The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DOUGLAS ADAMS

Douglas Adams grew up in England, eventually receiving a scholarship to attend St. John's College in Cambridge. He developed his talent as a writer early in life, impressing his teachers and peers with his humorous stories, poems, and essays. After graduating college, he lived in London and aspired to write for radio and television programs. Before long, he began to collaborate with Graham Chapman of *Monty Python* fame, helping Chapman write an episode for the show. After this period, he had trouble finding work as a writer, so he moved back into his mother's house. While living there, he continued to write and pitch ideas to various media outlets, but very few of his submissions were accepted. During this time, he became rather depressed about his prospects as an artist and his ability as a writer. Fortunately, it wasn't long before BBC Radio 4 agreed to run *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as a radio series. Based on the great success of this series, Adams wrote sequels and accompanying materials, eventually using the idea to write a series of five novels that came out between 1980 and 1992. After marrying his wife and having a daughter at the age of 42, Adams and his family moved to California, where he died of a heart attack seven years later.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Douglas Adams wrote *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as a radio series for BBC Radio 4, it was 1977—only eight years after the first moon landing. Naturally, then, the idea of space travel was still quite exciting, something that was very much part of the cultural conversation swirling throughout the decade. The fact that the piece was first realized as a radio broadcast is also worth mentioning because of the nature of its genre. Indeed, radio-format science fiction stories no doubt pay a tribute to the infamous 1938 broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*, in which the actor Orson Welles presented a fictional account as if it were true, informing listeners of an alien invasion and ultimately throwing the general public into panic. Given that *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* opens with the comedic alien invasion—and subsequent destruction—of earth, it seems likely that Douglas Adams wanted to humorously recall the initial broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is the first book in Douglas Adams's series of five novels tracing Arthur Dent's journey through space. The second installation is called *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, and it picks up where *The Hitchhiker's Guide* leaves off, following Arthur and his friends as they leave Magrathea and head for a "quick bite" at—of course—the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. In addition, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* shares certain thematic elements with Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, which also draws upon space travel and a number of invented theories that enable characters to make fantastical advances. It's also worth noting the similarities between *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which is—like *The Hitchhiker's Guide*—a work of science fiction about aliens that was first presented as a radio broadcast.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
- **When Written:** 1977
- **When Published:** *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* first appeared as a radio series in 1978. The book was then published in 1979.
- **Literary Period:** Post-modernism.
- **Genre:** Science fiction
- **Setting:** Outer space
- **Climax:** After learning that Trillian's pet mice are actually hyperintelligent beings who want to extract his brain, Arthur hastily escapes the planet of Magrathea.
- **Antagonist:** At various points in the novel, the Vogons are the chief antagonistic force. At other points, Benjy Mouse and Frankie Mouse assume this role.
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. In 2005, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was made into a movie starring a number of well-known actors, including Mos Def, Martin Freeman, Zooey Deschanel, Sam Rockwell, John Malkovich, and Helen Mirren.

Inspiration. Douglas Adams supposedly had the idea to write *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* one night while backpacking in Austria. Apparently, he was drunkenly falling asleep and thinking about the travel book he'd brought, *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to Europe*, when he decided it would be funny to write a guidebook for the galaxy.

PLOT SUMMARY

Arthur Dent wakes up hungover one day and notices construction machinery stationed outside his house. Slowly, he recalls what he learned the previous evening: his house is set to be demolished to make way for a new bypass. Rushing outside, he confronts Mr. Prosser, the construction foreman, by lying in front of his bulldozer. Prosser tries to convince him to stop, pointing out that Arthur could have objected to the plans when they were first posted. However, Arthur maintains that he never even *knew* about the plans until yesterday evening, when he went to the local planning office to see where the notice was supposedly "displayed": "in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard.'"

As Arthur and Prosser argue, Arthur's friend Ford Prefect rushes onto his property and tries to convince him to come to the pub. Unbeknownst to Arthur, Ford is actually an alien who has been waylaid on earth for the past fifteen years. He first came to the planet to gather more information for an updated edition of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which traveling aliens use as a reference book. For now, though, Arthur thinks Ford is human, and he's surprised to hear that his friend wants to go to the pub so early in the day. Ford promises Arthur that he'll convince Prosser to refrain from knocking down his house. Indeed, he succeeds in doing this by using an absurd argument that ends with Prosser himself lying in front of the bulldozer as a substitute for Arthur.

At the pub, Ford tells Arthur to drink five pints of beer as fast as he can because the world is about to end. Nobody in the pub believes him, but Arthur guzzles down the booze anyway. Arthur doesn't know this, but Ford received a transmission last night on his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic, which told him that the Vogon alien race was approaching earth in huge spaceships. The Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic is one of many valuable items Ford Prefect always carries with him, including a towel (the most useful item for hitchhiking) and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which is a small electronic contraption that holds millions of pages that can be called up onscreen.

Soon enough, the Vogon spaceships arrive and make an announcement as they hover over earth: "*This is* Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz *of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council*," a voice says over a PA system. "*As you will no doubt be aware, the plans for development of the outlying regions of the Galaxy require the building of a hyperspatial express route through your star system, and regrettably your planet is one of those schedule for demolition.*" At this, everybody on earth begins to panic, so the voice returns and says: "*There's no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years, so you've had plenty of time to lodge any formal complaint and it's far too late to start making a fuss about it now.*" Not long thereafter, the spaceships "energize" their "demolition beams" and destroy the planet.

Meanwhile, Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed President of the Galaxy, prepares for a public appearance on a far-off planet. The purpose of this appearance is for Zaphod to reveal to the Galaxy a new spaceship called the **Heart of Gold**. Zaphod is excited to make this announcement, for he has a secret plan that will shock the Galaxy. Upon seeing the Heart of Gold, he says: "That is so amazingly amazing I think I'd like to steal it." With this, he sets off a bomb as a distraction and jumps into the Heart of Gold with his girlfriend, Trillian, who is a human traveling through space with her two pet mice.

Meanwhile, Arthur finds himself on the Vogon spaceship with Ford, who helped him stow away on the aircraft. Ford explains what has happened and tells Arthur to heed the advice written on the front of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: "Don't panic!" Nonetheless, Arthur begins to fret when Ford tells him that Vogons hate hitchhikers. To make things worse, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz comes onto the intercom and says that the ship is being searched for stowaways. When Ford and Arthur are discovered, they're taken to Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, who recites his poetry to them as a method of torture before throwing them into outer space.

According to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a person can hold their breath for approximately 30 seconds while hurdling through space, at which point he or she will die unless a passing spaceship happens to intercept him or her. The chances of this happening are 2^276,709 to 1 in favor of the person dying. Against these odds, though, Ford and Arthur are saved by the Heart of Gold, suddenly finding themselves inside the ship as their figures contort. For instance, Ford turns into a penguin and Arthur's limbs start drifting off. Ford realizes that he and his friend have been saved by a ship that uses an "Infinite Improbability Drive," something that enables a craft to cross "vast interstellar distances in a mere nothingth of a second" by manipulating the laws of improbability. This is why Ford and Arthur have been saved: the utter unlikeliness of their survival perfectly linked up with the Heart of Gold's Improbability Drive.

Before long, Ford and Arthur return to their normal forms, and Zaphod and Trillian send Marvin—a depressed robot—to fetch them. When they enter the main part of the spaceship, they discover that they all know each other. Zaphod and Ford are distant cousins, and Arthur knows Trillian from a party on earth, where he flirted with her until Zaphod—on vacation on earth—swept in and took her away with him.

Once everybody reacquaints themselves with one another, Zaphod explains that they are going to **Magrathea**, an ancient planet built by a race of beings who design custom-built planets. Ford, for his part, maintains that Magrathea is the stuff

of legends, insisting that nobody *actually* believes it ever existed. Nonetheless, Zaphod tells them that this is where they're headed, and before long, their spaceship picks up a broadcast from an approaching planet. The broadcast is an old recording that confirms that they are, in fact, entering the vicinity of Magrathea. The voice thanks them for their interest but says that "the entire planet is temporarily closed for business." When the Heart of Gold continues to approach, another message plays, asking them to leave. Finally, a third message informs them that there are now guided missiles pursuing their ship. Trying to steer away from the mayhem, the crew accidentally turns the ship upside-down, but Arthur has the good idea to hit the Infinite Improbability Drive, which turns the two missiles into a bowl of petunias and a sperm whale, respectively. Suddenly, the group finds themselves sitting at peace in an entirely different interior console, since the ship has changed as a result of their use of the Improbability Drive. Nonetheless, they're able to land, and Zaphod leads them out onto the planet's desolate surface.

While Zaphod, Trillian, and Ford descend into a hole in the planet made by the impact of the sperm whale—which fell from great heights—Arthur stands watch with Marvin, who, in his depressive state, decides to enter sleep mode. Walking down a passageway leading into the planet, Zaphod explains to Trillian and Ford that he doesn't always know why he's doing something. He admits that he *thinks* that he stole the Heart of Gold to find Magrathea, but that he can't be sure because his brain has been tampered with. "I freewheel a lot," he says, claiming that he simply follows his impulses as if he's carrying out somebody else's plan. Curious about this phenomenon, he studied his brain one night in the spaceship's medical bay. What he found was quite strange: "A whole section in the middle of both [of my] brains that related only to each other and not to anything else around them." Continuing, he says: "Some bastard had cauterized all the synapses and electronically traumatized those two lumps of cerebellum." That "bastard," Zaphod explains, must have been him, since his own initials—Z.B.—have been burned into his brain. He thinks that he must have purposefully hidden some sort of motive, because all incoming presidents are subject to a battery of brain tests. Since the government would have discovered his intentions during these tests, he blotted them out from his own brain. As he says this, he and his friends realize that they are in a room that is slowly filling with gas, at which point they all pass out.

Meanwhile, Arthur walks around above ground and bumps into an old man named Slartibartfast who drives him in a hover car to the center of Magrathea. On the way, he explains that the entire planet's population has just woken up from a long hibernation of sorts. "You see," he says, "five million years ago the Galactic economy collapsed, and seeing that custom-built planets are something of a luxury commodity…," he says, trailing off. Continuing, he says: "The recession came and we decided it would save a lot of bother if we just slept through it. So we programmed the computers to revive us when it was all over." However, they haven't woken up because the market has been revived, but because a race of "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" have commissioned them to build a very lucrative project. Slartibartfast explains that millions of years ago, these beings built a computer called Deep Thought and asked it to tell them the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." After 7,500,000 years of thinking, Deep Thought told them that the answer is 42. The computer then suggested—in response to the beings' confusion—that they don't actually understand the question they're asking, and so the hyperintelligent beings ordered Deep Thought to build *another* computer capable of explaining the question to them. This computer, Slartibartfast tells Arthur, was the planet earth, and the hyperintelligent beings oversaw the experiment by taking the form of mice and monitoring humans. The project was supposed to take 10,000,000 years, but the Vogons destroyed earth five minutes before the computer finished its task.

Because Arthur is the last human in existence who was present on earth right before it was destroyed, the mice want to tap into his brain—after all, the answer they seek might be imbedded in him, since he is an organic product of the supercomputer itself (earth). Slartibartfast takes Arthur to join his friends, where they sit down for lunch and talk to Trillian's mice, who escaped from their cage when the Heart of Gold was busy dodging Magrathea's missiles. The mice explain that they'd like to remove Arthur's brain to inspect it, and chaos ensues. During a struggle, alarms suddenly start to blare for no apparent reason, giving Arthur and his friends a chance to escape. After fighting several "cops," the gang zooms off in Slartibartfast's hover car, boards the Heart of Gold, and leaves Magrathea behind. As they zoom through space, they decide to grab a "quick bite" at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Arthur Dent – Arthur Dent is a British man who unknowingly escapes the destruction of earth with his alien friend, Ford Prefect. On the morning of earth's annihilation, Arthur wakes up with a hangover and learns that his house is about to be destroyed by a construction company. In the midst of arguing with the construction foreman, Mr. Prosser, about the project, he is whisked away by Ford, whom he thinks is—like him—an average human. However, he learns this isn't the case when he finds himself in the Vogon alien spaceship as a stowaway. Before long, the ship's commander, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, throws him (along with Ford) into space, thereby beginning his journey through the galaxy. Luckily, Arthur and Ford are saved by Zaphod Beeblebrox and Trillian's spaceship, the **Heart of Gold**. Strangely enough, Arthur recognizes Trillian, whom he

once flirted with at a party on earth. As Arthur travels with this group of aliens, he is at once easy-going and incredulous, accepting his new circumstances even as he struggles to comprehend the wonders of the galaxy.

Ford Prefect – Ford Prefect is an extraterrestrial being who landed on earth fifteen years before the planet's destruction. Ford is from "a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse," and is the distant cousin of the galaxy's president, Zaphod Beeblebrox. Somebody who enjoys a good time, Ford originally came to earth in order to gather new information on the planet for an updated edition of the reference book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Unfortunately for him, though, he hasn't been able to hitch a ride off the planet since he first arrived, since not very many aliens travel to earth. As such, he's happy when the Vogons destroy the planet, giving him a chance to board their ship as a stowaway with his human friend, Arthur, whom he kindly saves. As they embark upon this adventure through space, Ford helps Arthur stay calm by telling him about life away from earth, though he doesn't always give his poor human friend quite enough background information. To remedy this, he encourages Arthur to read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Zaphod Beeblebrox – Zaphod Beeblebrox is the two-headed president of the galaxy, and Ford Prefect's distant cousin. Zaphod is purposefully suited for the role of president. This is because the job requires a person who is "controversial," somebody who is both "infuriating" and "fascinating." By the opening of the novel, Zaphod has already spent "two of his ten presidential years in prison for fraud." Now, though, he's excited to steal the **Heart of Gold** spaceship, which he uses to find the planet of **Magrathea**—an ancient planet nobody believes ever truly existed. When Zaphod's girlfriend, Trillian, and Ford ask him why he wants to find Magrathea, he admits that he doesn't know, explaining that before he became president, Yooden Vranx—the former president—visited him and told him that he should set out on this mission. However, Zaphod doesn't know *why* Yooden wanted him to find Magrathea. This is because Zaphod went into his own brain and altered his memory so that the standard battery of psychological and neurological tests performed on incoming presidents wouldn't reveal his plans to the government. As a result, though, he's forced to blindly carry out some rather absurd jobs, though it's worth noting that this doesn't seem to bother him very much. Indeed, Zaphod is somebody who doesn't mind "freewheel[ing]," somebody who is either very stupid or surprisingly clever.

Trillian – Trillian is a woman from earth who left six months before the planet is destroyed by the Vogons. Trillian has "a degree in math and another in astrophysics," which is why she decided to travel to outer space: "what else was there to do" on earth? One night, while attending a party, she met Zaphod, who was paying earth a rare visit. On that same night, Arthur tried to flirt with her, but Zaphod approached and said, "Hey, doll, is this guy boring you? Why don't you talk to me instead? I'm from a different planet." Since then, she has been traveling with Zaphod. A voice of reason, she often critiques the "freewheel[ing]" president, pointing out errors in his thinking. Beyond this, she doesn't play a very large role in the novel, as Douglas Adams fails to incorporate her in the majority of the characters' conversations.

Slartibartfast – Slartibartfast is an old man who lives on **Magrathea**. Like his fellow Magratheans, Slartibartfast is a custom planet designer. More specifically, he designs fjords (narrow coastal inlets), and was actually the person who designed the coastlines and archipelagos of Norway. When Arthur encounters him after landing on Magrathea, he explains to him that he—along with everybody else on the planet—has been in hibernation for five million years, ever since the galaxy went into an economic recession. Now, though, he and the other planet designers have been awoken by the same "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" who have been experimenting on humans for the past ten million years. Hoping to complete their long-running project, these beings (who on earth took the form of mice) want the Magratheans to design a second earth. Slartibartfast explains all of this to Arthur before taking him in a hover car to meet the mice.

Mr. L. Prosser – Mr. Prosser is a British construction foreman on earth. Mr. Prosser is tasked with demolishing Arthur Dent's house to make way for a new bypass. Before he can do so, though, Arthur lies down in front of his bulldozer. A rather weak-willed man who is a (surprising) descendent of the fearless Genghis Khan, Prosser is unable to convince Arthur to move. In fact, he himself ends up lying in front of the bulldozer after Ford Prefect arrives and convinces him to take Arthur's place while he and Arthur go to the pub. Ford tricks him into doing this by pointing out that, if Prosser is planning on staying there all day and waiting for Arthur to move, then it should be "all the same" if Arthur isn't actually there. Not wanting to show his confusion, Prosser agrees to this, tentatively lying down in the mud and allowing Arthur and Ford to slink off to the pub.

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz – Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz is the commander of the Vogon spaceship that destroys earth. Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz is a "fairly typical Vogon in that he [is] thoroughly vile." What's more, he hates hitchhikers. After annihilating earth, he feels "vaguely irritable," as he always does after decimating a planet. As such, he's delighted to discover that Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect have jumped aboard as stowaways—now he can take out his feelings on these freeloaders. Upon finding them, he tortures them with his poetry)Vogon poetry, Adams informs readers, is considered the third worst in the galaxy). After he subjects Arthur and Ford to his terrible verse, he has them thrown into space.

Eddie – The **Heart of Gold**'s main computer, which pilots and generally controls the ship. Unlike Marvin, Eddie has a cheerful disposition. In fact, this robot is so optimistic and chatty that

Zaphod constantly insults it, telling it to shut up and even, at one point, changing it to the ship's "emergency back-up personality."

Lunkwill – A "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" who works as a programmer on a long-running project to find an answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." Lunkwill and his colleague Fook are the two programmers chosen to turn on Deep Thought, a supercomputer designed to provide them with the answer they seek. Like Fook, Lunkwill is overjoyed when Deep Thought indicates that there is, in fact, an answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." However, he's deeply disappointed to hear that it will take the computer 7,500,000 years to arrive at this answer.

Deep Thought – A supercomputer built by Lunkwill, Fook, and other "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings." When Deep Thought is finally up and running, these programmers ask it if it is the most advanced computer in the galaxy, and it tells them that it is the *second* most advanced. The most advanced computer, Deep Thought says, will be the one that comes next—the second version of Deep Thought. Moving on, Lunkwill and Fook ask Deep Thought to tell them the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." After confirming that there *is* an answer, Deep Thought informs them that it will take 7,500,000 years to come to a conclusion. This upsets Lunkwill and Fook, but it pleases Majikthise and Vroomfondel, two philosophers who want to continue arguing for generations about the meaning of life. After 7,500,000 years, Deep Thought finally reveals the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything" to Pouchg and Loonquawl (ancestral descendants of Lunkwill and Fook). The answer, Deep Thought upholds, is 42. When Pouchg and Loonqwual express their disappointment, Deep Thought suggests that they don't understand the answer because they don't truly understand the question they've asked in the first place. To help them comprehend this question, Deep Thought makes another computer (the next version of itself). This computer is the planet earth, and it will take 10,000,000 years to explain to them the question they so desperately want to understand. In the intervening time, the "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" live on the planet in the form of mice. Unfortunately, the Vogons annihilate earth five minutes before the conclusion of the project.

Yooden Vranx – The former president of the galaxy. When they were young, Zaphod and Ford met Yooden while raiding his ship, which was a heavily armored "megafreighter." Impressed by Zaphod's ability to get past the ship's security measures, Yooden welcomed them with "food and booze" before teleporting them directly to a maximum security prison. Later, when he was president, he came to Zaphod and told him to steal the **Heart of Gold** and find **Magrathea**. Unfortunately, though, Zaphod doesn't know why Yooden told him to do this, since Yooden is now dead. What's more, Zaphod has tampered with his own brain so that the memory is no longer clear. All he knows is that Yooden wanted him—for some reason—to find Magrathea.

Benjy Mouse – A "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" who has been living on earth in the form of a mouse. More specifically, Benjy has been on earth as one of Trillian's two pet mice. When Trillian left earth to travel with Zaphod, she brought Benjy and Frankie (her other mouse). Unbeknownst to her, Benjy and Frankie have been subtly manipulating her, and when the **Heart of Gold** lands on **Magrathea**, they escape. Eventually, Arthur and his friends learn that Benjy and Frankie want to extract his brain to study it, assuming that the answer to their long-running experiment on earth must be imbedded in his brain. Another reason Benjy and Frankie want to dissect Arthur's brain has to do with their desire to get rich and famous. Indeed, they have been offered the opportunity to give lectures about what they've discovered on earth, but they can't do this without the vital information in Arthur's brain. Rather than repeating the entire experiment—which would take another 10,000,000 years—they want to cash in on their efforts now. When they fail to steal his brain, though, they try to fabricate their findings.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Marvin – A depressed robot aboard the **Heart of Gold**. Like the other robots onboard, Marvin was designed with *GPP* features: Genuine People Personalities. This is why he's capable of feeling enough emotion to experience depression.

Fook – A programmer who helped build Deep Thought and who, along with Lunkwill, turns the supercomputer on for the first time.

