; Eddie, the eternally optimistic computer; and two pet mice Trillian brought with her from Earth, whose significance only later becomes apparent.

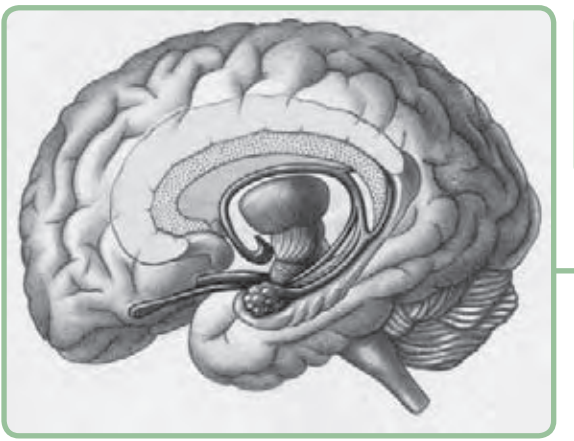
For reasons that again remain vague even to him, Zaphod takes the ship to a planet named Magrathea, once the centre of a successful planet-constructing industry but now believed unpopulated. While most of the group head down a passage to explore the planet's interior, Arthur and Marvin stay behind on the surface where they meet an elderly planet-designer called Slartibartfast. It transpires that the Magratheans are not dead but have merely been asleep for the past five million years, sleeping out an economic downturn.

Slartibartfast tells Arthur of a race of highly powerful, pan-dimensional beings who in this dimension manifest themselves as mice. It transpires that these beings once asked a supercomputer named Deep Thought to answer The Great Question of Life, the Universe and Everything. However, they were severely underwhelmed when Deep Thought, after seven and a half million years' intense contemplation, announced that the answer was "forty-two". Deep Thought went on to explain that this answer would only make sense once they truly understood the Ultimate Question, but to calculate said question would take a computer far more powerful than even Deep Thought itself.

This computer, so large that it included organic matter in its make-up, was named Earth. All had been going swimmingly until the Vogons destroyed it, five minutes before the end of its ten-million-year programme. Slartibartfast has been woken from his five-million-year slumber in order to create a replacement.

Arthur rejoins Ford, Trillian and Zaphod for a feast, only to discover that their hosts are Benjy and Frankie, the two mice Trillian brought with her from Earth. The mice want to buy Arthur's brain, in the belief that, as part of the Earth computer's organic make-up, it will contain information vital to understanding the Ultimate Question. Arthur, however, isn't keen to sell his precious grey matter. As the mice prepare to forcibly remove it, he and his companions flee.

On the way out, the group come under fire from a pair of policemen, but escape when the cops' life-support systems spontaneously explode. Upon re-emerging on the surface of the



A human brain similar to the one used by Arthur Dent, and coveted by Benjy and Frankie.

planet, they find the *Heart of Gold* – and, parked next to it, the police ship, looking as dead as its former occupants. The craft committed suicide after Marvin shared with it his hopelessly bleak view of the Universe.

The group leave Magrathea, and, relaxing with a highly intoxicating Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster, Zaphod brings the book to its rather abrupt close by suggesting a trip to the Restaurant at the End of the Universe.

Book Two: The Restaurant at the End of the Universe

The second *Hitchhiker's* book joins *The Godfather Part 2* and *From Russia With Love* in that most exclusive club: sequels that are better than the originals. It follows the radio series less slavishly than Book One, fleshing out the characters in the process, but still reads as if Adams was thoroughly enjoying himself – a quality notably lacking in later novels.

As one of the Galaxy's most eminent psychiatrists, Gag Halfrunt is terrified at the prospect of anyone discovering the meaning of life – after all, it would do his profession no end of harm. Indeed, it was Halfrunt who ordered the Vogons to destroy the supercomputer otherwise known as planet Earth. He has now employed the Vogons to finish the business by exterminating Arthur and Trillian, the last remaining humans in the Universe.

In normal circumstances, the *Heart of Gold* would more than likely be able to deal with a Vogon attack, thanks to its Infinite

Brownian Motion producer (aka a nice cup of tea).

