

Review: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

When I was studying in college, the smart guys in my class used to read a particular kind of books. Some of these books were *'The Lord of the Rings'* by JRR Tolkien (before it became a movie and was read by everyone else), novels by P.G.Wodehouse, *'One Hundred Years of Solitude'* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *'2001 : A Space Odyssey'* by Arthur C. Clarke, *'One, Two, Three...Infinity'* by George Gamov, *'The Fountainhead'* by Ayn Rand and *'Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance'* by Robert M. Pirsig. (In case you are curious, I have read the first part of the first book of *'The Lord of the Rings'*, a few novels by P.G.Wodehouse, *'One, Two, Three...Infinity'* and *'2001 : A Space Odyssey'* in later years, many years after I finished college. I haven't read the others yet.) One of these books was Douglas Adams' *'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy'*. It looked to me like a book which combined science fiction and humour and I wondered how that combination might work. But I never got around to reading it. Later, after I went to work, I saw all the books in the Hitchhiker's series in one omnibus volume. I read the blurb and the premise of the series was quite interesting and so I thought I will get it. I carried it with me as I moved cities and countries, but never read it. Finally all the stars got aligned last week. The book club that I am part of, decided to read this book this month, and so I took it down from my shelf and read it. I finished reading it yesterday. Here is what I think.

What I think

Arthur Dent, a mild-mannered guy who works at the local radio station, gets up one day morning and discovers that there are bulldozers at his front door. When he talks to the person who seems to have brought them, he discovers that his home is going to be razed down to make way for a bypass. He lies down in front of one of the bulldozers and prevents those newcomers from doing their jobs. Dent's friend, Ford Prefect, suddenly appears on the scene. Ford, though he says that he is an out-of-work actor, is actually an extra-terrestrial, who has come to Earth to study about the planet and about the beings there. Ford suddenly discovers that day that the Earth is going to be demolished that day, by the officials of the Galaxy, to make way for a hyperspace bypass. It is ironical, that while the local bureaucracy is trying to raze down Arthur's home without worrying about how it will affect his life, the Galactic bureaucracy is planning to raze down Earth without worrying about what Earth's inhabitants will feel about it. Ford tries to explain this to Arthur, but Arthur finds it difficult to believe all this. It seems like too many fantastic things are happening in a very short space of time. The spaceships which have come to demolish the Earth, are run by Vogons, extraterrestrial beings who are not highly evolved, but who know how to get a job done. The Vagon ships announce the news to the Earth's inhabitants and the Earth is destroyed. Meanwhile, Ford finds a way of taking Arthur with him and getting into a Vagon ship with the help of the cooks there, who like doing things which annoy the Vogons. However, unfortunately, the Vogons discover the presence of stoways in the ship and arrest them and eject them into space. Meanwhile the action shifts to the another part of the Galaxy, where the President of the Galaxy, Zaphod Beeblebrox inaugurates a new ship called *Heart of Gold* which uses the Improbability Drive and can travel vast distances in very less time. And before the audience present at the inauguration event know it, Zaphod steals the ship and escapes away and the whole Galactic police is after him. And by pure chance, the *Heart of Gold* rescues our old friends Arthur and Ford, while they are being ejected from the Vagon ship. Interestingly, Zaphod has a human companion on the ship, a woman named Trillian. Zaphod goes on a mission to a distant planet Magrathea, where untold of wealth is supposed to lie. What happens to our old friends and their new ones while they go on this journey forms the rest of the story.

I found *'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy'* quite interesting. I don't think I have read a sci-fi book which combined humour, like this, before. I think Douglas Adams was a pioneer in combining humour with science fiction. Science fiction novels are mostly fantastic – in the sense that they assume that enormous leaps of technology have been made and it is possible to travel across a galaxy in reasonable time, aliens exist etc. Such assumptions are there in this book too. But the interesting things I discovered were the small things that Adams says, which probably foreshadowed developments in technology which happened a few decades later. For example he talks about a device which Ford Prefect has in his knapsack, the description of which goes like this :

...he also had a device that looked rather like a largish electronic calculator. This had about a hundred tiny flat press buttons and a screen about four inches square on which any one of a million "pages" could be summoned at a moment's notice. It looked insanely complicated.

To me it looked like a description of a modern tablet or a reading device like the iPad or a Kindle with which one could browse the internet and use the Google search engine.

In another place, Adams says this about screens :

For years radios had been operated by means of pressing buttons and turning dials; then as the technology became more sophisticated the controls were made touch-sensitive – you merely had to brush the panels with your fingers; now all you had to do was wave your hand in the general direction of the components and hope. It saved a lot of muscular expenditure, of course, but meant that you had to sit infuriatingly still if you wanted to keep listening to the same program.

I liked this passage very much because it talks about touch screens and more sophisticated user interfaces of electronic devices, which have come into being today, more than thirty-three years after the book was written. There were no touch screens or Kinect-like interfaces, even a few years back. When I first saw Kinect, I was amazed. I think it still feels like magic. And it is surprising and amazing that Adams has written about these things so many decades back.

I also like the subtext in the novel, using which Adams comments on different things. For example, he says this about the position of the President of the Galaxy, while indirectly taking a dig at political leaders in general and the Presidential form of government in particular.