Majikthise – A "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" who belongs to the Amalgamated Union of Philosophers, Sages, Luminaries and Other Thinking Persons. As a philosopher, Majikthise doesn't want Deep Thought to determine an answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything," arguing that the "eternal verities" belong to thinkers, not machines.

Vroomfondel – A "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" who belongs to the Amalgamated Union of Philosophers, Sages, Luminaries and Other Thinking Persons. As a philosopher, Vroomfondel doesn't want Deep Thought to determine an answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything," arguing that the "eternal verities" belong to thinkers, not machines.

Pouchg – A "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" who—along with his colleague, Loonquawl—asks Deep Thought to finally reveal the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." Pouchg is disappointed when Deep Thought says that the answer is 42. Arthur Dent watches a virtual recording of this moment while standing in Slartibartfast's office.

Loonquawl – Pouchg's colleague, a "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" trying to find out the answer to "Life, the

Universe and Everything" from Deep Thought.

Frankie Mouse – Benjy Mouse's colleague, a "hyperintelligent pandimensional being" who has been living on earth in the form of one of Trillian's pet mice.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEANINGLESSNESS AND HAPPINESS

Throughout *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a story about a human man named Arthur who hitchhikes through space, many characters try to find meaning in their lives and search for the significance of their own existences. As they focus on discerning the meaning of life, though, their happiness decreases, and their efforts to eke out an existential purpose ultimately prevent them from enjoying life. By illustrating many fruitless attempts to formulate an understanding of existence, Douglas Adams suggests that such lofty philosophical considerations often obscure the actual experience—and pleasure—of being alive in the first place. The most successful and happy people, he implies, are those who accept life as a nearly meaningless experience, something that just *is*. No matter how hard people (a word Adams uses even when referring to aliens) strive to understand life, they will seemingly never fully comprehend its supposed purpose. As such, Adams intimates that such considerations often produce little more than unnecessary agony, frustration, and confusion.

In the very first chapter, Adams prepares readers to contemplate the superficial ways that people assign meaning to otherwise arbitrary concepts. Describing Earth, he writes: "Most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn't the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy." The mere fact that humans spend most of their time proposing "solutions" to unhappiness indicates the extent to which they analyze the nature of their experience as living beings. Unable to discern what exactly is making them so unhappy, they attach meaning to something tangible: money. Adams's choice to call money "small green pieces of paper" emphasizes how absurd it is to superimpose meaning onto something as meaningless as a dollar bill, which is nothing more than "paper." By beginning the novel with this observation, Adams spotlights humanity's desperation to find things in life that carry symbolic weight. Unable to reach more profound answers about their own unhappy existences, people turn to their worldly possessions in order to alleviate their discontent. In the end, though, this does nothing to change the fact that they're unhappy. Instead of simply living their lives, they frantically grasp for meaning by investing themselves in material items that ultimately do nothing to address their discontent.

While humans try to alleviate their existential unhappiness in simple materialistic ways, other races in the galaxy work more directly to discern the meaning of life. Adams explains: "Millions of years ago a race of hyperintelligent pandimensional beings [...] got so fed up with the constant bickering about the meaning of life [...] that they decided to sit down and solve their problems once and for all." Determined to finally understand existence—its purpose, its underlying significance—they design a supercomputer called Deep Thought that is (at the time) the smartest computer in the galaxy. Unfortunately, Deep Thought takes 7,500,000 years to tell these beings the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." When the computer is finally ready to deliver the answer, the "hyperintelligent" beings rejoice, saying, "Never again will we wake up in the morning and think *Who am I? What is my purpose in life?* [...] For today we will finally learn once and for all the plain and simple answer to all these nagging little problems of Life, the Universe and Everything!" By showcasing this desire to finally answer vast existential questions, Adams demonstrates how obsessed seemingly all living beings can become with finding meaning. Indeed, without an "answer" to their endless questions, these beings are "nag[ged]" by the "problems of life." Rather than approaching life as something that doesn't necessarily *have* to mean anything, they agonize about the specific conditions of existence.

Despite the determination of these "hyperintelligent" beings to pinpoint the meaning of life, Adams demonstrates the absurdity of thinking that there's a "plain and simple answer" to something as complicated as existence. He does this by providing an answer that is so simple it ridicules the very notion that *any* response could ever help somebody understand the meaning of life. Indeed, the "answer" to "Life, the Universe and Everything," Deep Thought asserts, is the number 42. This is an ironic moment, since the "hyperintelligent" beings clearly see life as so complicated that they need a supercomputer to understand it. Deep Thought's answer, though, is simple—so simple that the beings who asked the question can't even discern how it relates to anything at all. In this way, Adams emphasizes the pointlessness of obsessing over such lofty existential questions. After all, even a simple and tangible answer doesn't do anything to help the "hyperintelligent" beings make sense of life.

Rather than giving up and embracing the idea that existence doesn't *need* to mean anything, the "hyperintelligent" beings

refuse to let go of their obsession. Deep Thought explains to them that the reason they don't understand the answer to life is because they don't truly understand the question they're asking. As such, they tell Deep Thought to build another computer that can explain this question to them—this "computer" is the earth, and it will take 10,000,000 years to finish the problem. Without hesitation, the "hyperintelligent" beings embark upon this absurd project, dedicating millions of years to their ridiculous fixation. This, Adams implies, is the kind of monomania that overshadows life itself. These beings could simply accept that they'll never know the true meaning of life, but instead they waste time working toward an answer.

This obsession is worth juxtaposing with the lackadaisical attitude of Zaphod Beeblebrox, who's arguably the most content character in the novel. In fact, his girlfriend, Trillian, even begins "to suspect that the main reason he had had such a wild and successful life was that he never really understood the significance of anything he did." Rather than getting hung up on finding "significance," Zaphod simply takes life as it comes. Because of this, he has had a "successful" and enjoyable life, whereas the "hyperintelligent" beings have spent millions of wretched years hell-bent on studying existence. In turn, Adams shows that embracing a sense of insignificance and meaninglessness can actually help a person lead a happier life.

POWER AND CONTROL

The characters in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* frequently confront issues of power. For Arthur Dent, this means learning to accept that he is powerless against humanity's apathetic bureaucracies and even *more* powerless in the face of the alien races he encounters after earth is destroyed. Adams frames authority and power as abstract and inaccessible. In the same way that Arthur can do little to stop the state from destroying his house and building a bypass, he can do nothing to prevent the Vogon alien race from obliterating earth itself. Worse, he later learns that the entirety of human life has been an experiment manipulated by—of all creatures—mice. Although humans always believed *they* were the ones running tests on mice, it has apparently been the other way around: mice have been controlling all of humanity for 10,000,000 years. As such, Arthur suggests that true power over others comes when people don't even know the nature of their own oppression. Keeping power and authority hidden, he suggests, is the most effective way of subjugating a population.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy opens with a small-scale example of how people can gain authority over one another by making the engines of their own power appear vague or inaccessible. When Arthur Dent discovers that his house is about to be demolished to make way for a new bypass, it is already too late. This is because news of the construction project was made virtually inaccessible to him. "But Mr. Dent," Mr. Prosser, the foreman, says, "the plans have been available in the local planning office for the last nine months." In response, Arthur says: "Oh yes, well, as soon as I heard I went straight round to see them, yesterday afternoon. You hadn't exactly gone out of your way to call attention to them, had you? I mean, like actually telling anybody or anything." Mr. Prosser claims that the "plans were on display," but Arthur points out that the plans were "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.'" It becomes clear that whoever made the plan to demolish Arthur's house actively wanted to use the gears of bureaucracy to keep the project out of the public eye. As a result, Prosser is able to say that the plans have been "available" for "nine months," thereby intimating that Arthur is the one who is at fault for not being diligent enough to inform himself of the matter. In this way, Prosser gains the upper hand in their argument, despite the fact that Arthur has clearly been cheated. Completely unaware that his house is set to be torn down, he has had no time to prepare an argument, so the only thing he can in the moment is lie down in front of the bulldozer—a technique that, although effective in the short-term, is rather weak.

Unbeknownst to both Arthur and Prosser, there are other forces of power afoot that are greater than their own. They discover this when the Vogon alien race arrive in their large spaceships and hover above the earth, announcing that they're going to destroy the planet in order to build a "hyperspatial express route." In an argument similar to the one Arthur and Prosser have just had, the Vogons say: "There's no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years, so you've had plenty of time to lodge any formal complaint and it's far too late to start making a fuss about it now." In the same way that plans for the demolition of Arthur's house were hidden away so that he wouldn't be able to do anything to interfere, the Vogons have posted their "planning charts" on a planet that is inaccessible to humankind. As such, humanity hasn't even known to stand up for itself against the powerful Vogons. In turn, Adams illustrates that one party's ignorance can be another party's opportunity to assume power and control.

As if it isn't bad enough that Arthur has to come to terms with his home planet's annihilation, he soon learns that humankind has been under the control of another species for the entirety of its existence. When he goes to the planet **Magrathea**, an old luxury-planet designer named Slartibartfast explains to him that mice—who are actually a "hyperintelligent" race of "pandimensional beings"—have been experimenting on humans. Unsurprisingly, Arthur finds this ridiculous, trying to explain to Slartibartfast that *humans* are the ones who have been experimenting on *mice*. "Such subtlety," Slartibartfast muses, continuing by saying: "How better to disguise their real

natures, and how better to guide your thinking. Suddenly running down a maze the wrong way, eating the wrong bit of cheese, unexpectedly dropping dead of myxomatosis. If it's finely calculated the cumulative effect is enormous." By saying this, Slartibartfast reveals that mice have been purposefully deceiving humans as a way of gaining power over them. Similar to how Arthur Dent didn't know his house was in danger and thus was unable to fight the plans, humans have gone through life completely unaware of the fact that they are under the control of mice. In fact, they've considered themselves to be the ones in power, thereby deepening their ignorance of their own helplessness. Once again, then, Adams shows how effective it is to hide the engines of power. In an ironic twist, though, the mice are so preoccupied with their experiment that they fail to take note of the Vogons' "planning charts," which indicated that earth will be destroyed. As such, their 10,000,000-year experiment on earth is laid to waste when the planet is demolished, and they become victims of the very same kind of power tactic that they themselves used to control humankind: obfuscation.

IMPROBABILITY, IMPOSSIBILITY, AND ABSURDITY

In *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the galaxy is a place where seemingly anything can happen. In fact, Adams goes out of his way to upend readers' expectations about storytelling. To do this, he bases one of the novel's most important plot points on a spaceship that operates according to improbability, impossibility, and coincidence. Although he goes through the motions of explaining how the spaceship's "Improbability Drive" functions, his explanation relies heavily on unfamiliar concepts that force readers to move through the novel without a complete scientific—or even logistical—understanding of the very components that drive the story. As such, he plays with the conventional narrative form, challenging the idea that fiction has to be plausible, realistic, or predictable. In doing so, he also allows readers to experience the same kind of surprise and disbelief that protagonist Arthur Dent undergoes when he first leaves Earth and learns about aliens. By employing utter absurdity, Adams puts readers in a position of incredulity and skepticism, effectively simulating Arthur's shock and advocating for open-mindedness in the face of even the most incomprehensible circumstances.

Adams creates a highly unlikely plot, one that tests the limits of readers' willingness to suspend their disbelief. For instance, when earth is destroyed by the Vogon alien race, Ford Prefect and Arthur Dent become secret stowaways on the Vogon spaceship. However, it isn't long until the Vogons find them and jettison them into space. Although the chances (according to Adams) are 2^276,709 to 1 in favor of them dying while free-floating in space, Arthur and Ford are intercepted by Zaphod's spaceship, **Heart of Gold**. This is because the spaceship uses something called the Infinite Improbability Drive, "a wonderful new method of crossing vast interstellar distances in a mere nothingth of a second." It's worth noting here that Adams uses an invented measure of time, a "nothingth of a second." Given that this made-up value is used to describe such a critical logistical detail—a detail that accounts for how the protagonists escape death—it's clear that Adams is not interested in enabling readers to understand the novel's internal logic.

What's more, Adams only adds to the confusion when he explains the concept of "infinite improbability." He writes: "The principle of generating small amounts of *finite* improbability by simply hooking the logic circuits of a Bambleweeny 57 Sub-Meson Brain to an atomic vector plotter suspended in a strong Brownian Motion producer (say a nice hot cup of tea) were of course well understood." However, he continues, physicists maintained that "*infinite* improbability" was "virtually impossible." But then one day a young student proved them wrong; "If, he thought to himself, [an infinite improbability] machine is a *virtual* impossibility, then it must logically be a *finite* improbability." This meant that "all" this student had to do to make an infinite improbability machine was "work out exactly how improbable it is, feed that figure into the finite improbability generator, give it a fresh cup of really hot tea…and turn it on!" At this point, the majority of readers most likely have stopped tracking Adams's pseudo-scientific explanations, since it's clear they're not meant to be taken seriously (after all, his comic tone immediately appears in words like "Bambleweeny" and when he suggests that such a machine should float in "a nice hot cup of tea"). And even if readers *have* followed Adams's logic, the explanation doesn't actually provide any insight into how an improbability machine works—the devices he mentions are fictional, and the explanation hinges on the student's sardonic interpretation of the term "virtually impossible," which makes the explanation more of a joke about language than an actual scientific answer. As such, "infinite improbability" remains an abstract concept.

As if it's not already clear that Adams doesn't intend for readers to understand the logic behind how Arthur and Ford are saved, Zaphod and Trillian decide to calculate just how improbable it was for their ship to intercept these two free-floating humanoids. When Trillian "punch[es] up the figures," she arrives at "two-to-the-power-of-Infinity-minus-one," which Adams admits is "an irrational number that only has a conventional meaning in Improbability Physics." Given that "Improbability Physics" isn't a real field, it becomes even more apparent that Adams wants to firmly situate the logic underlying *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in a highly fictional realm, one that can only be understood on its own terms. Considering that the novel's primary protagonist, Arthur, is an earthling hurdling through space, it's unsurprising that Adams wants to keep

readers from fully understanding how the elements they encounter function—he wants readers to experience the same kind of dumbfounded awe Arthur no doubt feels as he witnesses an entirely foreign reality. Indeed, the author encourages an extreme suspension of disbelief by making it impossible to fully follow the book's internal logic, which is itself concerned with working out the internal logic of the very idea of impossibility. In this circular way, Adams forces readers to approach the novel with an open-minded sense of wonder rather than with a rigid and literal-minded outlook.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPLORATION

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy often focuses on the pursuit of knowledge. Although Adams advocates for an acceptance of meaninglessness in the face of lofty existential questions, he also makes it clear that the *impulse* to explore such questions—to seek out knowledge—is a natural and inevitable part of being alive. In fact, he even suggests that this process of exploration and discovery is often more enticing than the act of actually settling on an answer. For example, the "hyperintelligent beings" that come to earth as mice are unrelenting in their efforts to understand the meaning of life, such that the very process of inquiry overtakes their aspirations to find definitive answers. Their philosophers are so wrapped up in contemplating life's questions that they try to stop their fellow beings from building a computer—Deep Thought—that will provide an answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." This is because they want to continue debating the answer, and they know that any conclusion will put an end to their otherwise endless deliberations. Fortunately for them, Deep Thought needs 7,500,000 years to find the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything," thereby giving them a chance to postulate their own theories. This delights them, as they rejoice at the opportunity to simply keep exploring the topic of life. In turn, Adams suggests that the pursuit of knowledge is an activity that people take part in for its own sake. Spotlighting the ways living beings engage in intellectual discourse, he ultimately emphasizes that the desire to explore new ideas is often greater than the desire to secure actual answers.

Just before the mice are about to ask Deep Thought to tell them the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything," Adams demonstrates that some people—especially those who have committed their lives to knowledge and exploration—don't actually want to hear such answers. This is made clear when two philosophers named Majikthise and Vroomfondel burst into the room and try to stop Deep Thought before he responds. "You just let the machines get on with the adding up, and we'll take care of the eternal verities, thank you very much," Majikthise says to one of the mice who built Deep Thought. "You want to check your legal position, you do, mate. Under law the Quest for Ultimate Truth is quite clearly the inalienable prerogative of your working thinkers. Any bloody machine goes and actually *finds* it and we're straight out of a job, aren't we? I mean, what's the use of our sitting up half the night arguing that there may or may not be a God if this machine only goes and gives you his bleeding phone number the next morning?" According to Majikthise, machines should be used to solve simple problems, like those that revolve around "adding up" various numbers. Because he has devoted his entire life to "sitting up half the night arguing" about grand unanswerable questions, he doesn't want Deep Thought to arrive at definitive conclusions about, for instance, the existence of God. Echoing this sentiment, his colleague adds: "That's right, we demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!" Of course, this is a rather humorous "demand," since "doubt and uncertainty" are by their very definitions vague and thus not "rigidly defined." But this is precisely what the philosophers want to preserve: the kind of vagueness that invites intellectual exploration.

The philosopher mice aren't the only characters in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* who avoid definitive answers while still pursuing knowledge. Indeed, Zaphod embarks upon an entire mission of exploration and discovery without even knowing what, exactly, he wants to get out of the experience. This is because he has gone into his own brain and rewired his synaptic network so that he won't know why he wants to become president of the galaxy, steal the **Heart of Gold** spaceship, and find **Magrathea**, an old planet nobody believes exists. "I freewheel a lot," he tells Arthur, Ford, and Trillian. "I get an idea to do something, and, hey, why not, I do it. I reckon I'll become President of the Galaxy, and it just happens, it's easy. I decide to steal this ship. I decide to look for Magrathea, and it all just happens." However, he doesn't know *why* he gets the "idea to do something." Wanting to get to the bottom of this, he eventually runs a battery of tests on himself and finds his own initials cauterized into his brain tissue, right where an alteration was made that essentially makes it impossible for him to determine why he wants to do the things he's doing. Because government officials run tests on the brain of any incoming president, Zaphod guesses that he purposefully altered himself so that no one would detect his plans to find Magrathea. As a result, though, he doesn't know why he wants to find Magrathea. And yet, he pushes onward, undeterred. As such, his quest to find the planet takes on its own significance, as he blindly follows his impulse toward investigation. Rather than seeing exploration as a means to an end, Zaphod allows the *process* of discovery to be an end in and of itself. In turn, Adams presents the process of exploration and discovery—and the pursuit of knowledge—as an experience that is worth indulging even when its underlying reasons aren't readily apparent.

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Many linguistic interactions in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* accentuate the inherent shortcomings of language. Moreover, the characters' failures to communicate effectively with one another demonstrate how difficult it can be to rely on language when trying to connect with others, especially when a conversation's participants are faced with navigating cultural differences. This is because cultural differences often manifest themselves in language. However, Adams doesn't simply frame language as something that is ineffectual and destined to fail. He also exemplifies the flexibility language can grant a person, showcasing the ways in which somebody can use intelligent rhetoric to his or her benefit. Through his examination of the ways in which people communicate, Adams challenges readers to avoid taking language for granted, ultimately suggesting that its idiosyncrasies are worth bearing in mind when trying to connect with others.

Communication, Adams intimates, is complex and unwieldy. Whereas one person might find a certain sentence harmless and unremarkable, that very same phrase might deeply offend somebody else. This is made overwhelmingly apparent in a conversation between Arthur and Slartibartfast. On his way out of Slartibartfast's office on the planet of **Magrathea**, Arthur mumbles a small aside, saying, "I seem to be having tremendous difficulty with my life-style." For Arthur, this sentence is nothing more than an idle observation about the fact that things haven't been going his way. However, Adams chooses to use this moment to illustrate that even banal sentiments like this one are subject to misinterpretation. "It is of course well known that careless talk costs lives," Adams notes, adding that "the full scale of th[is] problem is not always appreciated." Indeed, at the same exact instant that Arthur complains about his "life-style," a "freak wormhole" opens in space, carrying his sentence to a "distant galaxy" where two civilizations are teetering on the brink of war. Unfortunately, Arthur's sentence about his "life-style" translates—in this galaxy—into "the most dreadful insult imaginable." Since the leaders of the two opposing civilizations each think that the other has said this, they embark upon a long and bloody war. Of course, readers know that Arthur's statement is nothing more than a simple expression of mild discontent. However, in a different context, the very same words spark anger and violence. In this way, Adams shows that language and communication are both highly contextual and that "careless talk" can easily bring about disastrous circumstances.