Improbability Drive. However, Arthur has chosen this precise moment to reject the unpalatable liquid usually provided by the ship's Nutri-Matic Drinks Synthesizer, and instead inform the machine how to make a proper cup of tea. The enormity of his demand has fully occupied every circuit in the ship's computer.

As Ford counts down the seconds to their certain doom, Zaphod hits upon the bizarre solution of holding a séance with his late great-grandfather. The ghost saves them by catapulting the *Heart of Gold* through time and space, first telling Zaphod that he must find the man who runs the Galaxy (and possibly the entire Universe).

An unexpected side effect of this space-warp is that Zaphod and Marvin disappear from the ship, only to materialize on the hedonistic planet of Ursa Minor Beta, home to the offices of *The*

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Zaphod, who still can't remember why he stole the ship he was onboard only seconds previously, now does something else he doesn't understand. He walks into reception and demands a meeting with a man called Zarniwoop, despite the fact that he's never heard of him.

As Zaphod makes his way to Zarniwoop's office, spaceships uproot the building and carry it off into the sky. To his bafflement, Zaphod is told that these spaceships are after him not because of something he's done, but because of something he's yet to do – but which he decided upon years ago. The flying office block is deposited on the unspeakably evil Frogstar World B, where Zaphod is subjected to the psychic torture of the Total Perspective Vortex, in which victims are forced to acknowledge their complete and utter insignificance in relation to the infinity of existence. Uniquely, however, he emerges unscathed, the machine apparently confirming his belief that he is indeed the most important being in the Universe.

Attempting to escape from the planet, Zaphod discovers a 900-year-old spaceship full of sleeping passengers. Also aboard is Zarniwoop, who rather smugly informs Zaphod that he's been inside an electronically synthesized Universe since arriving on the planet. Equally smugly, Zarniwoop also tells him that the pair had long ago agreed that he would steal the *Heart of Gold* and bring it here, as part of their mission to find the man who rules the Universe.

Zaphod has no recollection of any of this but, discovering that a shrunken *Heart of Gold* has been in his pocket all along, he returns onboard and is reunited with Ford, Arthur and Trillian. He also punches Zarniwoop, having had quite enough of his self-satisfied

explanations. But when Zaphod shouts at the computer to take them to "the nearest place to eat", it does exactly that, sending them five hundred and seventy-six thousand million years through time but no distance at all in any of the other dimensions.

The group emerges in Milliways, better known as the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. Thanks to the joys of time travel, this luxurious eatery offers diners the vicarious thrill of watching the whole of Creation destroyed, night after night. Our protagonists leave with Marvin but soon realize that the spaceship they've stolen is destined to crash into the Sun. Leaving Marvin to his fate, the others escape via a teleport.

Arthur and Ford find themselves on another spaceship, this time with the frozen bodies of fifteen million hairdressers, telephone sanitizers, insurance salesmen and public relations executives. It transpires that a planet called Golgafrinchan has decided to rid itself of the useless third of its population by sending them to another planet, with the not entirely convincing promise that the "useful" two thirds of the population will follow in due course.

Zaphod and Trillian, meanwhile, end up back on the *Heart of Gold* with Zarniwoop, and finally meet the man who rules the Universe. They find him living a simple life in a shack, trusting absolutely nothing beyond his own empirical experience. Zarniwoop seems to find the man's inconclusive answers rather frustrating, although Zaphod and Trillian conclude that the Universe is in good hands. They sneak away in the *Heart of Gold*, leaving Zarniwoop stranded.

The Golgafrinchan ship crash-lands on what Arthur and Ford come to recognize as pre-historic Earth. The new arrivals seem destined to slowly destroy the planet, together with its native

population – terrible news in terms of Earth's function as a mouse-commissioned supercomputer, since these natives are part of its organic make-up. Nevertheless, the book ends with Ford and Arthur in fairly reflective mood, Arthur mentioning in passing that he's thrown his copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* into a river.