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. On those criteria Zaphod Beeblebrox is one of the most successful Presidents the Galaxy has ever had – he has already spent two of his ten presidential years in prison for fraud. 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 political power is wielded. Most of the others secretly believe that the ultimate decision-making process is handled by a computer. They couldn't be more wrong.

My favourite scene in the story is, of course, when two people ask a supercomputer called 'Deep Thought' what is the meaning of life, the universe and everything and it asks them to come back after seven-and-a-half million years for the answer. And when the descendants of these two people come after all those years and ask the computer for an answer, it gives them an answer, which is totally surprising and unexpected.

The book also makes interesting commentaries on the boring aspect of everyday life, on dead-end jobs where people feel that they are just a cog-in-the-wheel and have no idea of the overall picture, on how scientists, even though they create and invent and discover new things, still bow down to political leaders who don't know much, how we miss the small things and not the big ones after they are gone (particularly in this passage, where Arthur Dent feels nostalgic about the earth after it has been destroyed – *"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."*), on how the lowest people in a research team sometimes make the most important discoveries and how this pisses off the powerful guys in the team and on how though we think we are the centre of the universe we might actually be an unimportant and irrelevant part of it.

Adams also touches humorously on the many-worlds theory, on whether prime numbers are infinite or there is a highest prime number, and asks philosophical questions, in a humorous way, on what would happen and what it might mean if we were all really parts of a gigantic creature or a computer, like coral polyps are parts of a coral reef.

'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' is humorous, funny and a fast read. It is also surprisingly deep, philosophical and asks all the big questions in an understated, humorous tone. I loved it. I can't wait to read the second book in the series now.

I will leave you with some of my favourite passages from the book.

Mostly Harmless

"If you're a researcher on this book thing and you were on Earth, you must have been gathering material on it."

"Well, I was able to extend the original entry a bit, yes."

"Let me see what it says in this edition then, I've got to see it."

"Yeah, okay." He passed it over again.

Arthur grabbed hold of it and tried to stop his hands shaking. He pressed the entry for the relevant page. The screen flashed and swirled and resolved into a page of print. Arthur stared at it.

"It doesn't have an entry!" he burst out.

Ford looked over his shoulder.

"Yes, it does," he said, "down there, see at the bottom of the screen, just above Eccentrica Gallumbits, the triple-breasted whore of Eroticon 6."

Arthur followed Ford's finger, and saw where it was pointing. For a moment it still didn't register, then his mind nearly blew up.

"What? Harmless? Is that all it's got to say? Harmless! One word!"

Ford shrugged.

"Well, there are a hundred billion stars in the Galaxy, and only a limited amount of space in the book's microprocessors," he said, "and no one knew much about the Earth, of course."

"Well, for God's sake, I hope you managed to rectify that a bit."

"Oh yes, well, I managed to transmit a new entry off to the editor. He had to trim it a bit, but it's still an improvement."

"And what does it say now?" asked Arthur.

"Mostly harmless," admitted Ford with a slightly embarrassed cough.

"Mostly harmless!" shouted Arthur.

Positive Attitude

"Just don't say things like that," stammered Ford. "How can anyone maintain a positive mental attitude if you're saying things like that?"

"My God," complained Arthur, "you're talking about a positive mental attitude and you haven't even had your planet demolished today. I woke up this morning and thought I'd have a nice relaxed day, do a bit of reading, brush the dog...It's now just after four in the afternoon and I'm already being thrown out of an alien spaceship six light-years from the smoking remains of the Earth!"

"All right," said Ford, "just stop panicking!"

"Who said anything about panicking?" snapped Arthur. "This is still just the culture shock. You wait till I've settled down into the situation and found my bearings. Then I'll start panicking!"

On being stupid

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.

On being safe

"Is it safe?" he said.

"Magrathea's been dead for five million years," said Zaphod, "of course it's safe. Even the ghosts will have settled down and raised families by now."

On problems

"You think you've got problems," said Marvin, as if he was addressing a newly occupied coffin, "what are you supposed to do if you are a manically depressed robot? No, don't bother

to answer that, I'm fifty thousand times more intelligent than you and even I don't know the answer. It gives me a headache to think down to your level."

Going to have a look

"What happened?" said Arthur.
"They stopped," said Zaphod with a shrug.
"Why?"
"Dunno, do you want to go and ask them?"
"No."
They waited
"Hello?" called out Ford.
No answer.
"That's odd."
"Perhaps it's a trap."
"They haven't the wit."
"What were those thuds?"
"Dunno."
They waited for a few more seconds.
"Right," said Ford, "I'm going to have a look."
He glanced round at the others.
"Is no one going to say, *No, you can't possibly, let me go instead?*"
They all shook their heads.
"Oh well," he said, and stood up.

On being too fast

The aircar rocketed them at speeds in excess of R17...

R is a velocity measure, defined as a reasonable speed of travel that is consistent with health, mental well-being and not being more than, say, five minutes late. It is therefore clearly an almost infinitely variable figure according to circumstances, since the first two factors vary not only with speed taken as an absolute, but also with awareness of the third factor. Unless handled with tranquility this equation can result in considerable stress, ulcers and even death.

P.S.

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