Although Adams portrays language as unwieldy and potentially even dangerous, he also highlights the ways in which a person can harness linguistic flexibility and use it to his or her advantage. Ford Prefect, for instance, is a master at manipulating words when he wants to convince somebody to do something. When, for example, he needs to tell Arthur that the world is about to end, he finds himself having to trick Mr. Prosser—the construction foreman—into waiting to demolish his friend's house, otherwise Arthur won't feel comfortable coming with Ford to the pub, since he thinks he needs to continue lying in front of Prosser's bulldozer. Approaching Prosser, Ford asks him to assume that Arthur will continue lying in front of the machinery all day. Having established this, he then asks if Prosser's men are "going to be standing around all day doing nothing" if this happens. Prosser admits that this is likely. "Well," Ford concludes, "if you're resigned to doing that anyway, you don't actually need him to lie here all the time do you?" Rather hilariously, Prosser thinks about this and then admits that he doesn't "exactly *need*" Arthur to continue lying in front of the bulldozer. "So if you would just like to take it as read that he's actually here," Ford says, "then he and I could slip off down to the pub for half an hour. How does that sound?" Prosser says that this seems "perfectly reasonable," though Adams notes that the foreman is a bit confused. Ford then adds that if Prosser himself wants to "pop off for a quick one" when they return, he and Arthur would be happy to "cover" for him. "Thank you very much," says Prosser, who is suddenly confused. In this moment, Ford has completely turned Prosser around, confounding the man by acting as if he's trying to *help* him, not dupe him. By offering to "cover" for Prosser later on, he puts himself in the position of doing him a favor, which forces Prosser to assume the role of somebody who should be grateful, not bitter. This, Adams suggests, is how somebody can influence an interaction. By making use of the instability of linguistic communication, Ford manages to get what he wants.

Whether or not somebody uses language to gain control over a situation, it's clear that communication emerges in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as inherently idiosyncratic. Indeed, Arthur often finds it difficult to communicate with the people he meets in space. For the most part, this is because these people are from other planets, which means they have different ways of connecting with others. Ford, on the other hand, is a seasoned hitchhiker who has been to many planets. As such, he knows how to talk to people from different cultures, rendering him a deft and competent communicator. In other words, he is well-acquainted with the fact that cross-cultural communication is rather peculiar and unpredictable. This aligns with Adams's general outlook—language is unstable, but this is simply a fact of life. When Arthur's "life-style" comment sets off an enormous war, Adams notes: "Those who study the complex interplay of cause and effect in the history of the Universe say that this sort of thing is going on all the time, but that we are powerless to prevent it. 'It's just life,' they say." The fact that people are "powerless to prevent" miscommunication and misunderstandings suggests that the unwieldiness of language isn't worth worrying about. Rather, Adams insinuates that people ought to embrace problems of communication and—when possible—use language to their benefit.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MAGRATHEA

The planet of Magrathea comes to stand for the kind of merciless greed that all too often plagues civilizations. Magrathea is an ancient planet populated by a species that made itself rich by designing custom-built luxury planets for wealthy clients. This market first arose when the Galactic economy was booming. As a result of the thriving market, almost everybody became quite rich. However, this unfortunately caused people to feel "rather dull and niggly," thereby prompting them to examine their lives. What they determined when they turned a critical eye on their existences was that they weren't happy with their home planets, so they started commissioning Magratheans to build them new ones that would satisfy their newly unquenchable desires. In this way, the planet also represents the ways in which wealth can corrupt happiness by providing people with the opportunity to endlessly pursue lives that seem—but aren't necessarily—better than the ones they're currently leading. Perfectly willing to exploit this niche market, the people of Magrathea set to work, eventually becoming so financially successful that they inadvertently threw the rest of the Galaxy into "abject poverty." Because nobody could afford their services anymore, the Magratheans decided to hibernate until the economy regained its strength. This, of course, is a somewhat unethical decision, one that suggests Magratheans only care about money and not the wellbeing of individuals throughout the Galaxy.

THE HEART OF GOLD

Because the Heart of Gold spaceship is powered by the "Infinite Improbability Drive," it naturally represents the strange and "improbable" things that happen in life and, of course, the novel itself. As Trillian and Zaphod fly through space in this aircraft, they try to calculate the measures of improbability that fuel the ship, but they find themselves unable to do so because they eventually arrive at an "irrational number that only has a conventional meaning in Improbability Physics." In this way, the notion of improbability in the novel remains abstract and unfathomable. In turn, readers' inability to fully grasp the logic underlying this central plot point forces them to proceed through the story with a certain suspension of disbelief. In this way, the Heart of Gold comes to represent not only improbability, but also the idea of accepting uncertainty.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* published in 1979.

Preface Quotes

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the Western Spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small unregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-eight million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.

This planet has—or rather had—a problem, which was this: most of the people living on it were unhappy for pretty much of the time. Many solutions were suggested for this problem, but most of these were largely concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper, which is odd because on the whole it wasn't the small green pieces of paper that were unhappy.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening words of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. By framing Earth as an "utterly insignificant little blue-green planet" with a "small unregarded yellow sun," Douglas Adams encourages his readers to divorce themselves from their humanly attachments to the world. This ultimately prepares readers for a novel that ventures far from earth, one that requires a certain open-mindedness. What's more, Adams portrays humans themselves as unimpressive animals, calling them "ape-descended life forms" that are "amazingly primitive." When he suggests that humans are strangely fascinated with "digital watches," he insinuates that their standards of excellence and innovation are quite low and unimaginative. It is perhaps because of this sheltered attitude that humans are "unhappy for pretty much of the time." However, they are also unable to alleviate this discontent because they're incapable of thinking outside the box—they can't manage to transcend the shortcomings of their own existence. As such, they focus on arbitrary things like the flow of money, which has nothing to do with their existential misery (other than the fact that this superficial fixation most likely exacerbates their lack of fulfilment).

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ The word *bulldozer* wandered through his mind for a moment in search of something to connect with.

The bulldozer outside the kitchen window was quite a big one.

He stared at it.

"Yellow," he thought, and stomped off back to his bedroom to get dressed.

Passing the bathroom he stopped to drink a large glass of water, and another. He began to suspect that he was hung over. Why was he hung over? Had he been drinking the night before? He supposed that he must have been. He caught a glint in the shaving mirror. "Yellow," he thought, and stomped on to the bedroom.

Related Characters: Mr. L. Prosser, Arthur Dent (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Arthur Dent wanders around his house with a hangover. As he slowly pieces together his memory of the night before, he vacantly takes note of the bulldozer standing outside his house. Despite the fact that he sees the machine and even comments on it by muttering the words "bulldozer" and "yellow" to himself, he doesn't actually register the fact that his house is about to be demolished by a fleet of construction vehicles. When Adams notes that the word "bulldozer" "wander[s] through his mind" "in search of something to connect with," he calls attention to the strange ways in which humans use and conceive of language. Indeed, labeling something doesn't always help a person *understand* whatever it is he or she is trying to comprehend. This is a perfect example of such a phenomenon, as the word "bulldozer" does nothing to remind Arthur of what's about to happen to his house. The unreliability of language is an important concept to keep in mind throughout *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, since the novel is interested in uncovering the ways in which knowing an answer sometimes doesn't help a person actually understand anything at all.

❝ Bypasses are devices that allow some people to dash from point A to point B very fast while other people dash from point B to point A very fast. People living at point C, being a point directly in between, are often given to wonder what's so great about point A that so many people from point B are so keen to get there, and what's so great about point B that so many people from point A are so keen to get there. They often wish that people would just once and for all work out where the hell they wanted to be.

Related Characters: Mr. L. Prosser, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adams provides a description of a bypass in order to fully explain why Arthur Dent's home is about to get demolished by a construction company working for the local planning council. By providing such a literal and detailed definition of an otherwise mundane and simple thing, Adams invites readers to see the trivial whims of humankind. This is a species, he reveals, that is never content, that will never be able to decide "once and for all" "where the hell they want to be." Instead, humans are fickle beings who—in an attempt to find happiness, or satisfaction, or fulfillment—embark on large projects that will enable them to keep themselves busy. This, Adams suggests, never makes much of a difference, since people will seemingly always want to be elsewhere.

"But Mr. Dent, the plans have been available in the local planning office for the last nine months."

"Oh yes, well, as soon as I heard I went straight round to see them, yesterday afternoon. You hadn't exactly gone out of your way to call attention to them, had you? I mean, like actually telling anybody or anything."

"But the plans were on display..."

"On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them."

"That's the display department."

"With a flashlight."

"Ah, well, the lights had probably gone."

"So had the stairs."

"But look, you found the notice, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Arthur, "yes I did. It was 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.'"

Related Characters: Arthur Dent, Mr. L. Prosser

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Arthur and Mr. Prosser as Arthur lies in front of a bulldozer in a desperate attempt to protect his house from getting demolished. The local planning council's plans to build a bypass in place of Arthur's house, Prosser explains, have been "on display" for "the last nine months." However, Arthur points out that the "display department" is in a basement with no lights, and that the actual plans have been rotting in "the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard.'" In this moment, Adams mocks the utter inefficiency of bureaucracy, illustrating the absurd ways in which governmental departments go about their daily business. What's more, it becomes clear that the local planning council isn't simply incompetent, but actively malicious. This is made evident by the fact that the council seems to have purposefully *hid* the plans from people like Arthur, rendering it impossible for anybody to object to and potentially thwart their plans. By putting this kind of bureaucratic power move on display, Adams shows readers that keeping people in the dark enables others to take advantage of them.

"So all your men are going to be standing around all day doing nothing?"

"Could be, could be..."

"Well, if you're resigned to doing that anyway, you don't actually need him to lie here all the time do you?"

"What?"

"You don't," said Ford patiently, "actually need him here."

Mr. Prosser thought about this.

"Well, no, not as such..." he said, "not exactly *need*..."

Prosser was worried. He thought that one of them wasn't making a lot of sense.

Ford said, "So if you would just like to take it as read that he's actually here, then he and I could slip off down to the pub for half an hour. How does that sound?"

Related Characters: Arthur Dent, Mr. L. Prosser, Ford Prefect

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

During this exchange, Ford attempts to convince Mr. Prosser to refrain from knocking down Arthur's house if he and his friend leave the construction site to have some beer at a nearby pub. The only reason Mr. Prosser hasn't already driven his machinery into Arthur's house is because Arthur has started lying down in front of his bulldozer. Obviously, then, he should be able to begin his work as soon as Arthur leaves. However, Ford uses his linguistic skills to confuse the slow-thinking foreman, ultimately persuading him into believing that he doesn't "actually need" Arthur to continue lying in front of the bulldozer. Although Ford's argument makes little sense, he delivers it as if he's proposing a logical conclusion. In other words, he assumes the posture of somebody who is reasonable, when in reality he is trying to

trick Prosser. The fact that this tactic works reinforces the notion that Adams wants to portray language as slippery and malleable. Using Ford as an example, the author demonstrates how easily somebody can control another person if he or she knows how to effectively use language to his or her benefit.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Ford was very kind—he gave the barman another five-pound note and told him to keep the change. The barman looked at it and then looked at Ford. He suddenly shivered: he experienced a momentary sensation that he didn't understand because no one on Earth had ever experienced it before. In moments of great stress, every life form that exists gives out a tiny subliminal signal. This signal simply communicates an exact and almost pathetic sense of how far that being is from the place of his birth. On Earth it is never possible to be farther than sixteen thousand miles from your birthplace, which really isn't very far, so such signals are too minute to be noticed. Ford Prefect was at this moment under great stress, and he was born six hundred light-years away in the near vicinity of Betelgeuse.

The barman reeled for a moment, hit by a shocking, incomprehensible sense of distance. He didn't know what it meant, but he looked at Ford Prefect with a new sense of respect, almost awe.

Related Characters: Arthur Dent, Ford Prefect

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, the bartender who has just served Ford and Arthur finally realizes that Ford is telling the truth: the world is about to end. This passage has two primary functions. First, it shows readers that Ford is an extremely unique person on Earth—not only is he from another planet, he "was born six hundred light-years away." Second, the strange "signal" that Ford inadvertently sends to the bartender "shock[s]" the man and makes him "reel for a moment," but then it gives him a "new sense of respect" and "awe" for Ford. As such, Adams demonstrates to readers that it isn't impossible to establish meaningful connections with beings from even the most far-off planets. Indeed, Ford and this stranger share an intimate moment despite the fact that they have very little common experience to draw upon.

❝ *"This is Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council," the voice continued. "As you will no doubt be aware, the plans for development of the outlying regions of the Galaxy require the building of a hyperstpatial express route through your star system, and regrettably your planet is one of those scheduled for demolition. The process will take slightly less than two of your Earth minutes. Thank you."*

The PA died away.

Uncomprehending terror settled on the watching people of Earth. […]

"There's no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years, so you've had plenty of time to lodge any formal complaint and it's far too late to start making a fuss about it now."

Related Characters: Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

In stark contrast to the tender connection that Ford and the bartender momentarily establish in the bar just minutes before the Vogons arrive, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz proves himself unable or unwilling to empathize with humankind's terror regarding the fact that the Earth is about to be destroyed. Of course, this is partially because he is a petty and bureaucratic being, somebody who has no pity for those who don't consult "planning charts and demolition orders" in their "local planning department." At the same time, though, it's rather ridiculous to claim that "Alpha Centauri"—which is 4.37 lightyears from the sun—is "local" to Earth. In turn, Adams draws a parallel between the Vogons and the government officials planning to tear down Arthur's house. In both cases, the antagonists have hidden their plans so that the people they're trying to oppress are unable to stand up for themselves.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ The President in particular is very much a figurehead—he wields no real power whatsoever. He is apparently chosen by the government, but the qualities he is required to display are not those of leadership but those of finely judged outrage. For this reason the President is always a controversial choice, always an infuriating but fascinating character. His job is not to wield power but to draw attention away from it. […] Very very few people realize that the President and the Government have virtually no power at all, and of these few people only six know whence ultimate power is wielded.

Related Characters: Zaphod Beeblebrox

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Douglas Adams includes this information regarding the nature of the galactic presidency in a footnote, explaining that Zaphod is a perfect person to rule the galaxy because he is highly "controversial." Indeed, he is a master of "finely judged outrage," as made clear when he eventually steals the Galaxy's most coveted spaceship and sets off on his own, leaving behind his duties in order to find a planet that nobody believes actually exists. The reason that these antics make somebody like Zaphod a good president is that they "draw attention away from" where power really lies. Although Adams doesn't reveal who, exactly, *is* in charge, this notion reinforces the idea that the most effective kind of power is the kind about which nobody knows. In the same way that Arthur can't do anything about the destruction of his house because he didn't know of the government's plan to demolish it, nobody in the Galaxy can challenge authority because they don't know who truly "wield[s]" it.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ 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?* At first Ford had formed a theory to account for this strange behavior. If human beings don't keep exercising their lips, he thought, their mouths probably seize up. After a few months' consideration and observation he abandoned this theory in favor of a new one. If they don't keep on exercising their lips, he thought, their brains start working. After a while he abandoned this one as well as being obstructively cynical and decided he quite liked human beings after all, but he always remained desperately worried abut [sic] the terrible number of things they didn't know about.

Related Characters: Ford Prefect

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adams pokes fun of the human tendency to speak without having anything to say. Because Ford is from a different planet, he's able to observe human communication in an objective and unbiased manner. When he conjectures that humans' brains "start working" if they stop talking, Adams insinuates that the vast majority of communication on Earth is completely vapid and ineffectual. By setting forth these humorous theories, Adams encourages readers to step back and consider both the social and linguistic habits humans have formed in everyday life. In turn, this exercise enables readers to understand why—later in the novel—Arthur often has trouble communicating with beings from other planets.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Now it is such a bizarrely improbable coincidence that anything so mind-bogglingly useful could have evolved purely by chance that some thinkers have chosen to see it as a final and clinching proof of the non-existence of God.

"The argument goes something like this: 'I refuse to prove that I exist,' says God, 'for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing.'

" 'But,' says Man, 'the Babel fish is a dead give-away, isn't it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don't. [...]'

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

" 'Oh, that was easy,' says Man, and for an encore goes on to prove that black is white and gets himself killed on the next pedestrian crossing."

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the virtual *Hitchhiker's Guide* reads out information about the "Babel Fish"—a fish that will translate foreign languages for whomever puts it in his or her ear. Adams uses this far-fetched idea to joke about both religion and atheism. On the one hand, he parodies God by framing him as the kind of being who would use backward logic to uphold lofty ideas about "faith." On the other hand, he satirizes the atheistic impulse to cling tightly to highly intellectual concepts in order to prove a point. Even though "Man" is speaking directly to God in this scene, he asserts that God *doesn't exist*. What's even more absurd is that Man's argument rests on an argument that God himself set forth. Nonetheless, this does little to stop Man from viewing the debate as nothing more than a philosophical argument. Similarly, even God treats this debate seriously, "vanish[ing] in a puff of logic" when he can't think of a way to best the ludicrous but rhetorically sound idea set forth by Man.

England no longer existed. He'd got that—somehow he'd got it. He tried again. America, he thought, has gone. He couldn't grasp it. He decided to start smaller again. New York has gone. No reaction. He'd never seriously believed it existed anyway. The dollar, he thought, has sunk for ever. Slight tremor there. Every Bogart movie has been wiped, he said to himself, and that gave him a nasty knock. McDonald's, he thought. There is no longer any such thing as a McDonald's hamburger.

He passed out. When he came round a second later he found he was sobbing for his mother.

Related Characters: Ford Prefect, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

When Arthur comes to his senses in the Vogon spaceship after Ford has rescued him, it takes him some time to wrap his head around the fact that Earth has been destroyed. First, Ford has to explain how they escaped. When he finally tells Arthur that his home planet has been decimated by the Vogons, the poor earthling naturally doesn't know what to make of the ghastly news. In this moment, though, he finally begins to comprehend the magnitude of what has just happened. Interestingly enough, he finds himself most moved by somewhat trivial concepts, like that "the dollar" has "sunk" forever. Indeed, when he considers this, he feels a "slight tremor," an indication of the extent to which humans emotionally invest themselves in the idea of money and wealth.

What really strikes a chord, though, is that "there is no longer any such thing as a McDonald's hamburger." A leader in the capitalist world of fast food—and, arguably, beyond—McDonald's is something tangible, something that humans like Arthur have valued for years. This, it seems, is what he mourns the most: the fact that his home economy has been erased from the universe. This sadness regarding money and capitalism makes perfect sense, considering Adams's previous assertion that humans have long focused on money as a way of alleviating their unhappiness. Now that the "dollar" has "sunk" and McDonald's no longer exists, Arthur can no longer look to economic measures of prosperity to find meaning in life, a fact that distresses him so much that he passes out and wakes up "sobbing for his mother."

Chapter 7 Quotes

"Yes, do continue…" invited the Vogon.

"Oh…and, er…interesting rhythmic devices too," continued Arthur, "which seemed to counterpoint the…er…er…" he floundered.

Ford leaped to his rescue, hazarding "…counterpoint the surrealism of the underlying metaphor of the…er…" He floundered too, but Arthur was ready again.

"…humanity of the…"

"*Vogonity*," Ford hissed at him.

"Ah yes, Vogonity—sorry—of the poet's compassionate soul"—Arthur felt he was on a homestretch now—"which contrives through the medium of the verse structure to sublimate this, transcend that, and come to terms with the fundamental dichotomies of the other"—he was reaching a triumphant crescendo—"and one is left with a profound and vivid insight into…into…er…" (which suddenly gave out on him). Ford leaped in with the coup de grace:

"Into whatever it was the poem was about!" he yelled.

Related Characters: Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, Ford Prefect, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

After Arthur and Ford are found in their hiding place on the Vogon ship, they are brought to Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, who subjects them to his awful poetry. After reading them a passage from one of his verses—a passage littered with strange words and unintelligible sounds—he gives the stowaways a choice: they can either be thrown off the ship, where they will surely die, or they can tell him how much they liked his poem. This is why they try so hard to string together a response, grasping desperately for something to say. In doing so, they rely heavily on phrases common in the field of literary analysis. For instance, they suggest that Prostetnic's "rhythmic devices" "counterpoint the surrealism of the [poem's] underlying metaphor." The problem with their analysis, though, is that they don't actually have anything worth saying. As such, they dress up their diction, speaking in grandiose language in order to avoid the fact that they don't know what Prostetnic's poem meant. Finally, when they are hardly able to continue, Ford pronounces that the poem leaves the listener with "vivid insight" into "whatever it was the poem was about." In turn, Adams makes fun of the attempt to analyze literature in such lofty ways, parodying the way critics often over-intellectualize something by using fancy language to dance around the fact that they're hardly saying anything at all.

Chapter 9 Quotes

The nothingth of a second for which the hole existed reverberated backward and forward through time in a most improbable fashion. Somewhere in the deeply remote past it seriously traumatized a small random group of atoms drifting through the empty sterility of space and made them cling together in the most extraordinarily unlikely patterns. These patterns quickly learned to copy themselves (this was part of what was so extraordinary about the patterns) and went on to cause massive trouble on every planet they drifted on to. That was how life began in the Universe.