Book Three: Life, the Universe and Everything

If *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* was *The Godfather Part 2*, then *Life, the Universe and Everything* bears uncomfortable similarities to *The Godfather Part 3*. No, we don't see Arthur Dent haunted by his lifetime of sin as a mafia Don. But what felt complete as a two-parter is revisited and the results, though perfectly respectable on their own terms, simply fail to meet the standards of previous instalments. Furthermore, Adams's decision to base much of the story on an unused *Doctor Who* script imposes a kind of action-adventure momentum that doesn't suit the laissez-faire characters of the *Hitchhiker's* world.

The book opens with Arthur, after all his adventures, back in England – London's Islington, to be precise. Unfortunately, however, he's living in a cave, stranded two million years before his own time. Just as he decides to deal with this problem by going mad, Ford Prefect appears, and the pair hitch a ride on a floating Chesterfield sofa. It deposits them some time in the 1980s, a few miles east in the middle of the pitch at Lord's Cricket Ground.

Spelling

For a story that mocks subeditors on more than one occasion, it is slightly ironic that *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* has itself thrown up a surprising number of spelling quandaries. With the potential for both a hyphen and an apostrophe, that apparently innocent word "hitchhiker's" has over the years been subject to the sort of gross cacography that would bring Lynne Truss out in a cold sweat. As writer and comic artist Neil Gaiman has pointed out, there have even been inconsistencies within a single product. Adams himself mixed "hitch-hiker's" and "hitchhiker's" in his original story outline; the first novel went for "hitchhikers" on the cover, but "hitch hiker's" in the main body of the book. Detailing these discrepancies is, of course, a thoroughly tedious business, which is presumably why The Guide's own subeditors spend so much time on extended lunchbreaks. Suffice to say, then, that consensus was eventually reached when Adams himself was moved to put forward his thoughts on the matter: thus the "hitchhiker's" spelling used in this book. Phew.

Moments later, a spaceship arrives, carrying a troop of robots attired in an approximation of cricket whites. Slartibartfast also shows up, having anticipated their arrival, but is unable to prevent them stealing The Ashes, the trophy associated with the long-running Test cricket series between England and Australia. Elsewhere the robots kidnap Marvin and steal the vital Gold Bail

from the *Heart of Gold*'s Infinite Improbability Drive, shooting Zaphod in the process.

Meanwhile, Arthur is discovering just what has made these artificial cricketers so aggressive. He learns of the planet Krikkit, once a happy place, hermetically sealed within a cloud of dust so thick that none of its inhabitants had ever considered any reality beyond. One day, however, a spaceship fell out of the sky, and they copied its design. Learning that there was indeed life beyond their planet, the people of Krikkit concluded that they would have to destroy it, thus beginning the notoriously ferocious Krikkit Wars. When Krikkit was eventually defeated, the planet was placed in a state of slow-motion existence, rendering it harmless. The robots are

Owzat: The Krikkit robot army on the rampage...

now attempting to re-assemble the key to this Slo-Time field, an event Slartibartfast is desperately attempting to prevent.

Ford, in particular, is reluctant to help, but perks up when he hears that it will involve teleporting themselves to a party. Arthur, however, is somehow diverted en route and meets a creature named Agrajag whom he has inadvertently killed on multiple occasions. Agrajag tries to take his revenge but Arthur accidentally kills him once more, having first been told that someone will try to assassinate him in a place called Stavromula Beta.

Caught in a landslide as he makes his escape, Arthur trips and is surprised to find himself flying. He's having a great time until he crashes into the party, which is itself flying, thanks to some clever engineering and rather a lot of alcohol. Here he meets not just Ford and Slartibartfast but also Trillian and a man who's just won the Rory award for "Most Gratuitous Use of the Word 'Fuck' in a Serious Screenplay". However, the Krikkit robots soon arrive and steal the trophy.

The robots have now collected all they need to free themselves from the time-warp by reassembling the Wikkit Gate key. Marvin's leg, the reconstituted Ashes and the Agrabuthon Sceptre of Justice comprise its stumps; its bails are the heart of the Infinite Improbability Drive and the Rory award.

