

A GUIDE TO

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Douglas Adams

"That . . . ," said Zaphod, *"is the most improbable planet that ever existed."*

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is an amusing work of science fiction (SF) and the first in a series of best-selling novels that chronicle trips through a zany galaxy of Adams's creation. Although the novel takes many satirical potshots at the absurdities of the real world and the conventions of SF, its true mission is to entertain, not to reform.

Setting: The novel opens on the day in the late twentieth century when the Earth is destroyed. The action then moves freely through time and space as the hitchhikers roam the galaxy.

Protagonist: Arthur Dent is the one native of Earth who is spared from destruction. He is saved by an alien friend with whom he subsequently travels throughout the galaxy in an uncertain quest.

Plot Structure: The novel consists of a series of episodes in the perilous intergalactic journey of Arthur Dent and his friend Ford Prefect as they attempt to overcome various threats to their safety and well-being.

Conflicts: The novel is full of **external conflicts** between characters. The initial conflict occurs between Arthur Dent and Mr. L. Prosser, the representative of the county council. Other conflicts include Arthur and Ford's struggle to get away from the gross Vogons. The main characters also have missiles hurled at them from the planet Magrathea and are chased by two intergalactic cops with zap guns when they try to escape from two mercenary mice who want to extract Arthur's brain. **Internal conflicts** are few; Arthur seems too bewildered and too busy to look inward as he knocks about the galaxy.

Resolution: With the help of his friends, Arthur repeatedly evades his enemies and, in the last chapter, escapes with his brain intact.

Themes: Life is an ongoing adventure, a **perilous journey**, not a berth in a safe harbor. The joy is in staying alive, keeping moving, and having a look around.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The humor and originality of this easy-to-read work will appeal to most students and will motivate them to move through the chapters quickly to meet the next set of fantastic creatures and to find out if and how Arthur and his friends will survive the next danger. As they read for entertainment, students will also get some sense of Adams's ironic and satirical view of contemporary society.

BACKGROUND

Genghis Khan (1162–1227). This great general and conqueror united the nomadic tribes of Mongolia in northern Asia into a fierce fighting force that eventually conquered all the land from what is now Korea, in the East, to Kiev in the West. Noted for his use of terror, Genghis Khan created the largest and most enduring empire in history. No wonder his supposed direct descendant, Mr. L. Prosser, has violent visions.

Hyperspace. In science fiction, hyperspace is a kind of specialized space, probably with more than three dimensions, which spaceships can enter and use as a shortcut to very distant points. It is sometimes described as crumpled or folded space, which brings distant points in conventional space into close proximity with one another. In Adams's novel, entering hyperspace is always a bit of a jolt.

MAIN CHARACTERS**(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)**

Arthur Dent, a tall, dark thirty-year-old with a worried look who left the stress of London to live quietly in the suburbs and work in local radio. Then the world ended.

Mr. L. Prosser, a forty-year-old bureaucrat on the county council. Fat and shabby, Prosser is a direct descendant of the Mongol warlord Genghis Khan. Although he is unaware of his ancestry, Prosser's heritage is revealed by his fat tummy and fondness for fur hats.

Ford Prefect, a friend of Arthur who came to Earth for a week from a planet near the star Betelgeuse and has been stranded for fifteen years.

Prostetnic Vogon Jeltz, the leader of the Vogons, a class of crude civil servants employed by the Imperial Galactic Government, who are sent to destroy the

Earth to make way for an interstellar expressway.

Zaphod Beeblebrox, a two-headed, three-armed ex-hippie with a talent for self-promotion and crowd-pleasing stunts who becomes President of the Imperial Galactic Government.

Trillian (known as **Tricia McMillan** on Earth), a young, attractive, intelligent humanoid.

The Dentrassis, a race of huge, friendly, furry creatures, who serve as caterers on the Vogon fleet. Enemies of the Vogons and fond of hitchhikers, they help Arthur and Ford to escape the slow-witted Vogons.

Marvin, a steel robot who is given a “genuine people personality” by his creators. Unfortunately, his personality is depressed, self-pitying, and suspicious.

Slartibartfast, a distinguished old gentleman in a long gray robe whom Arthur meets on the planet Magrathea. He and his race have just awakened from a five-million-year slumber.

Majikthise and **Vroomfondel**, two angry professional philosophers in faded robes who object to Deep Thought’s cybernetic encroachment on what has always been their intellectual territory: the eternal verities.

PLOT

Prologue. The **scene** is set—“an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet” in an out-of-the-way corner of an immense galaxy. The **central problem** facing that planet’s “ape-descended life forms” is that they are not happy. The narrator introduces an important plot element, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (an electronic guide to galactic travel), and says the story will tell of a great catastrophe and its far-reaching consequences.

Chapter 1. Arthur Dent wakes up in suburban England to discover that there is a big yellow bulldozer aimed at his house. He rushes out and lies down in front of it. A **stock character**, Mr. L. Prosser, a rigid bureaucrat from the local council, explains that the time for objecting to the council’s decision to build a bypass has expired. A standoff ensues until Arthur’s friend Ford Prefect arrives, determined to get Arthur’s attention and share some important news. Ford has never told his friend that he comes from another planet and has been just visiting for fifteen years. Posing as an out-of-work actor, Ford has been accepted by the locals, appearing no more eccentric than a lot of other Englishmen. (This is an example of Douglas Adams’s **satire**, his sly and humorous style of poking fun at his contemporaries.) Next, Ford cleverly convinces the dimwitted Prosser to take Arthur’s place in front of the bulldozer while he rushes Arthur off to the pub.