Related Characters: Ford Prefect, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

This is a description of the strange wormhole that opens in space precisely 29 seconds after Arthur and Ford have been thrown off the Vogon aircraft. Apparently, this "hole" "reverberate[s] backward and forward through time," reaching back many years into the "remote past." Of course, Adams's description of this phenomenon is completely ridiculous. However, this wormhole is what saves the two primary protagonists from dying (according to *The Guide*, one can only hold their breath for 30 seconds in space). The fact that this important plot point hinges upon such an absurd notion is in keeping with Adams's desire to demonstrate the random nature of life and the universe. By and large, he shows that absurdity is meaningless, but this doesn't mean that the freak occurrences that take place in the universe aren't also worth considering. Indeed, this hole that exists for a "nothingth" of a second is what creates "life […] in the Universe." As such, Arthur and Ford's lucky survival is linked to perhaps the most significant event in the history of life in all its forms. Juxtaposing this grandiose notion with Ford and Arthur's comparatively trivial story, Adams invites readers to approach his novel both casually and with a sense of wonder and awe.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ The principle of generating small amounts of *finite* improbability by simply hooking the logic circuits of a Bambleweeny 57 Sub-Meson Brain to an atomic vector plotter suspended in a strong Brownian Motion producer (say a nice hot cup of tea) were of course well understood [...]. [One] thing [scientists] couldn't stand was the perpetual failure they encountered in trying to construct a machine which could generate the *infinite* improbability field needed to flip a spaceship across the mind-paralyzing distances between the farthest stars, and in the end they grumpily announced that such a machine was virtually impossible.

Then, one day, a student [...] found himself reasoning this way:

If, he thought to himself, such a machine is a *virtual* impossibility, then it must logically be a *finite* improbability. So all I have to do in order to make one is to work out exactly how improbable it is, feed that figure into the finite improbability generator, give it a fresh cup of really hot tea...and turn it on!

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Adams explains the discovery and creation of the Infinite Improbability Drive, which powers the Heart of Gold spaceship and enables it to travel through space at unfathomable speeds. What's worth noting about this description is that it is precise in its delivery of nonsense. Indeed, readers no doubt feel as if they're actually reading a lofty scientific explanation regarding improbability. However, this explanation depends upon several fictive concepts. For instance, Adams provides no insight whatsoever into what a "Bambleweeny 57 Sub-Meson Brain" is, let alone what it does or how it works. What's more, this machine supposedly needs a "hot cup of tea" in order to operate. Finally, the student who discovers "infinite improbability" doesn't crack a scientific problem so much as manipulate the language other scientists have used. Indeed, this student's discovery depends upon his interpretation of the word "virtual," meaning that his breakthrough is essentially a pun. In this way, Adams cheekily invites readers on a mind-bending exploration of slapstick scientific reasoning. In the same way that the author makes fun of literary analysis and overly intellectual assessments of meaningless pieces of writing, here he parodies the scientific process and the (all too often) self-serious genre of science fiction.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ He tapped irritably at a control panel. Trillian quietly moved his hand before he tapped anything important. Whatever Zaphod's qualities of mind might include—dash, bravado, conceit—he was mechanically inept and could easily blow the ship up with an extravagant gesture. Trillian had come to suspect that the main reason he had had such a wild and successful life was that he never really understood the significance of anything he did.

Related Characters: Zaphod Beeblebrox, Trillian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

As Trillian considers Zaphod's intellectual capacity, she formulates a theory that the reason he is "successful" is that he "never really under[stands] the significance of anything" he does. This sentiment resonates with *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*'s general interest in meaninglessness. Whereas people like Arthur Dent are constantly worrying about their own discontent—wondering why they're unhappy and why they live the way they live—Zaphod hardly thinks at all. In fact, he doesn't even pay enough attention in life to avoid potentially blowing himself up on an expensive spaceship about which he knows almost nothing. In turn, he's able to enjoy himself, relishing the "dash, bravado, [and] conceit" that make him capable of living a "wild" life.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ One of the major difficulties Trillian experienced in her relationship with Zaphod was learning to distinguish between him pretending to be stupid just to get people off their guard, pretending to be stupid because he couldn't be bothered to think and wanted someone else to do it for him, pretending to be outrageously stupid to hide the fact that he actually didn't understand what was going on, and really being genuinely stupid. He was renowned for being amazingly clever and quite clearly was so—but not all the time, which obviously worried him, hence the act. He preferred people to be puzzled rather than contemptuous. This above all appeared to Trillian to be genuinely stupid, but she could no longer be bothered to argue about it.

Related Characters: Zaphod Beeblebrox, Trillian

Related Themes:

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

As Trillian continues to assess Zaphod and his intellectual faculties, she finds herself perplexed. Zaphod, it seems, is rather unpredictable. This often manifests in conversations in which he presents himself as "stupid," which is why Trillian thinks his manner of presenting his intelligence might not be entirely genuine: she believes he might be putting on a front, pretending to be dumber than he actually is in order to manipulate the people around him. Although this might be true, it's worth noting that Zaphod himself doesn't seem to have a handle on his own intelligence. Indeed, it's difficult even for him to determine his own intellectual level. This is partially because he—unlike most people—hardly stops to think about his actions. Instead, he embraces life with "bravado," forging onward and following his whims without constantly dissecting his lived experiences. As such, he rarely stops to think about whether or not he's stupid. In turn, he emerges as a surprisingly complicated character, one whose mental capabilities can't be nailed down because he isn't constant or stable enough to provide a baseline for analysis.

"Can we work out," said Zaphod, "from their point of view what the Improbability of their rescue was?"

"Yes, that's a constant," said Trillian, "two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand, seven hundred and nine to one against."

"That's high. They're two lucky lucky guys."

"Yes."

"But relative to what we were doing when the ship picked them up…"

Trillian punched up the figures. They showed two-to-the-power-of-Infinity-minus-one to one against (an irrational number that only has a conventional meaning in Improbability Physics).

Related Characters: Ford Prefect, Arthur Dent, Zaphod Beeblebrox, Trillian

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Zaphod and Trillian attempt to solve how improbable it was that the Heart of Gold happened to rescue Arthur and Ford from their free-floating journey through space with one second to spare. When they finally arrive at measure of probability, though, it is "two-to-the-power-of-Infinity-minus-one to one against." This, Adams notes parenthetically, is "an irrational number that only has a conventional meaning in Improbability Physics." This is a perfect example of how Adams gives his readers detailed explanations without furnishing any actual answers. After all, "Improbability Physics" is not a real field of science. Because of this, there's no way to actually track what Trillian and Zaphod are talking about. Instead, readers are forced to embrace a sense of half-knowledge, a sentiment that resonates with Adams's belief that meaninglessness and the absurd are simply part of being alive—in other words, one doesn't need to understand everything.

Chapter 14 Quotes

The Heart of Gold fled on silently through the night of space, now on conventional photon drive. Its crew of four were ill at ease knowing that they had been brought together not of their own volition or by simple coincidence, but by some curious perversion of physics—as if relationships between people were susceptible to the same laws that governed the relationships between atoms and molecules.

As the ship's artificial night closed in they were each grateful to retire to separate cabins and try to rationalize their thoughts.

Related Characters: Zaphod Beeblebrox, Trillian, Ford Prefect, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

After the Heart of Gold plucks Arthur and Ford from space, everybody onboard realizes with a shock that they all know

each other. Apparently, this has happened because the ship is running the Infinite Improbability Drive, which creates occurrences that are highly improbable. As the group tries to sleep that night, each passenger feels strange about what has happened. This is because they feel powerless against science, "ill at ease knowing that they [have] been brought together not of their own volition or by simple coincidence, but by some curious perversion of physics." Rather than having agency over their own lives, they feel as if their "relationships" are "susceptible to the same laws that govern the relationships between atoms and molecules." Unsurprisingly, this usurps their sense of individuality and control, ultimately suggesting that their efforts to direct their own lives are meaningless in the face of science.

Chapter 15 Quotes

Many men of course became extremely rich, but this was perfectly natural and nothing to be ashamed of because no one was really poor—at least no one worth speaking of. And for all the richest and most successful merchants life inevitably became rather dull and niggly, and they began to imagine that this was therefore the fault of the worlds they'd settled on. None of them was entirely satisfactory: either the climate wasn't quite right in the later part of the afternoon, or the day was half an hour too long, or the sea was exactly the wrong shade of pink.

And thus were created the conditions for a staggering new form of specialist industry: custom-made luxury planet building. The home of this industry was the planet Magrathea, where hyperspatial engineers sucked matter through white holes in space to form it into dream planets—gold planets, platinum planets, soft rubber planets with lots of earthquakes—all lovingly made to meet the exacting standards that the Galaxy's richest men naturally came to expect.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

This description of Magrathea from *The Guide* reveals something noteworthy about the nature of desire. Indeed, when the people in the Galaxy grew "extremely rich," they began to feel as if life were "rather dull and niggly." This suggests that wealth does little in the way of bringing happiness to a person's life. In fact, Adams suggests here that becoming rich actually deteriorates a person's sense of contentment. This is perhaps because with wealth comes opportunity, meaning that a person always has the choice to try to improve his or her life. Because the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence—as the saying goes—this kind of opportunity leaves people with a sense of unfulfilled desire, as if they must always strive for something new. This, it seems, is why Magrathea started manufacturing custom planets.

Chapters 17-18 Quotes

This is a complete record of [the sperm whale's] thought from the moment it began its life till the moment it ended it.

Ah...! What's happening? it thought.

Er, excuse me, who am I?

Hello?

Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?

What do I mean by who am I?

Calm down, get a grip now...oh! this is an interesting sensation, what is it? It's a sort of...yawning, tingling sensation in my...my...well, I suppose I'd better start finding names for things if I want to make any headway in what for the sake of what I shall call an argument I shall call the world, so let's call it my stomach.

[...] What's this thing? This...let's call it a tail—yeah, tail. Hey! I can really thrash it about pretty good, can't I? Wow! Wow! That feels great! Doesn't seem to achieve very much but I'll probably find out what it's for later on. Now, have I built up any coherent picture of things yet?

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

When the Heart of Gold approaches Magrathea, two guided missiles begin to trail it. As a last resort, Arthur decides to hit the Infinite Improbability Drive, and the missiles turn into a bowl of petunias and a sperm whale. In this passage, Adams provides an account of the sperm whale's brief foray into consciousness. Notably, the animal's first six thoughts are questions. These questions are rather

broad and existential, as the whale seeks to discover "what's happening," "who" it is, "why" it is "here," what its "purpose in life" is, and what it means when it uses the word "I." The fact that these questions arise within seconds of the whale's creation suggest that such concerns are fundamental components of being alive. It's no wonder, then, that the race of "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" who create Deep Thought want to know the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." However, although Adams lends credibility to these searching questions, he also humorously diminishes the lofty philosophical nature of such existentialist thoughts by having a sperm whale express them only seconds before splattering on the ground. In this way, he once again mocks the ways in which thinking creatures desperately grasp for meaning.

Chapter 24 Quotes

"The car shot forward straight into the circle of light, and suddenly Arthur had a fairly clear idea of what infinity looked like.

It wasn't infinity in fact. Infinity itself looks flat and uninteresting. Looking up into the night sky is looking into infinity—distance is incomprehensible and therefore meaningless. The chamber into which the aircar emerged was anything but infinite, it was just very very very big, so big that it gave the impression of infinity far better than infinity itself.

Related Characters: Slartibartfast, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Arthur rides in Slartibartfast's "aircar" through the "bowels" of Magrathea. Moving at incredible speeds, he looks at a "circle of light" that gives him a "fairly clear idea of what infinity look[s] like." At this point in the passage, though, Adams seizes the opportunity to touch upon the idea of perspective. He makes sure readers know that Arthur *isn't* looking at infinity, but rather something that is "very very very very big." Because "infinity itself looks flat," it is difficult to grasp its vastness. This is why something that is "very very very very big" gives a person "the impression of infinity far better than infinity itself": it is within the framework of the person's understanding, whereas the unending nature of space is not.

Chapter 25 Quotes

"You want to check your legal position, you do, mate. Under law the Quest for Ultimate Truth is quite clearly the inalienable prerogative of your working thinkers. Any bloody machine goes and actually *finds* it and we're straight out of a job, aren't we? I mean, what's the use of our sitting up half the night arguing that there may or may not be a God if this machine only goes and gives you his bleeding phone number the next morning?"

"That's right," shouted Vroomfondel, "we demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!"

Related Characters: Deep Thought, Fook, Lunkwill, Vroomfondel, Majikthise

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Majikthise and Vroomfondel—who are both philosophers—try to convince Lunkwill and Fook that they shouldn't ask Deep Thought the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." If the computer "finds" this answer, great thinkers like them will be "out of a job" and will have wasted many nights "sitting up" and "arguing that there may or may not be a God." This, of course, is Adams's way of revealing the absurdity of philosophical thought, which often sparks debate but rarely provides answers about anything at all. As if Adams's skepticism regarding this kind of thinking isn't already clear, Vroomfondel proceeds by demanding "rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty." Not only is this a ridiculous request—since "doubt and uncertainty" are inherently vague and amorphous—but it also perfectly reflects the ways in which the practice of philosophy operates. Indeed, although philosophy rarely comes to any conclusions, it bears with it a number of very "rigid" conventions about how a person presents his or her ideas. As such, Adams tries to unearth the various idiosyncrasies and contradictions that often plague advanced academic thought, once more parodying the lengths to which people will go when engaging in intellectual traditions.

Chapter 28 Quotes

"I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."

"But it was the Great Question! The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything," howled Loonquawl.

"Yes," said Deep Thought with the air of one who suffers fools gladly, "but what actually *is* it?"

A slow stupefied silence crept over the men as they stared at the computer and then at each other.

"Well, you know, it's just Everything...everything..." offered Pouchg weakly.

"Exactly!" said Deep Thought. "So once you do know what the question actually is, you'll know what the answer means."

Related Characters: Pouchg, Loonquawl, Deep Thought

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Deep Thought, Loonquawl, and Pouchg 7,500,000 after Lunkwill and Fook have asked the supercomputer to find the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." Having waited all this time, Loonquawl and Pouchg (Lunkwill and Fook's successors) are deeply disappointed by Deep Thought's assertion that "42" is the Ultimate Answer. However, Deep Thought's point is a valid one: these "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" don't have a solid understanding of their own question. In fact, they haven't really asked much of a question in the first place. Instead, they've simply ordered Deep Thought to supply an answer that is compatible with the wide-ranging phrase, "Life, the Universe and Everything." In other words, the scope of their question is far too broad. As a result, they're confounded by the supercomputer's answer, realizing suddenly that the language they used to ask their original question was poorly chosen, thereby making it impossible for them to understand Deep Thought's response. Once again, then, Adams demonstrates that language is often bound to fail, ultimately demonstrating to readers that careless words can create complete confusion even in seemingly well-administered scientific studies.

Chapter 31 Quotes

"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."

Related Characters: Frankie Mouse (speaker), Benjy Mouse, Arthur Dent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Frankie Mouse says this to Arthur while trying to explain why he and Benjy don't want to start their 10,000,000-year experiment again. He acknowledges that the "dignity of pure research" and the "pursuit of truth in all its forms" are both valuable concepts, but he admits that "there comes a point" when such endeavors are no longer worthwhile. Instead of spending "another ten millions years" on the same study, he simply wants to live his life, perhaps even getting rich by doing the "lecture circuit" in his own dimension and talking (or lying) about what he learned on Earth. Since he is one of the most disciplined intellectuals in the entire novel, this sentiment is quite striking, ultimately suggesting that even the most rigorous thinkers eventually see the appeal of relaxing into uncertainty. As such, Adams once more advocates for an embrace of meaninglessness, implying that not all questions are worth answering.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PREFACE

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy opens by describing Earth as an "insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea." Moving on, Adams points out that humankind has one particularly aggravating problem: everybody is always unhappy. Many people suggest possible solutions for this condition, but the majority of these proposals are "concerned with the movements of small green pieces of paper." This, Adams maintains, is unhelpful, since money has nothing to do with humanity's unhappiness—after all, "the small green pieces of paper" aren't the ones who are unhappy.

By describing earth as an "insignificant little blue-green planet," Adams prepares readers to divorce themselves from their attachments to their own world. Calling Earth "insignificant," Adams urges readers to look at human existence objectively. In doing this, he is able to illustrate the triviality of things like money, to which humans otherwise ascribe great meaning. What's more, he suggests that humans are inherently unhappy and that the quest to ease this discontentment is an integral part of life on Earth. Unfortunately, though, it's clear that humans are inept at identifying the true source of their unhappiness, something that surely exacerbates their lack of contentment.

Many humans believe that "they'd all made a big mistake in coming down from the trees in the first place," and others even think that nobody should have ever "left the oceans." Despite this pessimism, a young woman finally realizes the heart of humanity's problems, suddenly understanding how to make the world a happy place. This takes place on a random Thursday "nearly two thousand years after one man had been nailed to a tree for saying how great it would be to be nice to people for a change." Unfortunately, the girl who has this unspeakable breakthrough never gets to tell anybody because a "terrible, stupid catastrophe" takes place right after she figures out how to make the world good.

Adams's sense of humor emerges early in The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. *In this moment, he uses deadpan delivery to explain humanity's struggle to find meaning in life, ultimately describing the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ in plain language that takes away some of that story's grandeur and mystery. Still, he emphasizes the extent to which humans long to find happiness in life, framing the species as a group who constantly pursues knowledge about the nature of its own existence.*

This novel, Adams says, is not about the girl who knew how to fix the world. Instead, it's the story of a book called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which is "not an Earth book, never published on Earth, and until the terrible catastrophe occurred, never seen or even heard of by any Earthman." Despite this, it is a very "remarkable" book that many other beings use as a guide of sorts as they make their way through the galaxy. "In many of the more relaxed civilizations on the Outer Eastern Rim of the Galaxy," Adams writes, "the *Hitchhiker's Guide* has already supplanted the great *Encyclopedia Galactica* as the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom." In "large friendly letters," its cover reads: "DON'T PANIC."

Given the popularity of this galactic reference book, it becomes clear that humans aren't the only beings interested in knowledge and exploration. Indeed, the fact that the Hitchhiker's Guide *is a "repository of all knowledge and wisdom" suggests that many other species want to learn more about life in all its various forms, whether on their own planet or in the far reaches of the galaxy.*

CHAPTER 1

One Thursday morning, Arthur Dent wakes up in his home, which looks out over a "broad spread of West Country farmland" in England. As he gradually comes back to consciousness, he realizes that he's dreadfully hungover. He hauls himself out of bed and stands in front of the window, where he sees—but does not register—a bulldozer sitting ominously outside. Preoccupied with his hangover, Arthur goes about getting himself ready for the day, mindlessly making himself coffee in the kitchen and yawning all the while. *Bulldozer*, he thinks, unsure of why the word has found its way into his head. *Yellow*, he muses. Ignoring this, he returns to the bedroom to get dressed, slowly remembering that he went to the pub last night because something had made him quite angry.

Although Arthur Dent doesn't register that a bulldozer is parked outside his house, he does take note of word fragments that drift through his head. These fragments, of course, have to do with the bulldozer, but Arthur can't correlate them with the outside world, perhaps because he's too preoccupied with his hangover to pay much attention to anything else. In this way, Adams shows readers that language often comes to people in strange ways that are hard to understand. Given that this is a novel about space travel and alien interactions, this is an important thing to keep in mind, since linguistic communication is often all a person has when trying to connect with strangers.

Arthur thinks about the previous night, recalling that he had been telling people about something important—something having to do with "a new bypass he'd just found out about." Apparently, this bypass has been "in the pipeline for months," but nobody "seemed to have known about it." As he sips a glass of water, he tells himself that everything will work out—after all, nobody wants a bypass, so the planning council won't have "a leg to stand on." *Yellow*, he thinks again, the word drifting through his mind "in search of something to connect with." Fifteen seconds later, he's outside "lying in front of a big yellow bulldozer" that has been "advancing up his garden path."

When the word "yellow" floats through Arthur's mind "in search of something to connect with," Adams portrays language as a connective tool, something that unites otherwise disparate ideas. In this moment, the word "yellow" finally meets up with Arthur's memory of getting angry at the pub about a bypass the government wants to build—suddenly, he puts together that the government must want to knock down his house in order to construct this bypass, which is why there is a "yellow" bulldozer visible through his window.

The construction foreman, Mr. L. Prosser, is not thrilled to see Arthur lying in front of his bulldozer. Adams describes him as a forty-year-old man who is "fat and shabby" and works for the local council. "Curiously enough, though he didn't know it, he was also a direct male-line descendant of Genghis Khan," Adams notes, adding that nobody would ever guess this based on Prosser's outward appearance or temperament. Indeed, Prosser is a "nervous, worried man," not a "great warrior." When Arthur puts himself before the bulldozer, Prosser grows especially "nervous," realizing that something has gone "seriously wrong with his job, which [is] to see that Arthur Dent's house [gets] cleared out of the way before the day [is] out." "Come off it, Mr. Dent," he says, "you can't win, you know. You can't lie in front of the bulldozer indefinitely."

Adams reveals his fondness of the absurd in this scene when he informs readers that Mr. Prosser—who seems, by all accounts, a rather bland man—is a descendant of the great Genghis Khan, the fearless mongoloid emperor who was revered for his fierce battle skills. This obviously appears quite unlikely, and yet Adams insists that the two men are vaguely related, thereby preparing readers to accept even the most ridiculous of premises. More than anything, this puts readers in an open-minded outlook—something that will help them come to terms with the rest of the book's outlandish plot.