Our protagonists decide there is now no other way of stopping the robots but to take the extremely dangerous step of visiting the planet of Krikkit itself. To their terror, they are discovered almost as soon as they arrive. Rather than exterminating them, however, the Krikkitmen are simply keen to chat. They mention that they have a bomb capable of destroying the whole of existence, but don't seem particularly keen to use it.

Trillian realizes that some greater power has been behind the Krikkit robots all along. It transpires that an ancient computer named Hactar has not been destroyed, as previously believed, but merely reduced to smithereens – its component parts actually constituting the dust cloud around Krikkit. Hactar has been deliberately nurturing Krikkit's population in the hope that one day they would demand of it the supernova bomb that it once built but deliberately sabotaged, a decision it subsequently regretted.

At the same time, Zaphod finds the wreckage of the spaceship that fell through the planet's dust cloud, starting the Krikkit Wars in the first place, and realizes that it's a fake. He also discovers Marvin, hooked up to the Krikkit War Computer and therefore responsible for the apathy that's spread through the robots (and saved Zaphod's life). Admitting its guilt, Hactar's particles fade away and the Universe is saved – although Arthur very nearly destroys it when an ill-advised trip back to Lord's almost sets off the supernova bomb.

In the epilogue, the protagonists meet a character called Prak, who has been given an excessive dose of a truth drug. However, their hopes that he will reveal "the Question to the Ultimate Answer" are crushed when Prak explains that the Question and the Answer cannot both be known in the same Universe. Instead, he tells them where to find God's last message to his creation but Arthur decides to ignore this message, instead opting to live a quiet life on the now becalmed Krikkit. He passes the time flying and talking to birds before realizing that most of their conversation is actually very dull.

Book Four: So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish

The shortest and weakest *Hitchhiker's* novel is, to a large degree, the story of a girl sitting in a café in Rickmansworth and her relationship with Arthur Dent. Apart from the odd appearance from Ford, the other main *Hitchhiker's* characters barely feature.

The girl's name is Fenchurch, and Arthur meets her upon his return to Earth after eight years of inter-galactic hitchhiking – although, confusingly, only six months seem to have passed at home. More confusing still, despite having arrived back after the date when he knows the Vogons destroyed the planet, Earth is still in existence.

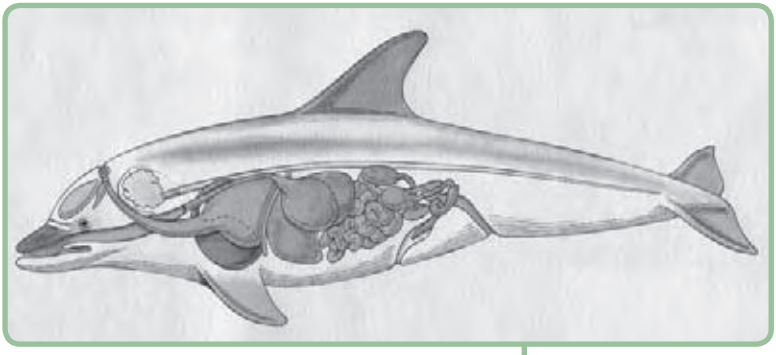
Though rumours persist of a mysterious CIA agent found floating in a reservoir, all talk of yellow spaceships and world destruction has been put down to mass hallucination. The sole exception seems to be Fenchurch, who continues to insist that she witnessed a huge explosion. As a result, everyone thinks she's mad. Arthur, however, simply feels an instant and very powerful attraction towards her that goes beyond the fact that she's the first female of his own species he's set eyes on for several years.

He attempts to explain to Fenchurch that they are somehow enormously important to one another, but with little success. They lose contact and Arthur sits around at home in a state of abject depression, slightly perplexed by the presence in his bedroom of a fishbowl, engraved with the words "So Long and Thanks". Deciding that he needs a project to lift his spirits, he tries to pinpoint, via computer, the exact location of the pre-historic cave in which he

used to live (in *Life, the Universe and Everything*). He knocks on the door – and, to his amazement, it's answered by Fenchurch.