Arthur assures Prosser that he's willing to stay in front of the bulldozer for a long time. "This bypass has got to be built and it's going to be built!" In this moment, Adams describes a bypass as something that allows people to move from "point A to point B very fast while other people dash from point B to point A very fast." This is because people always want to be elsewhere, never able to make up their minds. Prosser, though, knows that he wants to be anywhere but in front of Arthur's house. As his workers look at him with "derisive grins," he anxiously tells Arthur: "You were quite entitled to make any suggestions or protests at the appropriate time, you know." This enrages Arthur, who yells: "Appropriate time? The first I knew about it was when a workman arrived at my home yesterday."

It becomes clear in this interaction that Prosser is somebody who blindly follows orders. When he yells that the bypass "has got to be built," he reveals his desire to simply execute his duties without considering the consequences. In turn, Adams demonstrates the human tendency to accept meaningless directives as long as they don't disrupt their own lives. By describing a bypass as something people can use to go from "point A to point B" while others go from "point B to point A," the author trivializes the concept of such a system, calling into question why people can't simply be content with where they are at the moment. In turn, he recalls the idea that humans are rarely happy, and that they try to fix this by throwing their time and energy into useless things like making money or—in this case—building unnecessary objects.

Mr. Prosser insists that the plans for this bypass have been "available in the local planning office for the last nine months." "Oh yes," Arthur replies, "well, as soon as I heard I went straight round to see them, yesterday afternoon. You hadn't exactly gone out of your way to call attention to them, had you?" In response, Mr. Prosser claims that these plans were on display, but Arthur challenges this, too, saying: "On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them." Although Prosser upholds that the cellar *is* the display department, Arthur reveals that the plans were "in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard.'"

The fact that the plans to build a bypass have been hidden in "a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying 'Beware of the Leopard'" suggests that the local planning council wants to keep their projects secret. This is because doing so makes it impossible for people like Arthur to protest. In this way, Adams intimates that keeping people in the dark is an effective way of gaining power or control over them.

At this point, Adams takes a moment to discuss the fact that Arthur's good friend, Ford Prefect, is "from a small planet somewhere in the vicinity of Betelgeuse." Unbeknownst to Arthur, Ford arrived on Earth fifteen years ago while conducting research for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Wanting to renew the guidebook's entry for Earth, Ford hitchhiked to the planet but soon became stranded, since very few space travelers visit Earth. Since then, he has pretended to be an out-of-work actor living the life of an "unruly boxer" who likes to "gate-crash university parties, get badly drunk and start making fun of any astrophysicists he [can] find." By the time Ford reaches Arthur's house on this particular Thursday morning, Prosser has already tried a number of techniques to get Arthur out of the way, and has nearly resigned himself to the fact that he won't succeed.

Ford Prefect is somebody who loves adventure, as made evident by the fact that he is an intergalactic hitchhiker. Wanting to augment the entry about Earth in the Hitchhiker's Guide, *he has come to the planet in search of one thing: knowledge. As such, he epitomizes the desire to explore new things in the name of gaining new insight into fundamental truths about existence and the universe.*

Ford stands over Arthur and asks if he's busy. "Am I *busy*?" Arthur replies. "Well, I've just got all these bulldozers and things to lie in front of because they'll knock my house down if I don't, but other than that…well, no, not especially, why?" Unable to understand sarcasm, Ford says, "Good, is there anywhere we can talk?" He then urges his friend to come to the pub with him, saying that they simply must drink—and quickly, too. Arthur refuses, saying he has to stay so that Prosser doesn't knock down his house, but Ford insists that he has to tell him "the most important thing" he'll ever hear. He also adds that Arthur will need a "very stiff drink."

It becomes clear in this section that Adams is interested in exploring the ways in which people have trouble communicating with one another. He has already demonstrated the trouble Arthur has with language, both on his own terms (when he can't connect various words to their larger meanings) and when trying to persuade Prosser to leave his house alone. Now, though, Adams highlights a different kind of communicative impasse, one that arises from a difference in culture. Indeed, Ford is from another planet, one where people don't use sarcasm. As such, he takes his friend seriously when Arthur dryly informs him that he's not "especially" "busy."

Ford walks over to Prosser to convince him that he shouldn't knock down Arthur's house in their absence. "Has Mr. Dent come to his senses yet?" Prosser asks Ford. "Can we for the moment assume that he hasn't?" Ford replies, adding: "And we can also assume that he's going to be staying here all day?" When Prosser agrees to this hypothetical suggestion, Ford says, "So all your men are going to be standing around all day doing nothing?" Prosser admits that this is likely the case. "Well," Ford continues, "if you're resigned to doing that anyway, you don't actually need him to lie here all the time do you?" Pressing Prosser in this manner, Ford manages to convince the foreman that there's no difference whether or not Arthur is in front of the bulldozer or not, suggesting that it won't matter much if they go to the pub for a while.

In his conversation with Prosser, Ford demonstrates a skillful command of rhetoric and persuasion, one that relies upon his ability to confuse Prosser. Indeed, he twists the conversation so that Prosser suddenly doesn't know how to respond. Of course, his points don't actually make sense, since ultimately there is nothing preventing Prosser from demolishing Arthur's house if Arthur leaves, but Ford so skillfully confounds the foreman that this doesn't matter. In turn, Adams shows readers that language can be manipulated and used to a person's benefit.

"And if you want to pop off for a quick [drink] yourself later on, we can always cover for you in return," Ford says to Prosser. "Thank you very much," Prosser says, confused but unwilling to admit it. "So," Ford concludes, "if you would just like to come over here and lie down…" Seeing Prosser's confusion, he says, "Ah, I'm sorry, perhaps I hadn't made myself fully clear. Somebody's got to lie in front of the bulldozers, haven't they? Or there won't be anything to stop them driving into Mr. Dent's house, will there?" After another brief back and forth, Prosser finally agrees and situates himself in the mud. As they set off for the pub, Arthur asks if Prosser can be trusted. "Myself I'd trust him to the end of the Earth," Ford assures him. "Oh yes, and how far's that?" Arthur snorts. "About twelve minutes away," Ford replies.

Ford's ability to use language to his own advantage takes on an absurd quality when he tricks Prosser into lying in front of his own bulldozer. Here, Adams shows readers that some people will do nearly anything as long as somebody is persuasive enough to trick them into doing it. In this case, Ford has presented Prosser with the mere appearance *of a logical argument, which is all Prosser needs before he's willing to comply with Ford's ridiculous suggestion that he lie down in the mud in Arthur's place.*

CHAPTER 2

Arriving at the pub, Ford orders six pints of beer—three a piece for Arthur and himself. "And quickly please," he tells the bartender. "The world's about to end." He then turns his attention to Arthur, telling him to drink the three pints quickly. He claims that Arthur is going to need the beer in his system as a muscle relaxant. "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?" he asks. Arthur merely shrugs, saying, "I don't know. Why, do you think it's the sort of thing you're likely to say?" Ford doesn't respond to this, instead telling Arthur to drink up and repeating that the world is about to end. "This must be a Thursday," Arthur mutters. "I never could get the hang of Thursdays."

The difference between Ford and Arthur's attitudes is quite distinct in this scene. This makes sense, obviously, since Ford knows that the world is about to end, whereas Arthur simply thinks he's having an off day. Still, there is some overlap in their respective outlooks. Ford, on the one hand, has clearly resigned to the idea that Earth is about to be destroyed. Similarly, Arthur has adopted an apathetic outlook to everyday life, merely complaining that Thursdays are particularly difficult to "get the hang of." In both cases, each man invests himself in the idea that things are beyond his control, and that there's no use trying to rise above hardship.

CHAPTER 3

As Arthur and Ford drink, a fleet of "huge yellow chunky slablike somethings" move through the "ionosphere" above Earth. Ford is the only person on the planet who knows of their presence, since he picked up their signal on a small device called the Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic. This is a gadget he keeps in his "leather satchel," which he always wears around his neck. Other notable items inside this satchel are: an "Electronic Thumb" that helps him hitchhike through the galaxy, a digitized copy of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and—most important of all—a towel, which is the "most massively useful thing an interstellar hitchhiker can have" because it is versatile and easy to carry. In any case, Ford's Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic blinked into action the night before, when the mysterious ships appeared above. Now, as he sits with Arthur, it begins to strobe more rapidly.

In this novel, Adams frequently juxtaposes absurdly futuristic and unfathomable details with commonplace ideas. For instance, Ford's "leather satchel" contains a collection of highly advanced technological gadgets, but Adams goes out of his way to make clear that the most important item Ford carries is a run-of-the-mill towel. As such, he underhandedly mocks the self-serious tone that many science-fiction novels use, reminding readers that the genre itself is often quite outlandish.

A crash sounds, but Ford tells Arthur not to worry. "They haven't started yet," he says. "It's probably just your house being knocked down." Looking outside, Arthur sees that Ford is right: Prosser has started demolishing his home. As Arthur leaps out of his seat, Ford urges him to "let them have their fun" because it "hardly makes any difference at this stage" whether or not Arthur's house remains standing. Ignoring his friend, Arthur rushes outside and runs toward his house. Before following his friend, Ford tosses another large bill to the bartender and tells him to keep the change. The bartender then looks at him and shivers, picking up on "tiny subliminal signals" issuing from Ford—"this signal simply communicates an exact and almost pathetic sense of how far [a] being is from the place of his birth," Adams notes. This happens when a person undergoes great stress.

Ford's assertion that it "hardly makes any difference" whether or not Arthur's house is demolished once again touches upon Adams's interest in futility and meaninglessness. Unsurprisingly, though, Arthur has trouble wrapping his head around this fact, since he is still very much invested in his everyday life, which he doesn't know is about to undergo a great change. This suggests that context and perspective are what keep a person from seeing the pointlessness of their endeavors. In other words, if Arthur knew (or actually believed) that the Earth is about to be destroyed, he might not care about things about which he otherwise feels quite strongly.

Since Ford is very far from his home planet, the bartender is overwhelmed by the signals he sends. As a result, he suddenly understands that the world is going to end. "Are you serious, sir?" he asks, terrified. Ford confirms that he is, in fact, serious, adding that the planet has roughly two minutes left before total destruction. "Isn't there anything we can do about it then?" the bartender asks. Ford assures him that there's nothing to be done, and the pub goes quiet. Clearing his throat, the bartender makes an announcement. "Last orders, please," he calls.

When the bartender calls for "last orders," he essentially comes to terms with the fact that there's nothing he can do to stop the world from ending. In light of this powerlessness, he does the only thing under his control: he bartends.

Meanwhile, the "huge yellow machines" continue their descent. As Arthur runs toward his house yelling at the top of his lungs, he fails to notice that the construction workers have started fleeing their bulldozers. Mr. Prosser, for his part, is staring into the sky at one of the "huge yellow somethings." Chaos begins to break out all over the world as people rush around and crane their necks to see the otherworldly ships. Ford, of course, knows what's happening—his Sub-Etha Sens-O-Matic woke him up the night before, calling his attention to the imminent arrival of these alien ships. Although he has been waiting fifteen years to hitch a ride off of Earth, he's disappointed to learn that the newly arrived ships belong to a certain alien species known as the Vogons. Nonetheless, he prepares himself to board their ships, making sure he has his towel ready.

As the Vogon spaceships near Earth, humanity loses control. Suddenly afraid for their lives, humans' everyday customs finally grind to a halt, and everyone abandons their regular routines. The fact that the mere appearance of spaceships can derail all of humanity shows the extent to which people are utterly unprepared to part with their daily customs. Of course, it makes sense that humans—who have very little experience with space travel—would be shocked to see spaceships. But in this novel, which is populated with aliens like Ford who have traveled throughout the Galaxy, such ignorance seems like a vast intellectual shortcoming.

The Vogons' spaceships hover motionless in the sky and take control of every radio, television, cassette recorder, and speaker on Earth. "People of Earth, your attention, please," a voice says. "This is Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz of the Galactic Hyperspace Planning Council. As you will no doubt be aware, the plans for development of the outlying regions of the Galaxy require the building of a hyperspatial express route through your star system, and regrettably your planet is one of those scheduled for demolition. The process will take slightly less than two of your Earth minutes. Thank you." After this announcement, terror breaks out. Seeing this, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz comes back onto the announcement system and says, "There's no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your Earth years."

When Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz says that the plans for this "hyperspatial express route" have been on display in Earth's "local planning department in Alpha Centauri" for fifty years, readers are reminded of the ridiculous manner in which plans to build a bypass through Arthur's property were displayed. Namely, both sets of plans have been posted in inaccessible areas. Like Earth's planning council, the Vogons seem to understand that knowledge is power, meaning that if they hide their plans, there's nothing earthlings can do to interfere.

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz informs all Earth-dwellers that it's too late to "lodge any formal complaint" about the planet's destruction. After a moment, somebody somewhere on Earth finds the wavelength of the Vogon broadcast and sends a message back to the ship, though nobody but the Vogons hear it. "What do you mean, you've never been to Alpha Centauri?" booms Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz's voice again. "For heaven's sake, mankind, it's only four light-years away, you know. I'm sorry, but if you can't be bothered to taken an interest in local affairs that's your own lookout." He then orders his fleet to "energize the demolition beams," and after a stretch of "terrible ghastly silence" there comes a "terrible ghastly noise," and the Earth winks out of existence.

It is possible that the Vogons weren't intentionally hiding their plans from Earth, since they act in this moment as if they're surprised that humankind hasn't yet discovered "Alpha Centauri." However, even if the Vogons didn't know about humankind's limited knowledge of its own Galaxy, the Vogons still posted the plans in a remote location—to truly inform earthlings of their planet's impending doom, the logical thing would have been to post notices on Earth itself. This is rather obvious, and so it seems clear that the Vogons—like the council trying to knock down Arthur's house—purposefully obscured their intentions in order to quickly gain power without a fight.

CHAPTER 4

While the Vogons destroy Earth, the President of the Galaxy prepares for a public appearance on a far-off planet. His name is Zaphod Beeblebrox, and he's about to unveil a new spaceship called the **Heart of Gold**. Zaphod has been looking forward to this day ever since he became president. In fact, the Heart of Gold is the reason he became president, "a decision that had sent shock waves of astonishment throughout the Imperial Galaxy." "Zaphod Beeblebrox?" everybody wondered. "*President?* Not *the* Zaphod Beeblebrox? Not *the* President?" Many people saw Zaphod's presidency as proof that "the whole of known creation had finally gone bananas." However, this is exactly what makes Zaphod a perfect president, since the position always goes to a controversial figure who "wields no real power whatsoever." Indeed, Zaphod's job is "not to wield power but to draw attention away from it."

In keeping with the idea that knowledge is power, the President of the Galaxy is supposed to distract people. If citizens don't understand where, exactly, power lies, then they are at a disadvantage if they ever want to confront or challenge it. This recalls the Vogons' decision to post plans for their "hyperspatial express route" not on Earth but on another planet. Similarly, it also recalls the planning council's decision to post their plans for a bypass in a place that was essentially inaccessible to Arthur. Power, Adams makes clear, is most effective when nobody knows its true source.

Zaphod—who has two heads and a third arm—speeds along in a boat, driving toward the location where he will unveil the **Heart of Gold**. Zooming up on his speedboat, he dazzles the crowd, which is actually just a collection of three billion people watching from home using "the eyes of a small robot tri-D camera." Zaphod exits the boat and enters a large floating globe with a couch hovering in its center. Lounging on the couch while the designers of the Heart of Gold stand outside the globe, Zaphod smiles, pleased with how he must look. After allowing the globe to be thrown about on the water, Zaphod exits and prepares to make his address. "Hi," he says, after the audience applause dies down. "Hi," he says again. Looking out into the crowd, he finds Trillian, "a girl that [he] picked up recently while visiting a planet."

Zaphod, it seems, is a master at drawing attention to himself. Judging by his flashy entrance, it's evident that he cares deeply about what people think about him. This is exactly what he's supposed to do, given that the job of the Galactic President is "not to wield power but to draw attention away from it." As he steps up to the microphone, he relishes his esteemed position, gleefully letting his spectators hang on his every word.

Although the press is eager for Zaphod to give them a good quote, "one of the officials of the party" decides that Zaphod is "clearly not in a mood to read the deliciously turned speech." As such, this official flips a switch in his pocket and unveils the **Heart of Gold**. It is shaped like a "sleek running shoe, perfectly white and mind-bogglingly beautiful." At its center—though nobody can see this—there lies a device that makes "this starship unique in the history of the Galaxy." "Wow," Zaphod says. "That is really amazing. That really is truly amazing. That is so amazingly amazing I think I'd like to steal it." The crowd laughs at this, finding it a "marvelous presidential quote." Having said this, Zaphod lifts his heads, yells out in major thirds, throws a bomb, and runs through "the sea of suddenly frozen beaming smiles."

When Zaphod finally speaks, what he says lacks any substance whatsoever—all he does is assert that the spaceship is so "amazing" that he'd like to "steal it." Nonetheless, the audience is pleased with his announcement, as if he has just said something of great importance. In this moment, then, Adams satirizes political speeches, which often have more to do with style and verve than meaning or substance. Again, this is why Zaphod is a perfect Galactic President: he attracts widespread attention without actually wielding any true power. To top things off, his use of a bomb only adds to the idea that he must serve as a distraction, though it's not yet clear what, exactly, he might be distracting citizens from in the first place.

CHAPTER 5

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, Adams notes, is quite ugly. Like all Vogons, his nose is long and his forehead small. Many of his attributes are due to the fact that the Vogons have never evolved—ever since they first "crawled out of the sluggish primeval seas of Vogsphere," the Vogons have never changed. This is a testament to their stubborn nature, which makes them especially well equipped for "civil politics." When the Vogons finally found a way to leave their wretched planet, they immediately traveled to a nearby location, where they became the "immensely powerful backbone of the Galactic Civil Service." Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, Adams explains, is a "fairly typical Vogon in that he [is] thoroughly vile. Also, he [does] not like hitchhikers."

Adams uses the Vogons' stubbornness to symbolize the unyielding nature of bureaucracy, which is often slow and unaccommodating. The fact that this species has never evolved is a testament to their unwillingness to adapt to change. This kind of mentality perhaps also influenced their refusal to delay Earth's destruction, an act that casts them as a race obsessed with control, power, and arbitrary rules.

The Vogons employ a race of aliens called the Dentrassis on their spaceships. The Dentrassis work as caterers on the Vogon ships but hate the Vogons. As such, they have no problem helping Ford and Arthur sneak onto the ship as stowaways. As the spaceship hurdles away from what used to be Earth, Arthur slowly wakes up in a dark cabin. When he asks Ford where they are, his friend says that they've safely survived the destruction of Earth by "hitch[ing] a lift" on a Vogon spaceship. "Are you trying to tell me that we just stuck out our thumbs and some green bug-eyed monster stuck his head out and said, 'Hi fellas, hop right in, I can take you as far as the Basingstoke roundabout?" Arthur asks, and Ford confirms that this is the case, though the Thumb is electronic, and the roundabout is six light-years away.

Despite the fact that the Vogons are stubborn creatures who go out of their way to control everything in a bureaucratic and unbending way, they can't keep hitchhikers like Arthur and Ford from slipping onto their spaceships. This suggests that such an unyielding attitude only invites animosity from the beings who work for the Vogons. Indeed, the Dentrassis are eager to break the Vogons' rules, thereby undermining their efforts to keep things orderly and under complete control. However, the earlier mention that Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz doesn't like hitchhikers means that even with help from the Dentrassis, Ford and Arthur are in a precarious position as stowaways.

Having just destroyed Earth, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz feels "vaguely irritable." This is how he always feels after "demolishing populated planets." As such, he wishes somebody would "come and tell him that it was all wrong so that he could shout at them and feel better." To his delight, a Dentrassis server comes running into the room with an obvious grin on his face—a clear indication that something *has* gone wrong. After all, if a Dentrassi looks "that pleased with itself," there must surely be something "going on somewhere on the ship that [Prostetnic] could get very angry indeed about."

A true indication that Vogons are power-hungry and controlling is the fact Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz actively wants something to go wrong so that he can smite somebody. Seeing that a Dentrassis server is happy, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz knows that he'll be able to find something amiss on the ship, and this excites him because it will provide him with an opportunity to aggressively reinforce his own power.

Meanwhile, Arthur bombards Ford with questions. Finally, Ford hands him *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and tells him to look up anything he might want to know. He shows him how the book works, explaining that Arthur must type in what he wants to find, since the book has been digitized. Together, they look at the entry for Vogons, which reads (in part): "Here is what to do if you want to get a lift from a Vogon: forget it. They are one of the most unpleasant races in the Galaxy—not actually evil, but bad-tempered, bureaucratic, officious and callous." At the end of the entry, the book says: "On no account allow a Vogon to read poetry at you."

Once again, Adams's penchant for absurd or random humor is apparent, this time showing itself in the form of The Hitchhiker's Guide*'s warning: "On no account allow a Vogon to read poetry at you." In addition to reminding readers that this novel is interested in using ridiculous premises to tell a story, this warning portrays language as something that can actually be harmful. Meanwhile, Arthur's interest in* The Guide *showcases his desire to learn more about space, granting him an opportunity to gain knowledge that was inaccessible to him on Earth.*

Ford explains why he was on Earth and tells Arthur that, unfortunately, the planet has been destroyed. He then urges Arthur to heed the guidebook's most salient advice: "DON'T PANIC." "You just come along with me and have a good time," he says. "The Galaxy's a fun place. You'll need to have this fish in your ear." Saying this, he takes out a small yellow fish. As he does so, the ship's speakers burst to life, spewing a terrible sound that sounds to Arthur like "a man trying to gargle while fighting off a pack of wolves." Ford tells him that this sound is the Vogon captain making an announcement." He then shoves the yellow fish into Arthur's ear canal, and suddenly Arthur can understand the announcement.

Until this point in the novel, Arthur hasn't yet been able to influence the things that have been happening around him, but he has perhaps not fully realized this yet. Now that Ford has informed him that his home planet is gone, though, he most likely is able to finally comprehend the depths of his powerlessness: Earth has been annihilated, and there's nothing he can do about it. Worse, he has no choice but to zoom through space, about which he knows nothing. To help him do this, Ford shoves a fish in his ear that helps translate languages in his head. This, it seems, is the only thing connecting him to his new circumstances (other than Ford himself).

CHAPTER 6

With the fish in his ear, Arthur listens to Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz's announcement: "I see from our instruments that we have a couple of Hitchhikers aboard," Prostetnic says. "Hello, wherever you are. I just want to make it totally clear that you are not at all welcome. I worked hard to get where I am today, and I didn't become captain of a Vogon constructor ship simply so I could turn it into a taxi service for a load of degenerate freeloaders. I have sent out a search party, and as soon as they find you I will put you off the ship. If you're very lucky I might read you some of my poetry first." When the message ends, Ford tells Arthur that the fish in his ear is a Babel fish, which translates foreign languages into whatever language the listener understands.

Once again, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz confirms that he is a prototypical Vogon—stubborn and deeply preoccupied with control. Unfortunately, he seems to have no sympathy for somebody like Arthur, who has just tragically lost his home planet. In fact, Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz is so concerned with order and control that he plans to throw Ford and Arthur into space, sending them to die after reading them his poetry.

Arthur realizes that, since Ford is a researcher for *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, he must have been gathering information about Earth. Ford confirms that this is the case, saying that he was "able to extend the original entry a bit," though the edition Arthur is holding is an old one. Still, Arthur is eager to see what the guidebook has to say about his home planet, which he suddenly misses dearly. When he finds the entry, he's shocked by its brevity—the description of Earth is one word: "Harmless." Ford tries to justify this, saying that there's simply not enough room in the book to go into detail. Plus, he adds, nobody ever knew much about Earth. When Arthur asks him how he updated the entry, Ford tells him that he changed it to "Mostly Harmless." Before Arthur can object to this, Ford hears footsteps outside the door.

Even though The Guide is supposed to serve as a "repository of all knowledge and wisdom" in the Galaxy, the book's report of Earth is short and rather uninformative. Indeed, it's hard to think of this single-word (and the new two-word) entry as actual "wisdom." At the same time, it's worth noting that knowing whether a planet is harmless or not is probably one of the first and most important things a galactic hitchhiker would want to know. In this way, the entry is rather effective, though it's understandable that its brevity upsets Arthur, who is suddenly nostalgic for his home planet.

CHAPTER 7

Vogon poetry, Adams explains, is the "third worst in the Universe," behind "that of the Azgoths of Kria"—whose poet laureate accidentally killed himself by reciting too much of his own wretched verse—and a woman named Paula Nancy Millstone Jennings from Greenbridge, Essex, England. Now, as Arthur and Ford are strapped into torturous "Poetry Appreciation chairs," Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz smiles and begins reciting one of his original pieces. "*Oh freddled gruntbuggly…*," he intones as Ford writhes involuntarily in his seat. "*Thy micturations are to me- As plurdled gabbleblotchits on a lurgid bee.*" When he finishes, Prostetnic tells Arthur and Ford that they must choose between dying in space or telling him how much they liked his poetry. As Ford gasps for breath, Arthur heroically tells Prostetnic that he "quite liked" his verse. Rushing on, he says, "I thought that some of the metaphysical imagery was really particularly effective."

What's perhaps funniest and most surprising about this scene is that Ford, who is normally so quick on his feet when it comes to using language to dupe somebody, doesn't even think to tell Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz that his poetry is good. Instead, he struggles in agony in his chair, unable to withstand the horrible sounds of this alien's terrible verse. Arthur, on the other hand, jumps at the opportunity to save himself. To do so, he blatantly lies, launching into a convoluted compliment about the "metaphysical imagery" embedded in Prostetnic's poem. In this way, he uses his linguistic and analytic skills to protect himself.

Arthur continues to praise Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz's poetry, even as Ford gapes at him in disbelief. Soon, though, he begins to grasp at words, unable to sustain this false flattery. Luckily, Ford eventually helps him, jumping in to finish Arthur's statement that Prostetnic's verse has "interesting rhythmic devices" that "counterpoint the surrealism of the underlying metaphor." When Ford can't think up what this underlying metaphor actually is, Arthur posits that the metaphor is one about the "humanity"—or "Vogonity"—of "the poet's compassionate soul." Having established this, Arthur forges on to say that this "compassion" "contrives through the medium of the verse structure to sublimate this, transcend that, and come to terms with the fundamental dichotomies of the other and one is left with a profound and vivid insight into…into…er…" At this point, Ford swoops in, declaring, "Into whatever it was the poem was about!"

Using Arthur and Ford's collaborative assessment of Prostetnic's poem, Adams satirizes the practice of literary analysis, insinuating that such endeavors often sound quite intellectual without actually saying anything at all. Indeed, it's worth noting that Arthur and Ford are hardly saying anything of importance about Prostetnic's verse. At one point, Arthur says that the "verse structure" works to "sublimate this, transcend that, and come to terms with the fundamental dichotomies of the other," but he never identifies what he means by the words "this," "that," and "other," thus rendering his comment entirely useless. And as if it's not already clear that Arthur and Ford aren't actually saying anything of substance, Ford unabashedly proclaims that Prostetnic's poem provides insight "into whatever it [is] the poem [is] about." In turn, the analysis becomes meaningless, a mere gesture toward examination that lacks any real intellectual significance.

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz considers for a moment the things Arthur and Ford have said about his poetry. "So what you're saying is that I write poetry because underneath my mean callous heartless exterior I really just want to be loved, is that right?" he asks. When Ford confirms this, Prostetnic stands and says, "No, well, you're completely wrong. I just write poetry to throw my mean callous heartless exterior into sharp relief. I'm going to throw you off the ship anyway. Guard! Take the prisoners to number three airlock and throw them out!" Ford and Arthur begin to struggle, but they find themselves helpless against the strength of a large Vogon guard. As they're roughly escorted out of the room, Prostetnic sits back and says, "Hmmm, *counterpoint the surrealism of the underlying metaphor*…" After closing his eyes for a moment, he mutters, "Death's too good for them."

For a moment, it seems as if Prostetnic is moved by what Arthur and Ford have said about his poetry. Interestingly, he manages to find meaning in what they have said, deciding to interpret their incoherent babbling as a statement regarding his "callous heartless exterior" and his need to be "loved." Although he dismisses this when he chooses to have them thrown off the ship, the mere fact that he derived this interpretation from their rambling analysis suggests that he wants to think this about himself. However, Adams is not a sentimental author, but the kind of writer who chooses humor over emotion. As such, he further dismisses the idea that Prostetnic wants to believe in the value of his own poetry. He does this by having Prostetnic muse that "death" is "too good" for Arthur and Ford, ultimately establishing once and for all that Prostetnic's poetry is meaningless and that reading into it is not only useless, but absurd and ill-advised.

As the Vogon guard takes Ford and Arthur to the airlock, Ford tries to trick him into letting them go. Before long, he has the guard questioning his purpose in life, but then the large Vogon dismisses this line of thinking and throws them into the airlock, where they have little to do but bide their time before their inevitable deaths. Thinking to himself, Arthur reflects upon the fact that almost nothing from Earth exists anymore. "This is terrific," he thinks, "Nelson's Column has gone, McDonald's has gone, all that's left is me and the words *Mostly harmless*. Any second now all that will be left is *Mostly harmless*. And yesterday the planet seemed to be going so well." As he thinks about this, the airlock begins to hiss, and then Ford and Arthur pop "into outer space like corks from a toy gun."

Yet again, Ford tries to use language and persuasion to influence his circumstances, this time attempting to convince the Vogon guard that there's more to life than pushing people around inside a spaceship. Unfortunately, though, the Vogons are a stubborn species who aren't particularly interested in deep existential questions. Rather, they focus on executing whatever it is they've set out to accomplish, and this is why Ford's linguistic tricks don't ultimately work on the guard. Arthur, for his part, simply gives up and laments his impending death, recognizing in this moment that he is completely powerless against the Vogons' strong will.

CHAPTER 8

According to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a person can hold "a lungful of air" in space for roughly thirty seconds. However, this does very little to help that person survive, since "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." Interestingly enough, this figure is also "the telephone number of an Islington flat where Arthur once went to a very good party and met a very nice girl whom he totally failed to get off with—she went off with a gate-crasher." Despite the odds against their survival, Adams notes, Arthur and Ford are rescued twenty-nine seconds after getting ejected from the Vogon spaceship.

For the first time in the novel, Adams turns his attention to the notion of improbability. By outlining the unlikelihood of Arthur and Ford surviving, he encourages readers to question how, exactly, the two protagonists are going to avoid death. Furthermore, when Adams casually mentions that the figure of probability related to Arthur and Ford's survival is—coincidentally—also the "telephone number of an Islington flat where Arthur once went to a very good party and met a very nice girl," he infuses the plot with absurdity, ultimately parodying the convoluted ways in which conventional science fiction novels rely upon outlandish plot points in order to tell a story. And yet, despite just how absurd and improbable it is, Arthur and Ford are rescued from space with only one second to spare.

CHAPTER 9

On the spaceship that rescued Ford and Arthur, a computer babbles to itself "in alarm" because it senses that an airlock has opened and closed "for no apparent reason." This, Adams says, is because "reason was in fact out to lunch." Indeed, a hole briefly opened in the Galaxy for "exactly a nothingth of a second." This hole itself was a "nothingth of an inch wide." When it closed, "lots of paper hats and party balloons fell out of it and drifted off through the Universe." These aren't the only unlikely items to have fallen out of the hole—among them were also a team of very tall market analysts and 239,000 "lightly fried eggs."

At this point in the novel, Adams begins to intensify the complete absurdity of the book's plot. What's interesting, though, is that these ridiculous notions often take the form of an explanation. Indeed, Adams uses the term "a nothingth of a second" to describe how Arthur and Ford have been rescued from their free-fall, but this does very little in the way of giving readers an actual understanding of what has just happened. As such, Adams's tongue-in-cheek explanations only emphasize the improbability, absurdity, and meaninglessness of the concepts that fuel the novel's plot.

Ford and Arthur are confused to find that the inside of the spaceship that rescued them looks exactly like a familiar location in England. They also watch a number of unlikely things pass by, like "huge children" bouncing "heavily along." As they observe the spaceship's oddities, a voice comes over an intercom and says, "Two to the power of one hundred thousand to one against and falling." Ford recognizes this as a measure of probability, but doesn't know what else to make of the announcement—other than that the figure refers to something quite improbable.

Not only is the idea of improbability something that readers have surely picked up on by this point, it is also something of which the characters themselves are suddenly cognizant. Ford, for instance, knows that the computerized voice he hears has just read a figure of probability. However, he has no idea why this has happened—putting him in the same position as the reader.

"Ford," Arthur gasps, "you're turning into a penguin." The intercom voice then returns and recites another measure of probability. Afterwards, it tells Arthur and Ford to relax because they're safe, even if Ford has turned into a penguin. Arthur, for his part, notices that his limbs are detaching from his body. "Welcome to the Starship **Heart of Gold**," says the voice. "Please do not be alarmed by anything you see or hear around you. You are bound to feel some initial ill effects as you have been rescued from certain death at an improbability level of two to the power of two hundred and seventy-six thousand to one against—possibly much higher. We are now cruising at a level of two to the power of twenty-five thousand to one against and falling, and we will be restoring normality just as soon as we are sure what is normal anyway."

It's worth considering what the computerized voice says to Arthur and Ford about their rescue. Although their survival was highly improbable, it obviously wasn't impossible. After all, they were saved. Nonetheless, the computer tells them that they were rescued from "certain death at an improbability level of" 2^276,000 to 1. This, of course, is a contradiction, since "certain death" would mean that there was no probability at all of Arthur and Ford surviving. Once again, then, Adams provides readers with an absurd explanation that ultimately devolves into meaninglessness.

"Arthur!" Ford says. "This is fantastic! We've been picked up by a ship powered by the Infinite Improbability Drive!" He then goes on to explain that he has heard rumors of this device but has always assumed it didn't really exist. Despite his enthusiasm, though, Arthur has a hard time paying attention, for he's busy trying to keep an "infinite amount of monkeys" from entering the room to discuss their script for *Hamlet*.

Until this moment, Adams's preoccupation with improbability and absurdity has seemed like nothing more than a humorous fascination. Now, though, it becomes clear that the notion of improbability is central to the very plot of the novel itself. In other words, this unlikely story is essentially driven by the very idea of unlikeliness.

CHAPTER 10

Adams describes the Infinite Improbability Drive, explaining that it enables one to cross "vast interstellar distances in a mere nothingth of a second." This, he says, is the story of its creation: a group of scientists have for a long time been able to generate "small amounts of *finite* improbability by simply hooking the logic circuits of a Bambleweeny 57 Sub-Meson Brain to an atomic vector plotter suspended in a strong Brownian Motion producer (say a nice hot cup of tea)." However, nobody knew how to make a machine that would generate *infinite* improbability, which would enable a spaceship to propel itself "across the mind-paralyzing distances between the farthest stars." After considerable amounts of research, these scientists declared that "such a machine was virtually impossible."

What's remarkable about Adams's description of the Infinite Improbability Drive is that it sounds as if he's actually explaining something when, in reality, he's not. Again, he uses make-believe terms like "a mere nothingth of a second," thereby making it impossible for readers to follow the logic of his explanation. What's more, Adams doesn't say anything about how generating "infinite improbability" would cause a spaceship to fly "across the mind-paralyzing distances between the farthest stars." Instead, he gives readers the semblance of an explanation, leaving them to struggle with the specific details and ultimately parodying the idea that everything in fiction must adhere to logic.

Thinking about the problem of creating an infinite improbability machine, a young student realized that if "such a machine is a *virtual* impossibility, then it must logically be a *finite* improbability." From there, he understood that all he needed to do was "work out exactly how improbable it is, feed that figure into the finite improbability generator, give it a fresh cup of really hot tea…and turn it on!" The only thing that surprised him more than his ability to create this coveted machine, Adams notes, is that a group of scientists lynched him after his breakthrough because they "finally realized that the one thing they really couldn't stand was a smart-ass."

In this section, Adams once again provides an explanation that doesn't actually explain anything at all. When he suggests that a "virtual impossibility" is equivalent to a "finite improbability," he uses wordplay—not science—to advance his description. Even if this logic were sound, the young student then uses a fake machine (a "finite improbability generator") that runs on hot tea. In turn, Adams makes it clear that readers aren't expected to understand the underlying logic of the Infinite Improbability Drive. Indeed, his explanations do little more than encourage readers to embrace the fact that they simply don't need to fully comprehend every plot point in order to follow this novel's story.

CHAPTER 11

In the **Heart of Gold**'s main cabin, Zaphod and Trillian listen to the computerized voice read out measures of probability. "*Four to one against and falling,*" the voice calls out. "*Three to one…two…one…probability factor of one to one…we have normality, I repeat we have normality. Anything you still can't cope with is therefore your own problem.*" Zaphod turns to Trillian and asks what she thinks of the situation they're in—whom have they picked up, and if it's a good idea to take on hitchhikers after having stolen the Galaxy's most famous spaceship. Trillian tells him it's not worth thinking about, since they had no choice: the Heart of Gold picked up the hitchhikers on its own. "But that's incredible," Zaphod says. "No, Zaphod," Trillian replies. "Just very very improbable."

Again, Adams emphasizes the role that improbability plays in this novel. Even the characters themselves find the events that unfold in this plot hard to believe. One thing worth noting is that such outlandishness actually challenges "normality," forcing readers and characters alike to question the things they take for granted in everyday life. "Anything you still can't cope with is […] your own problem," the Heart of Gold's computer says, suggesting that sometimes even regular notions can be as hard to accept as highly improbable events.

Trillian sends a robot named Marvin to fetch the hitchhikers. "I think you ought to know I'm feeling very depressed," Marvin mutters. After some convincing, he finally leaves the cabin and goes looking for Arthur and Ford, who are beginning to feel a bit more normal, especially since their surroundings have at last become the recognizable interior of a spaceship. Ford even finds a sales brochure that advertises the **Heart of Gold**'s most impressive features. "They make a big thing of the ship's cybernetics," he remarks, reading that all of the robots and computers onboard are equipped with GPP, or "Genuine People Personalities." "Sounds ghastly," Arthur says, at which point Marvin arrives and agrees, saying, "Absolutely ghastly. Just don't even talk about it." He then mocks the sales brochure, saying, "*All the doors in this spaceship have a cheerful and sunny disposition. It is their pleasure to open for you.*"

The fact that Marvin is depressed is (ironically) humorous, since robots don't have feelings of their own. This means that Marvin was specifically programmed to be sad and lethargic—two qualities that are fairly undesirable in a robot. Instead of eagerly attending to his human masters' needs, he complains about life, calling it "ghastly" and informing Trillian that he is "feeling very depressed." This, it seems, is what the programmers thought might seem like a "Genuine People Personality." In turn, Adams is able to suggest that depression and general discontent are integral to the human experience.

"Come on," Marvin says to Ford and Arthur, "I've been ordered to take you down to the bridge. Here I am, brain the size of a planet and they ask me to take you down to the bridge. Call that *job satisfaction*? 'Cos I don't." When Ford asks which government runs this spaceship, Marvin tells him that it has been stolen by Zaphod Beeblebrox, and something "extraordinary happen[s]" to Ford's face, as "at least five entirely separate and distinct expressions of shock and amazement pile up on it in a jumbled mess." Moving through one last door, he turns to Arthur and says, "Did that robot say Zaphod Beeblebrox?"

By giving Marvin such deep depression, Adams pokes fun at the desire to create things that seem authentic or "genuine." Indeed, this attempt has led Marvin's programmers to make a rather useless and unpleasant robot, all for the purpose of trying to give him a real "personality."

CHAPTER 12

Back in the main cabin, Trillian asks Zaphod if he can find any hidden meaning in the coordinates where they accidentally picked up the hitchhikers. As he thinks aloud in what seems to be a very stupid way, she wonders about his intelligence. She wonders if he pretends to be stupid to catch people off guard and force them to think for him. Alternatively, she wonders if he actually *is* stupid. "He was renowned for being amazingly clever and quite clearly was so," Adams notes, "but not all the time, which obviously worried him, hence the act. He preferred people to be puzzled rather than contemptuous. This above all appeared to Trillian to be genuinely stupid, but she could no longer be bothered to argue about it."

If Zaphod merely pretends to be stupid, it's possible that he does so as a way of gaining power over people. In the same way that his job is to hide where true governmental power lies, he might obfuscate his intelligence so that people expect less from him. Indeed, he prefers "people to be puzzled" about him, something that gives him a certain control over his relationships.

Trillian consults a map of the universe and isolates the area where they picked up the hitchhikers, pointing out that it's in the same sector as where she originally joined Zaphod. "Hey, yeah," he says, marveling at how coincidental this is, especially since they were—at the time of picking up the hitchhikers—supposed to be moving through a different part of the galaxy. Annoyed, Trillian reminds him that this is because they're using the Improbability Drive to travel. "You explained it to me yourself," she says. "We pass through every point in the Universe." Wanting to figure out just how improbable it was to take on these hitchhikers in the same location that Trillian originally joined him, Zaphod orders the main onboard computer to solve the problem. However, its cheery disposition annoys him so much that he decides to answer the question himself using a pencil and paper.

Once more, the notion of improbability comes to the forefront of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. *In this instance, improbability is something that Zaphod believes he can solve, even though it is infinite and therefore something that would be very difficult to consider in any tangible way. In fact, figuring out the probability of something deemed "infinitely improbable" would effectively render it a* finite *improbability. Yet again, then, the novel's underlying logic contradicts itself, ultimately creating nothing but meaninglessness and absurdity.*

CHAPTER 13

When Arthur and Ford enter the **Heart of Gold**'s main cabin, Zaphod casually greets Ford in a purposefully nonchalant manner. "Ford, hi, how are you? Glad you could drop in," he says. Ford matches Zaphod's nonchalance, explaining off-handedly to Arthur that Zaphod is a friend and a distant cousin. Arthur then reveals that he too has met Zaphod before. When Arthur was at a party on earth, Zaphod prevented him from going home with a girl he was flirting with. "I wasn't doing very well with her," he admits. "I'd been trying all evening." When he finally got a chance to talk to her, Arthur says, Zaphod sidled up, interrupted them, and said, "Hey, doll, is this guy boring you? Why don't you talk to me instead? I'm from a different planet."