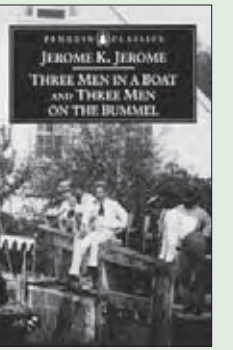
This time, things go rather better between them. In fact, this is by some margin the soppiest section of the whole *Hitchhiker's* saga. Several pages pass with Arthur and Fenchurch simply kissing, cuddling and, most nauseatingly, listening to Dire Straits. Fenchurch tells Arthur of her Rickmansworth café experience, when she witnessed what she believes to have been the explosion of Earth. She also says that all dolphins disappeared at that exact moment. In return, Arthur teaches her to fly.

When their airborne romance starts attracting tabloid attention, the pair travel to California to meet a man named Wonko the Sane, reputed to be able to explain the disappearance of the dolphins. In his house, a curious building known as "Outside the Asylum", Arthur spots a fishbowl identical to the one he found in his house – and discovers that Fenchurch had one too. Wonko explains that

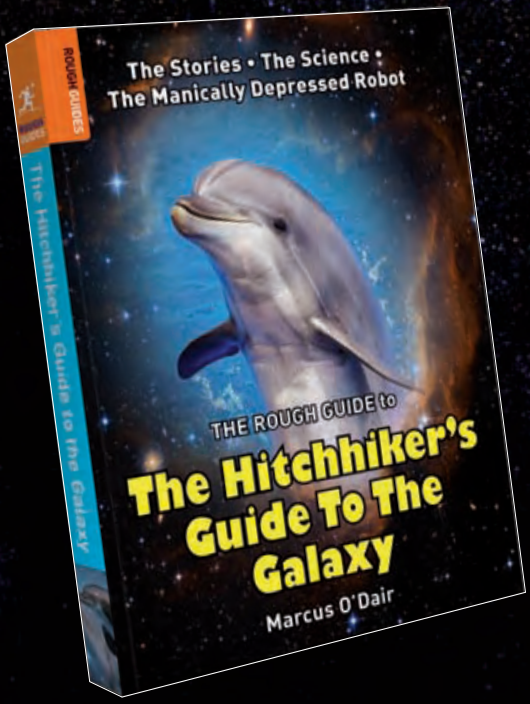


Dolphins: the second most intelligent creatures on planet Earth … after the mice of course.

Three Men in a Boat



Of the books to which *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* might be compared, one which stands out is *Three Men in a Boat* by Jerome K. Jerome (1859–1927). Published in 1889, this is the story of three men dealing with what might nowadays be called a mid-life crisis by taking a boating trip along the Thames between Kingston and Oxford. Although not a direct or acknowledged influence, it has much in common with *Hitchhiker's*. Both are seen as quintessentially British, sharing a sense of humour based on misunderstandings, misconceptions, pretentiousness, manners and mockery, ranging from the subtle to the brutal. Although *Three Men in a Boat* is firmly rooted in the Victorian era, while *Hitchhiker's* begins in the late 1970s, the comedy remains timeless. In terms of style, the writing of both authors is educated and intelligent, while still being easily readable. The characters of *Three Men in a Boat* – J and his friends Harris and George – have much in common with Arthur and his companions. Disorganized, easily distracted and troubled by non-specific discontent, they don't really know what ails them, so they can't identify a solution: a recurring theme throughout *Hitchhiker's*. Yet in spite of their ongoing, towering incompetence, they muddle through – a very British way of doing things. Arthur Dent would probably be quite happy in their company.



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Don't panic!

This new **Rough Guide** explores the ever-expanding universe created by Douglas Adams. A must-have companion for both long-term enthusiasts and those discovering the **Hitchhiker's** stories for the first time. Features include:

- A lightspeed crib of the stories so far.
- Everything you need to know about the saga's numerous incarnations: books, TV show, movie, radio series and more.
- Coverage of key Hitchhiker's concepts and plot devices: tea, cricket, towels and small yellow fish.
- The stories behind all your favourite characters: Ford, Arthur, Zaphod and, of course, Marvin.
- The life and times of Douglas Adams: his influences, passions and an overview of his other works.
- Details of online resources, including the lowdown on the official fanclub, "ZZ9 Plural Z Alpha".

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