The fact that everybody on this spaceship has met each other before is quite improbable. Indeed, this would be rather remarkable even if the group were casually dining in a restaurant. In this case, though, they have just encountered each other after Ford and Arthur literally fell through a hole in space. As if this isn't unlikely enough, they find themselves saying hello like old friends, hardly perturbed by the incredible coincidental nature of their circumstances. As such, Adams once again emphasizes the extent to which improbability—and absurdity—factor into the plot of this novel.

After telling this story, Arthur is flabbergasted to find the woman who rejected him standing next to Zaphod. "You must admit he did turn out to be from another planet," says Trillian, referring to Zaphod. "Tricia McMillan?" Arthur asks. "What are you doing here?" Trillian responds by telling him that she left earth before it was destroyed. "After all, with a degree in math and another in astrophysics what else was there to do? It was either that or the dole queue again on Monday." Unsettled by just how many strange coincidences have just taken place, Zaphod asks Trillian if "this sort of thing" is going to happen each time they use the Improbability Drive. "Very probably, I'm afraid," she responds.

When Trillian says that there was nothing left for her to do on Earth after earning "a degree in math and another in astrophysics," Adams mocks academia, ultimately suggesting that rigorous study doesn't—like many people believe—prepare a person for a lifetime of satisfying work, but instead renders them unfit for and unsatisfied with regular employment. This is why Trillian says that she would be in the "dole queue" on the following Monday if she hadn't left Earth (the dole queue is a line where people await unemployment checks).

CHAPTER 14

As the **Heart of Gold** speeds through "the night of space," its passengers have trouble sleeping. To pass the time, Trillian watches her two pet mice, whom she brought from earth in a cage. While she does this, Zaphod finds himself unable to sleep because he senses something strange going on in his mind. Namely, he feels as if he won't "let himself think about" something, but he doesn't know what it is. As everybody but Arthur abandons the attempt to get some rest, they convene in the control room, where Trillian tells Zaphod that they're nearing the planet he has been wanting to find. This planet, he tells Ford, is "the most improbable planet that ever existed."

Strangely enough, Zaphod seems to be keeping something from himself. Ironically, this puts him in the same position in which he puts everybody else. He normally tries to hide his thoughts and intelligence from other people so that he has a certain amount of power or control over them. Now, though, he feels as if he's keeping himself in the dark, thereby preventing himself from feeling in control of even his own mind.


CHAPTER 15

Adams provides an excerpt from *The Guide*'s entry for a planet called **Magrathea**. In "ancient times," it reads, the Galaxy was rich. In fact, people became so wealthy that their lives began to feel "rather dull and niggly." They attributed this discontent to the various insufficiencies of their own worlds, deciding that they "settled on" the wrong planets. As such, they began hiring specialists to design "custom-made luxury planets." This project took place on Magrathea, "where hyperstatial engineers sucked matter through white holes in space to form it into dream planets" that were "made to meet the exacting standards that the Galaxy's richest men naturally came to expect." Unfortunately, this business venture was so profitable that Magrathea became significantly richer than any other planet, throwing the Galaxy into "abject poverty" that instigated an economic crash. Since then, Magrathea has "disappeared," and people no longer believe it ever existed at all.

According to this entry in The Hitchhiker's Guide, *a general sense of discontent is something that afflicts people throughout the Galaxy. At the beginning of the novel, Adams makes it clear that humans are saddled with unhappiness, which they try to alleviate by attaching significance to otherwise mundane concepts or objects. Apparently, though, earthlings aren't the only species to struggle with this kind of discontent. In the same way that humans focus on money in an attempt to make themselves happier, other species fixate on the idea of buying new planets. Needless to say, both techniques are quite materialistic and most likely do nothing to improve a person's sense of fulfillment.*

CHAPTER 16

Arthur suddenly wakes up and finds Ford shouting at Zaphod. "You're crazy, Zaphod," says the wayward hitchhiker. "**Magrathea** is a myth, a fairy story." To prove that they are indeed orbiting Magrathea, Zaphod wakes up the onboard computer, who says, "Hi there! This is Eddie, your shipboard computer, and I'm feeling just great, guys, and I know I'm just going to get a bundle of kicks out of any program you care to run through me." Eddie then confirms that the ship is approaching Magrathea. Although Zaphod finds himself annoyed by Eddie's chipper attitude, he asks the computer to let them see the planet. When Magrathea blinks into clarity on the onboard screen, Ford clings to his doubt, skeptically asking why Zaphod wants to reach such a planet in the first place. Unable to give a straightforward answer, Zaphod says he thinks it's the "fame" and "money" that attracts him.

When Ford asks Zaphod why he wants to find Magrathea, the two-headed president can't deliver a legitimate answer. Grasping for a response, he guesses that what must appeal to him about the planet is its "fame" and its "money"—this makes sense, considering that Zaphod is a superficial person. However, it's worth noting that his inability to perfectly pinpoint why he wants to find Magrathea is in keeping with his earlier feeling that he is hiding something from himself. Whereas most people would be able to articulate what's motivating them to do something, Zaphod finds himself unable to do so, suggesting that he is truly in the dark about his own intentions.


CHAPTERS 17-18

As the **Heart of Gold** glides ever closer to **Magrathea**, a transmission from the ghostly planet—which has been inactive for 5,000,000 years—plays over the ship's speakers. "*Greetings to you*," a voice says. "*This is a recorded announcement, as I'm afraid we're all out at the moment. The commercial council of Magrathea thanks you for your esteemed visit but regrets that the entire planet is temporarily closed for business. Thank you. If you would care to leave your name and the address of a planet where you can be contacted, kindly speak when you hear the tone.*" Trillian points out that the planet seems to want them to leave, but Zaphod ignores this, saying that it's "just a recording."

Again, Adams infuses the plot of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy *with a humorous strain of absurdity, this time treating an entire planet as if it's a small business. When Magrathea transmits a pre-recorded message to the Heart of Gold, it presents itself like a message one might record on a telephone answering machine. As such, Adams reminds readers to refrain from taking the plot of the novel too seriously.*

The spaceship draws closer to **Magrathea**, and another recorded message sounds over the speakers: "*We would like to assure you that as soon as our business is resumed announcements will be made in all fashionable magazines and color supplements, when your clients will once again be able to select from all that's best in contemporary geography. Meanwhile, we thank our clients for their kind interest and would ask them to leave. Now.*" In defiance of his fellow passengers' desire to leave, Zaphod forges onward, eventually receiving a final message that politely informs everybody on the **Heart of Gold** that there are now two guided missiles making their way toward the spaceship.

Zaphod's determination to reach Magrathea is strange. After all, he claims that the only reason he wants to go to this planet is because it is famous and wealthy. Since these are somewhat feeble reasons to visit a planet in the first place, it doesn't make sense that he would be willing to risk his life under these circumstances. In turn, his relentless desire to continue onward suggests that there is something else that is secretly motivating him—whether or not he knows it.

"Hey, this is terrific!" Zaphod shouts. "Someone down there is trying to kill us!" When Arthur asks him what he's talking about, Zaphod points out that this means they "must be on to something." He then orders Eddie to take "evasive action," but Eddie informs them that the controls have been overridden by some external force. As the missiles near the ship, Ford tries to steer the craft manually, ultimately turning them upside down and turning them around so that they begin traveling toward the missiles. In a moment of panic, Arthur has a brilliant idea. Running to the spaceship's console, he activates the Improbability Drive. Suddenly, everything is calm again, though the interior of the ship has undergone a redesign. "What the hell happened?" asks Zaphod, who finds himself lounging in a "wickerwork sun chair."

When Zaphod gleefully says that he "must be on to something" because of the fact that somebody is trying to shoot the Heart of Gold, it once again becomes clear that he doesn't know what, exactly, he's looking for. All he knows, it seems, is that he wants to land on Magrathea. This lack of knowledge about his own intentions once more confirms that Zaphod is keeping something from himself, operating with only a partial understanding of his own whims.

The crew on the **Heart of Gold** discovers that the Improbability Drive has turned the missiles into a sperm whale and a bowl of petunias, respectively. As the sperm whale careens toward **Magrathea**, it springs into thought, thinking, "Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?" Gradually, it begins to piece together the facts of its existence, delighted by the sensation of air rushing over its body and by the feeling of being alive. "What's this thing suddenly coming toward me very fast?" it wonders. "So big and flat and round, it needs a big wide-sounding name like…ground! That's it! That's a good name—ground! I wonder if it will be friends with me?" With this, it splatters on the surface of Magrathea. The bowl of petunias, on the other hand, thinks only one thing: "Oh no, not again."

The sperm whale's brief quest to discover itself once again signals Adams's interest in the ways in which knowledge—and the pursuit of knowledge—inform a living being's existence. The fact that the sperm whale asks probing questions about itself suggests that this kind of self-aware consciousness is an inherent part of being alive. At the same time, Adams makes fun of these grandiose questions, as made evident by the fact that this philosophical whale splatters across the surface of Magrathea only moments after engaging in such heady inquiries.

CHAPTERS 19-20

The **Heart of Gold** lands safely on **Magrathea**. As everybody prepares to venture onto the planet's surface, Trillian discovers that her pet mice have escaped their cage, but nobody except her seems to care. In fact, they're too preoccupied with the Heart of Gold's new voice, which Zaphod explains he changed in the hopes of altering the system's cloying personality. After a brief argument with Eddie—who has taken on the identity of a nagging parent—the group finally exits the spaceship and makes its way onto the barren landscape of Magrathea. Before long, they come upon a crater created by the sperm whale's impact. To Zaphod's delight, the whale's crash has opened a hole to "the interior of the planet," which he decides to enter. Excited to venture into a place "where no man has trod these five million years," he sets off.

Zaphod's seemingly reckless obsession with Magrathea continues in this scene, as he joyously ventures into a hole in a mysterious planet. If he has ever had any good sense or capacity for self-preservation, he has certainly left it behind at this point. What's most absurd about his enthusiastic attitude is that he doesn't even seem to understand why he is so curious about Magrathea, a fact that once again reminds readers that Zaphod has a strange relationship with his own mind.

As the group (minus Arthur and Marvin, who remain above ground) stomps down a passageway, Ford asks Zaphod why he wanted to find **Magrathea** in the first place. Zaphod answers by saying that he stole the **Heart of Gold** "to look for a lot of things," including the planet. Ultimately, though, he doesn't actually know what he's looking for. "I only know as much about myself as my mind can work out under its current conditions. And its current conditions are not good," he says. "I freewheel a lot. I get an idea to do something, and, hey, why not, I do it. I reckon I'll become President of the Galaxy, and it just happens, it's easy. I decide to steal this ship. I decide to look for Magrathea, and it all just happens. Yeah, I work out how it can best be done, right, but it always works out."

In this moment, Zaphod confirms that his decision-making process is fairly odd. He even admits that his mind isn't currently in "good" condition. Nevertheless, he trusts himself enough to "freewheel" his way through life, following his impulses even when he's not sure why he wants to do something. This statement reinforces his suspicion that he is keeping something from himself.

Continuing his monologue about the nature of his decision making, Zaphod explains that if he stops to think about why he has done something, he suddenly has an urge to stop pondering his actions. Last night, he says, he was thinking about this strange phenomenon. Wanting to get to the bottom of his mental process, he went to "the ship's medical bay" and plugged himself into "the encephalographic screen," where he looked at an overview of "all the tests [he] had to go through under Government medical officers before [his] nomination for presidency could be properly ratified." After searching in vain for quite some time, he finally discovered "a whole section in the middle of both [of his] brains that related only to each other and not to anything else around them." According to Zaphod, "some bastard had cauterized all the synapses and electronically traumatized" these sections of his brain.

When Zaphod says that he found two sections of his brain that "relate only to each other and not to anything else around them," what he's saying is that somebody has created a secret network between his two brain. In other words, the rest of his brain doesn't know what's going on in these two sections. This, it seems, is why he has been feeling like he's keeping something from himself—indeed, he's hiding something from the rest of his brain.

When Ford asks who Zaphod thinks did this to him, Zaphod says that the person burned their initials into his brain—a signature of sorts. The letters that he found are "Z.B.": Zaphod Beeblebrox. Just as he reveals this to Ford and Trillian, "a steel shutter slam[s] down behind them and gas start[s] to pour into the chamber." Right before the three friends pass out, Zaphod says, "I'll tell you about it later."

Despite the fact that Zaphod is often characterized as a bit stupid, it's worth noting that his suspicions about his own brain have been right all along. After all, he has had a hunch that he is hiding something from himself, and this has turned out to be true in a very literal sense, considering that he was the one to tamper with his own brain in order to keep something hidden.

CHAPTER 21

On the surface of **Magrathea**, Arthur walks around feeling bored. To alleviate the tedium of waiting, he skims *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, reading a strange story about Zaphod himself, who once convinced a studious graduate student during a night of drinking to get to the bottom of an all-consuming question: what happens to the countless ballpoint pens that have been lost throughout the Galaxy? Closing *The Guide*, Arthur strikes up an idle conversation with Marvin, who calls the magnificent double-sun sunset "rubbish." Leaving the depressed robot alone, Arthur wanders around as night falls rapidly. In the quick onslaught of darkness, he suddenly walks into an old man.

The story that Arthur reads in The Hitchhiker's Guide *has little to do with the novel's primary plot. However, it once again demonstrates Adams's penchant for absurdist humor and his love of mocking academia. By writing about a graduate student who becomes obsessed with such a trivial project, Adams parodies the intellectual tendency to become absorbed in meaningless topics.*

CHAPTER 22

"You choose a cold night to visit our dead planet," says the old man Arthur has just walked into. He is wearing a long robe and standing by an "aircar." He tells Arthur that the Magratheans have been sleeping since the crash of the Galactic economy 5,000,000 years ago. Since custom-built planets are "luxury commodit[ies]," they've decided to hibernate until the recession ends. "The computers were index-linked to the Galactic stock-market prices, you see," says the old man, "so that we'd all be revived when everybody else had rebuilt the economy enough to afford our rather expensive services." He then urges Arthur to get into his "aircar" so they can travel into the "bowels" of **Magrathea**, where his people are slowly waking. "What is your name, by the way?" Arthur asks. Pausing with a look of sadness on his face, the old man says, "My name is Slartibartfast."

As made evident by the fact that they decided to sleep through the economic recession, the Magratheans are money-minded people. Of course, this isn't a particularly responsible thing to do, since the Magratheans' economic success is precisely what threw the galaxy into "abject poverty" in the first place, but it's clear that they aren't concerned with such matters. Instead, they are simply interested in building "luxury commodity[ies]," unbothered by their own greedy power.

CHAPTER 23

"It is an important and popular fact that things are not always what they seem," notes Adams. Humans, for instance, have assumed for centuries that they're the most intelligent beings on Earth, but this was never true. In fact, dolphins were smarter, and "had long known of the impending destruction of the planet." In fact, the dolphins even tried to warn humankind of the danger, "but most of their communications were misinterpreted as amusing attempts to punch footballs or whistle for tidbits, so they eventually gave up and left the Earth by their own means." Apparently, there was only one other species that was smarter than the dolphins, "and they spent a lot of their time in behavioral research laboratories running round inside wheels and conducting frighteningly elegant and subtle experiments on man. The fact that once again man completely misinterpreted this relationship was entirely according to these creatures' plans."

Although this section may seem a bit random given the fact that it doesn't have much to do with what's currently happening to Arthur or Zaphod, Ford, and Trillian, the idea that "things are not always what they seem" is a useful lens through which to examine the novel. Indeed, this is a story that draws heavily from the notion that life is full of the unexpected and the unpredictable. The fact that dolphins and a certain kind of lab animal are smarter than humans proves this point, reminding readers to move through The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy *with an open mind, ready to reconsider even the most absurd notions.*

CHAPTER 24

When Arthur and Slartibartfast arrive on the factory floor deep inside **Magrathea**, Arthur looks with "a kind of wonderful horror" at the magnificent and odd things suspended from the ceiling—the "spherical shapes" and "delicate traceries of metal and light." Arthur asks if the Magratheans are starting their business again after their long hibernation, but Slartibartfast tells him that "the Galaxy isn't nearly rich enough to support" that yet. "No," he continues, "we've been awakened to perform just one extraordinary commission for very…special clients from another dimension. It may interest you…there in the distance in front of us." Following Slartibartfast's outstretched finger, Arthur catches a glimpse of his home planet. "The Earth…" he says in awe. "Well," replies Slartibartfast, "the Earth Mark Two in fact."

When Slartibartfast points out a new version of the Earth to Arthur, it slowly becomes clear that Magratheans must have built the original Earth. This means that Earth was a custom-designed luxury planet—a staggering notion. In turn, Adams reinforces the idea that "things are not always what they seem," producing yet another outlandish plot point that upends readers' (and Arthur's) expectations.

Dumbfounded, Arthur asks if Slartibartfast made the Earth. "Oh yes," the old man answers. "Did you ever go to a place…I think it was called Norway?" Arthur says that he never made it to Norway, to which Slartibartfast says, "Pity, that was one of mine. Won an award, you know. Lovely crinkly edges. I was most upset to hear of its destruction." As Arthur grumbles, Slartibartfast muses, "Yes. Five minutes later and it wouldn't have mattered so much." This confuses Arthur, but Slartibartfast only says, "The mice were furious." "Yes, well, so I expect were the dogs and cats and duck-billed platypuses," says Arthur sarcastically. "Ah," responds Slartibartfast, "but they hadn't paid for it, you see, had they?" He then reveals that Earth was "commissioned, paid for, and run by mice," and that it was destroyed "five minutes before the completion of the purpose for which it was built."

Many of the surprising plot twists in Adams's novel are simple reversals of things that humans take for granted. For instance, humans see mice as insignificant creatures who—at their best—can be kept as pets. When Slartibartfast says that mice "commissioned" and "paid for" Earth, though, suddenly everything Arthur thinks he knows about this small species upends itself, leaving him to grasp for answers in the face of this improbable turn of events.

Because Earth was destroyed "five minutes before" it fulfilled its purpose, Slartibartfast explains, the Magratheans have been hired to build it again. Arthur, for his part, has trouble coming to terms with the fact that his planet was run by mice, but Slartibartfast maintains that mice "are not quite as they appear." Indeed, they are "merely the protrusion into our dimension of vastly hyperintelligent pandimensional beings." He then adds that these beings have been experimenting on humans. Hearing this, Arthur insists that *humans* were the ones experimenting on *mice*, but Slartibartfast helps him see that the mice manipulated humans into thinking they were in control when they really weren't. "How better to disguise their real natures, and how better to guide your thinking. Suddenly running down a maze the wrong way, eating the wrong bit of cheese, unexpectedly dropping dead of myxomatosis."

Yet again, Adams proves that true power and control comes when the submissive party doesn't even know it is submitting to the will of the dominant party. For years, humans have believed that they've been studying mice, but in reality mice have been studying them, manipulating humans by obfuscating their own power. This subtle technique has enabled them to "guide" human thought while simultaneously avoiding suspicion.

CHAPTER 25

Adams states that life is full of difficult questions. Millions of years ago, he explains, "a race of hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" got tired of "the constant bickering about the meaning of life." As such, they decided to build a supercomputer to answer their questions. "The size of a small city," this computer was named Deep Thought. When Deep Thought was finally turned on, two programmers named Lunkwill and Fook asked it if it was the most powerful computer "in all time." Deep Thought answered by saying that it was the *second* most powerful—the first, it explained, had not yet been built; this computer would be Deep Thought's predecessor. Moving on, the programmers asked Deep Thought to tell them "the Answer" to "Life, the Universe and Everything." Deep Thought confirmed that there was indeed a "simple answer," but told them that it would take some thinking.

Although the individuals who design Deep Thought are "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings," it's worth noting that they're not that different from humans. After all, Adams has already made clear that one of the most pressing conundrums in human history has been the discontent that comes from wanting to find meaning in life. Like humans, these hyperintelligent beings also want answers regarding fundamentally existential problems, so they design a supercomputer that will tell them the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." The fact that this desire to find meaning in existence is so ubiquitous ultimately suggests that such considerations are simply part of being alive, regardless of what dimension an individual lives in.

Suddenly, two philosophers burst into the room where Lunkwill and Fook are talking to Deep Thought. These men are Majikthise and Vroomfondel, and they are part of the Amalgamated Union of Philosophers, Sages, Luminaries and Other Thinking Persons. What they want—what they demand—is for Deep Thought to be turned off. "You just let the machines get on with the adding up," says Majikthise, "and we'll take care of the eternal verities, thank you very much. You want to check your legal position, you do, mate. Under law the Quest for Ultimate Truth is quite clearly the inalienable prerogative of your working thinkers. Any bloody machine goes and actually *finds* it and we're straight out of a job, aren't we?" Jumping in, Vroomfondel adds, "That's right, we demand rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty!"

The outrage expressed by Majikthise and Vroomfondel once again highlights the ways in which intense intellectual thought can sometimes lose sight of its intended purpose. Majikthise and Vroomfondel have spent their entire lives on a "Quest for Ultimate Truth," but now they suddenly want to stop Deep Thought from coming to a conclusion about this "ultimate truth." In doing so, they reveal that they are more concerned with the actual process of engaging in philosophical thought than in finding an answer. Also, they want to ensure that they have job security. Adams perfectly outlines the absurdity of this outlook by having Vroomfondel demand "rigidly defined areas of doubt and uncertainty," which are two things that are, by nature, vague and "uncertain."

Interrupting the philosophers, Deep Thought points out that its "circuits are now irrevocably committed to calculating the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything," but that the program will take 7,500,000 years to run. "It occurs to me," Deep Thought says, "that running a program like this is bound to create an enormous amount of popular publicity for the whole area of philosophy in general. Everyone's going to have their own theories about what answer I'm eventually going to come up with, and who better to capitalize on that media market than you yourselves? So long as you can keep disagreeing with each other violently enough and maligning each other in the popular press, and so long as you have clever agents, you can keep yourselves on the gravy train for life." This satisfies the philosophers, who happily turn around and leave the disappointed progammers alone.

In this moment, Deep Thought displays a shrewd understanding of how fame works. "So long as you can keep disagreeing with each other violently enough and maligning each other in the popular press," the computer says, "[…] you can keep yourselves on the gravy train for life." Saying this, Deep Thought points to the fact that these philosophers simply want to argue with one another about conflicting theories regarding the nature of life. For people like Majikthise and Vroomfondel, the field of philosophy is more about exploring various ideas than it is about finding answers. Because of this, they're happy to hear that the program will take 7,500,000 years to come to a conclusion—a period of time during which they can attract attention by setting forth their own conjectures about the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything."

CHAPTERS 26-27

After listening to Slartibartfast tell him this story about Deep Thought, Arthur admits he doesn't understand what the tale has to do with Earth. Slartibartfast tells him that this is because he hasn't heard the whole story, then invites him to his office, where he plays him a recording of the "great day of the Answer," which was documented on a Sens-O-Tape 7,500,000 years after Lunkwill and Fook asked Deep Thought about the meaning of "Life, the Universe and Everything." Slartibartfast hands Arthur two wires, which transport the earthling into a virtual world, where he can watch the recorded proceedings. Hovering above the scene, Arthur observes two hyperintelligent pandimensional beings address a large crowd. "Never again will we wake up in the morning and think *Who am I? What is My purpose in Life?*" yells one of them, and the crowd goes wild with applause.

Once again, Adams shows that humans aren't the only living beings tormented by existential questions. Even these "hyperintelligent pandimensional beings" ask questions like "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose in life?" Interestingly enough, though, what these hyperintelligent beings don't consider is that questions like these are highly specific to each individual. The question Deep Thought is about to answer has to do with "Life, the Universe and Everything," meaning that it probably won't solve the specific existential quandaries that people pose to themselves in moments of individual uncertainty. Nonetheless, the crowd is still eager to hear Deep Thought's response.

Using the Sens-O-Tape, Arthur drifts into a room where two men named Loonquawl and Pouchg address Deep Thought as it rouses itself to provide an answer to the question of "Life, the Universe, and Everything." Deep Thought confirms that it has found this answer, adding, "Though I don't think that you're going to like it." After awkwardly deflecting Loonquawl and Pouchg's enthusiasm and stalling for a moment, Deep Thought finally delivers the highly sought-after answer. "Forty-two," it says.

Deep Thought's answer to the meaning of "Life, the Universe and Everything" is so simple that it is—in a way—extremely complicated. Not only does this numerical answer have little to do with each person's individual uncertainties, but it doesn't even relate in any discernable way to the original question. In turn, Adams pokes fun at the desire to interrogate such profound ideas, subtly suggesting that people ought to simply live and appreciate their lives without worrying so much about essentially unanswerable questions.

CHAPTER 28

"Fort-two!" shouts Loonquawl. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?" Defensively, Deep Thought assures the pandimensional beings that the answer has been checked quite "thoroughly." "I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is," Deep Thought posits. Pouchg and Loonquawl find this absurd, repeating that they want to know the answer to "the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything." Again, though, Deep Thought challenges them, asking what this question actually *is*. When the pandimensional beings are unable to think up a satisfactory response, Deep Thought suggests that once they understand "what the question actually is," then they'll comprehend the meaning of the answer.

Deep Thought's point is a valid one: the pandimensional beings haven't asked a straightforward question. They have simply asked for the answer to "Life, the Universe and Everything." This, of course, is less of a question than it is a demand—and one that is broad in its parameters. As a result, they don't even know what they've asked this supercomputer to solve, rendering their question meaningless despite its seemingly grandiose and profound qualities.

Exasperated, Loonquawl and Pouchg ask Deep Thought to simply tell them the "Ultimate Question," but the computer informs them that this is impossible. However, Deep Thought assures them, there is a computer that *can* tell them what they need to know. "I speak of none but the computer that is to come after me, Deep Thought says. "A computer whose merest operational parameters I am not worthy to calculate—and yet I will design it for you. A computer that can calculate the Question to the Ultimate Answer, a computer of such infinite and subtle complexity that organic life itself shall form part of its operational matrix. And you yourselves shall take on new forms and go down into the computer to navigate its ten-million-year program!" Deep Thought decides that this supercomputer will be called Earth.

Finally, Adams reveals to readers why the Earth was created: to help these pandimensional beings—who are clearly the mice who "commissioned" and "paid for" the planet's construction—understand "the Question to the Ultimate Answer." At this point, their quest for supposed truth has become so convoluted and roundabout that the answer they seek is actually a question. This, of course, is awkward and difficult to track—evidence of Adams's desire to portray such lofty philosophical investigations as absurd.

CHAPTER 29

While Arthur learns about the hyperintelligent pandimensional beings in Slartibartfast's office, Trillian and Ford try to rouse Zaphod from his gas-induced slumber. Finally, they manage to wake him by telling him he's currently sleeping on a floor of gold. Jumping up, he examines his surroundings, which Ford explains are made up of **Magrathea**'s catalog of the worlds they've built. "Trillian and I came round a while ago," Ford says. "We shouted and yelled till somebody came and then carried on shouting and yelling till they got fed up and put us in their planet catalog to keep us busy till they were ready to deal with us. This is all Sens-O-Tape." Above, a sign appears in the air that reads: *Whatever your tastes, Magrathea can cater for you. We are not proud.*

The sign that appears in the air about Magrathea's willingness to "cater" to all kinds of "tastes" illustrates just how preoccupied with money this planet is. Unashamed, the Magratheans will build whatever a client asks them to build. It is this kind of capitalistic mentality that has rendered them the richest planet in the Galaxy. This mentality is also probably why they inadvertently threw the Galaxy into an economic recession: their desire to be rich and powerful is boundless, and they don't seem to care about the consequences of their financial pursuits.

As the Sens-O-Tape shifts around them, Zaphod continues telling Ford and Trillian about the oddity he found in his brains. "Whatever happened to my mind, I did it," he says. "And I did it in such a way that it wouldn't be detected by the Government screening tests. And I wasn't to know anything about it myself. Pretty crazy, right?" Going on, he says, "What's so secret that I can't let anybody know I know it, not the Galactic Government, not even myself? And the answer is I don't know. Obviously. But I put a few things together and I can begin to guess." He then talks about when he first decided to run for president, which was "shortly after the death of President Yooden Vranx."

In this scene, Zaphod once again confirms that he must be the person who went into his brain and tampered with it, ultimately hiding something from himself. This, it seems, must have been necessary so that other people—the "Galactic Government"—wouldn't know his plans, whatever they are. If power lies in secrecy, Zaphod has the ultimate power, since he himself doesn't even know what he's doing. This, of course, is yet another one of Adams's ways of creating absurdity in this text, ultimately testing his own theory about power and secrecy and applying it to rather ridiculous circumstances.

When Zaphod was young he and Ford hijacked Yooden Vranx's "Arcturan megafreighter." These ships were hard to infiltrate, but Zaphod managed to do it. This impressed Yooden, so he welcomed the two youngsters aboard and partied with them before teleporting them to a high security prison. Now, Zaphod reveals that Yooden visited him right before he died and told him about the **Heart of Gold**. "It was his idea that I should steal it," he adds. This, it seems, is why Zaphod decided to become president in the first place. It's also why Zaphod altered his brain to hide his plans. "I don't seem to be letting myself into any of my secrets," he says. "Still, I can understand that. I wouldn't trust myself further than I could spit a rat." Just then, a Magrathean enters and says, "The mice will see you now."

A rather mysterious character, Yooden Vranx factors into the plot of the novel rather late. Nonetheless, he serves an important role, providing Zaphod with a reason to steal the Heart of Gold and look for Magrathea. At the same time, though, Zaphod no longer knows what this reason was. As such, readers have essentially learned nothing new about why Zaphod decided to steal the spaceship and travel to Magrathea. In other words, Adams happily lets the plot of his novel devolve into uncertainty, allowing the story to forge onwards even without an underlying framework of meaning. In turn, he challenges conventional notions of plot structures in fiction, eschewing the idea that every single detail should be explained to readers.

CHAPTER 30

Back in Slartibartfast's office, Arthur and the old man discuss the fact that Deep Thought designed Earth, and that the Vogons destroyed it five minutes before the program was finished. "Ten million years of planning and work gone just like that," Slartibartfast says. Reflecting that an entire civilization could develop "five times over in that time," he adds, "Well, that's bureaucracy for you." Arthur says that he thinks he sensed this, since for his whole life he has felt as if something "big" and "sinister" has been going on. "No," Slartibartfast says, "that's just perfectly normal paranoia. Everyone in the Universe has that." He then outlines his personal philosophy, saying, "I always think 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."

Slartibartfast's personal philosophy provides a perfect framework for the entire novel. Indeed, Adams clearly endorses the idea of simply "keep[ing]" oneself "occupied" in the face of unanswerable questions. In fact, this is exactly what the novel itself has been doing for the past thirty chapters—none of the central characters seem to know why the things that are happening are taking place, but this hasn't stopped them from continuing to go through the motions. Similarly, readers know for a fact that Zaphod can't remember why he wanted to find Magrathea, and yet this hasn't kept them from continuing to read. As such, Adams intimates that life is an experience that ought to be lived, not a question that needs to be answered.

Slartibartfast tells Arthur that he won an award for designing Norway, but he doesn't attach too much significance to it—it's just an award. Now, he's tasked with designing Africa for the Earth Mark Two, but his bosses don't want him to give the continent fjords because they aren't "equatorial enough." Changing the subject, the old man tells Arthur that it's time for him to meet the mice. "Your arrival on the planet has caused considerable excitement. It has already been hailed, so I gather, as the third most improbable event in the history of the universe." Following Slartibartfast out of the office, Arthur dejectedly mutters, "I seem to be having tremendous difficulty with my life-style."

For Slartibartfast, designing planets is nothing more than a job. That he won an award for building Norway only emphasizes the fact that his involvement with the Earth is not nearly as meaningful as Arthur's. Hearing Slartibartfast talk about designing the Earth Mark Two surely makes Arthur feel like his home planet is nothing more than a business project, lending him a new perspective with which to examine his previous life.

CHAPTER 31

"It is of course well known that careless talk costs lives," Adams writes, "but the full scale of the problem is not always appreciated." In keeping with this, when Arthur says, "I seem to be having tremendous difficulty with my life-style," a "freak wormhole" opens in space and carries his words "to a distant Galaxy where strange and warlike beings [are] poised on the brink of frightful interstellar battle." The two war leaders are having a fateful meeting when Arthur's phrase floats between them. In one of their languages, this sentence is "the most dreadful insult imaginable." As a result, the two populations begin a long and horrific war. Thousands of years later, the two sides realize it was a simple mistake, uniting forces to wage war on Arthur's galaxy. They therefore launch a fleet of battleships toward Earth, all of which plummet into a dog's mouth.

This rather random aside once more exemplifies the fact that language can be an unwieldy thing, especially when taken out of context. Arthur's words—which in his own language amount to little more than a mild complaint—set off a long war, proving that even the simplest misinterpretation (or freak accident) can turn people against one another. In the end, though, Adams frames these kinds of misunderstandings as rather meaningless, as expressed by the fact that an entire fleet of battleships intended to decimate Earth end up doing absolutely nothing because they are—apparently—small enough to fit inside a dog's mouth.

Slartibartfast brings Arthur to a waiting room, where he finds his friends feasting on an exquisite lunch. After he greets them, he hears a tiny voice that says, "Welcome to lunch, Earth creature." Looking down, he sees Trillian's mice on the table. "Arthur," Trillian says, "this is Benjy mouse. And this is Frankie mouse." The mice, who are sitting inside what look like two futuristic whiskey glasses, greet him before dismissing Slartibartfast and informing him that they "won't be needing the new Earth any longer." As he exits, the old man rants angrily about the work he's already done on Africa.

At last, Adams reveals that Trillian's mice have been involved in the long-running experiment on Earth. This is without a doubt a great shock to Arthur, although it's worth keeping in mind that at this point—after so many ludicrous events—he is most likely becoming accustomed to even the most improbable twists.

"Now, Earth creature," says Benjy mouse, "the situation we have in effect is this. We have, as you know, been more or less running your planet for the last ten million years in order to find this wretched thing called the Ultimate Question." Interrupting, Arthur says, "Why?" In response, Frankie mouse says, "No—we already thought of that one, but it doesn't fit the answer. *Why? Forty-two*…you see, it doesn't work." He then admits that they're tired of running experiments on Earth and daunted by the idea of doing the entire thing again. "It was by the merest lucky chance that Benjy and I finished our particular job and left the planet early for a quick holiday, and have since manipulated our way back to **Magrathea** by the good offices of your friends." Magrathea, Benjy interjects, is a "gateway" back to their dimension.

Once more, the notion of power and control comes to the forefront of the novel, this time in the form of Benjy and Frankie's confession that they have been "running" Earth for "the last ten million years." Although Adams often frames human life as trivial and void of meaning, these mice seem to think otherwise. Indeed, they wouldn't spend so much time studying people like Arthur and Trillian if they didn't think that there was value in their actions. Unfortunately, though, the Vogons destroyed Earth before the mice ascertained the "Ultimate Question," leaving them in a state of uncertainty once again.

Since leaving Earth, Benjy and Frankie have received a very lucrative offer to "do the 5D chat show and lecture circuit" in their own dimension. "But we've got to have *product*, you see," Frankie says. "I mean, ideally we still need the Ultimate Question in some form or other." They need something, they tell Arthur, that "sounds good." This is why they need Arthur, who is "a last generation product of [the Earth's] computer matrix." This means that his brain is "an organic part of the penultimate configuration of the computer program." Because of this, the mice think that the Ultimate Question is "encoded" within him. "So we want to buy it off you," Benjy says. For a moment, Arthur thinks the mice want to buy the question from him, but they soon make clear what they really want: his entire brain.

In keeping with the fact that humans have been subject to the subtle manipulations of mice for the past ten million years, Arthur is suddenly forced to confront the idea that he has perhaps less agency than he'd like to think. After all, he is "a last generation product" of a "computer matrix." In this moment, then, he faces the overwhelming idea that he has been created to do something other than simply live a normal life. And although this surely terrifies him, it does mean that his life has not been utterly meaningless.

Arthur rears back in his chair as the mice try to convince him to give them his brain, saying that they can give him a simple electronic replacement. As he tries to inch away, the mice lift off the table in their glass cases and start moving toward Arthur. Meanwhile, Trillian, Ford, and Zaphod try to pull Arthur away while opening the door. Unfortunately, a group of heavily-armored Magratheans block their way. Miraculously, though, a planet-wide alarm system bleats into the air, stopping everybody in their tracks.

When the group of friends realizes that there is a horde of armed Magratheans on the other side of the door, their powerlessness becomes overwhelmingly apparent. Once again, they are forced to come to terms with the fact that they have no control over what happens next. In fact, even the planet-wide alarm—which most likely will provide them a distraction for their escape—is completely out of their control and has nothing to do with anything they have done to ameliorate their circumstances.

CHAPTER 32

"Emergency! Emergency!" a voice blares over **Magrathea**. "Hostile ship has landed on planet. Armed intruders in section 8A. Defense stations, defense stations!" As Arthur and his friends slip away, Benjy and Frankie complain to each other about their predicament, deciding that their only option is to formulate a "fake" question that sounds "plausible." After thinking for a moment, Frankie suggests, "*How many roads must a man walk down?*" Benjy likes this, and the two mice begin to celebrate. Meanwhile, Arthur and his friends are now half a mile away, running down corridors and hallways and trying to escape. The "intruders" that have landed on Magrathea are "cops" trying to arrest Zaphod for stealing the **Heart of Gold**. Having cornered the group (who hides behind a wall), the cops yell at Zaphod to emerge, shooting all the while.

To Frankie and Benjy, the truth no longer matters. Even they—hyperintelligent pandimensional beings obsessed with finding the Ultimate Question—have tired of their otherwise relentless investigations into the nature of life. This suggests that such pursuits are inherently fatiguing. Individuals can toil for entire lifetimes—or, in this case, millennia—and still get no closer to fully understanding "everything" about "life" and the "universe." Instead of continuing their studies, then, Frankie and Benjy simply want to find some happiness doing something fun, like becoming famous.

CHAPTER 33

Without warning, the cops' guns go silent. Gradually emerging from behind their protective wall, Zaphod, Ford, Trillian, and Arthur discover that the cops have died because "the tiny life-support system computer" on their space suits has malfunctioned (these cops are methane-breathing creatures that can't survive on **Magrathea**). "Let's get shot of this hole," says Zaphod. "If whatever I'm supposed to be looking for is here, I don't want it." Saying this, he grabs one of the cops' guns and shoots a computer before making off with his friends in an aircar parked nearby—this, Arthur recognizes, is Slartibartfast's vehicle. When they get inside, he finds a note affixed to one of the buttons. "*This is probably the best button to press*," the note reads.

Like the mice—who have finally given up trying to find the Ultimate Question—Zaphod decides to stop pursuing whatever it is he has been looking for on Magrathea. As such, the majority of the novel's characters begin to embrace the idea of living in uncertainty. This ethos of uncertainty is further illustrated by Slartibartfast's note, which suggests with a degree of ambiguity that Arthur should press a certain button on the aircar's console.

CHAPTER 34

When Arthur and his friends reach the surface of **Magrathea** once more in the aircraft, they find the police spaceship parked next to the **Heart of Gold**. Oddly enough, it looks "dark and silent." Like the cops themselves, it's clear that this ship is dead. As Ford walks toward it, he finds Marvin, who is lying face-down on the ground. "Don't feel you have to take any notice of me, please," Marvin intones. "That ship hated me," he says, referring to the police craft. When Ford asks what happened, Marvin explains that he got "very bored and depressed" and decided to plug himself into the ship's "external computer feed." "I talked to the computer at great length and explained my view of the Universe to it," he says. "And what happened?" asks Ford. "It committed suicide," Marvin says.

Adams has already demonstrated the unwieldiness of language and communication. Throughout the novel, the characters often have trouble connecting with one another, which is frequently due to Arthur's lack of knowledge about space. When Marvin hooks himself up to the police space ship to have a conversation, though, there is no misunderstanding. Rather, the space ship hates him so much that it kills itself. In turn, Adams demonstrates that language can have dire consequences even when no form of misunderstanding is afoot.

CHAPTER 35

Later that night, the **Heart of Gold** speeds through space. To keep himself entertained, Arthur reads *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—if he has to live in space, he figures, he might as well learn about it. "The history of every major Galactic Civilization tends to pass through three distinct and recognizable phases," *The Guide* says, listing these phases as Survival, Inquiry, and Sophistication—these are "otherwise known as the How, Why and Where phases." "For instance," *The Guide* says, "the first phase is characterized by the question *How can we eat?* the second by the question *Why do we eat?* and the third by the question *Where shall we have lunch?*" As Arthur reads, Zaphod comes and asks if he's hungry. When he says that he is, Zaphod says, "Okay, baby, hold tight. We'll take a quick bite at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe."

The three "phases" that civilizations pass through ultimately signify a culture's intellectual engagement with its own existence. In the first phase, the civilization figures out "how" it can survive. This is the most basic and essential question of the three. In the second phase, the civilization takes on a philosophical attitude, pondering deeply the underlying reasons that drive its customs. In the final phase, the civilization has already worked out both "how" it should live and "why" it should live this way, so all that's left to do is decide the specific day-to-day ways that it will spend its existence. Interestingly enough, Arthur himself has gone through all three of these phases since the beginning of the novel. At first, he is preoccupied with learning "how" he has suddenly been flung into space and taken from his home planet. As he gets used to living on the Heart of Gold and exploring Magrathea, he slowly begins to question "why" what has happened has happened. Finally, he now embraces his new life, wondering only where he will eat his next meal.

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