Chapter 2. At the pub, Ford orders six pints of beer and tries to tell the barman and Arthur that the world as they know it is about to blow up, but no one believes him. Arthur thinks it’s just another rotten Thursday.

Chapter 3. On this fateful Thursday, huge yellow space vehicles head toward Earth on a mission of destruction, their approach registered only on an instrument in Ford Prefect’s satchel. Here too is the invaluable reference, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Recalling its advice on the indispensability of a towel for galactic travel, Ford asks if Arthur has one, but Arthur, in an example of **comic irony**, is so focused on the destruction of his house that he hardly notices that the world is ending.

Chapter 4. Meanwhile, at the other end of the galaxy, Zaphod Beeblebrox, the two-headed, three-armed President of the Imperial Galactic Government, speeds along to the planet Damogran where a new spaceship, the *Heart of Gold*, is being unveiled. Zaphod, who is colorful, ambitious, vague, and none too ethical, is described, with **political satire**, as “ideal presidency fodder.” Indeed, he does have an ulterior motive for seeking office: He plans to steal the *Heart of Gold*. While saying “Hi” to the assembled crowd, the President spots Trillian, an old girlfriend, and after a few more memorable one-words, Zaphod releases a paralyzing bomb into the crowd.

Chapter 5. Ford and Arthur come to in the galley of the flagship of the Vogon Constructor Fleet. The Vogons are vile and bad-tempered and act as civil servants for the galactic government. Ford uses his Electronic Thumb to hitch onto the Vogons’ ship, where he and Arthur are welcomed by the Dentrassis, a race of gourmands who serve, but loathe, the Vogons.

Chapter 6. Still on the Vogon ship, Arthur and Ford survive the jolting transition into hyperspace. They are now six light-years from where Earth used to be, and Arthur is feeling a little homesick. This chapter, like many others, ends with a **cliffhanger**—the Vogons are approaching, to cast the pair into outer space or worse.

Chapter 7. The worst happens: Arthur and Ford are strapped into Poetry Appreciation chairs and forced to listen to and comment on Vagon poetry. Nonsense **dic-tion** is used to **spoof** the embarrassing, self-indulgent poetry that some would-be poets inflict on captive audiences. Arthur’s responses are **parodies** of the pretentious and empty language of some literary critics. After the reading, the Vogons decide to throw Arthur and Ford off their ship, with only thirty seconds of air left.

Chapter 8. The narrator gives us more information about *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. The book has been written and rewritten in many styles by countless researchers and travelers.

Chapter 9. Arthur and Ford are rolling around in a world of pure **fantasy** on the starship *Heart of Gold*, which is powered with Improbability Drive.

Chapter 10. The narrator now gives the history of the discovery of Improbability Drive by a student who was left to clean up the lab.

Chapter 11. In the improbability-proof cabin of the *Heart of Gold*, Trillian tells Zaphod about the two

hitchhikers they have picked up while in Improbability Drive. Then Marvin, a robot with a “genuine people personality”—a comic **stereotype** of a deeply depressed person—is sent to fetch Arthur and Ford. Ford is astonished to learn that the ship is in the hands of his childhood friend and “semicousin” Zaphod.

Chapter 12. Meanwhile Zaphod is listening to the radio for news of himself and his daring theft. He is a **caricature** of the narcissistic personality **type**. Trillian has figured out, with the help of a cheery, helpful computer named Eddie, that the hitchhikers have come from the same coordinates that she did.

Chapter 13. Ford and Zaphod greet each other casually, and when Ford tries to introduce Zaphod to Arthur, the latter explains that they have already met—at a party in Islington where Arthur was talking to a very attractive woman until Zaphod broke in. Then to Arthur’s surprise, the girl he knew on Earth as Tricia McMillan steps forward—another zany **coincidence**.

Chapter 14. Zaphod, Trillian, and Ford gather around the cabin controls as Zaphod homes in on the object of his **quest**—the most improbable planet ever—Magrathea.

Chapter 15. This chapter tells the story of the planet Magrathea, where a race of builders once made luxury planets to order for the rich merchants.

Chapter 16. Zaphod and Ford argue about the planet they are orbiting. Zaphod, whose **motive** is a desire for wealth and fame, believes it is Magrathea, but Ford is skeptical. Arthur says the suspense is killing him; then the narrator, ignoring literary convention, ends all **suspense**. He reveals the exact extent of the damage that will be done by a Magrathian missile attack.

Chapter 17. As the *Heart of Gold* approaches Magrathea, a gentlemanly voice warns the crew to stay away. When they decline, a missile attack is launched. Arthur suggests that they shift into Improbability Drive, and an explosion of light and noise ensues.

Chapter 18. Improbability Drive has rearranged everything, an example of the **transformation motif** that is characteristic of fantasy literature. The missiles have turned into bowls of petunias, and a sperm whale spinning in space drops to the surface of Magrathea.

Chapter 19. As the party is about to step onto Magrathea, Trillian is upset because the white mice she brought with her from Earth have escaped.

Chapter 20. On the surface of Magrathea, Zaphod discovers a huge crater made by the fallen whale.

Chapter 21. Arthur encounters an old man.

Chapter 22. The careworn but kindly man gives his name as Slartibartfast. While transporting Arthur to the workshop at the center of Magrathea, he explains that he and his cohorts have just awakened from a five-million-year sleep, which was their way of

responding to an economic recession that shut down their planet-building industry.

Chapter 23. The narrator reveals that the second most intelligent creatures on Earth, the dolphins, tried to warn humans about the destruction of Earth but were not taken seriously. In addition, in a colossal **irony**, humans failed to recognize that those white mice they used in their lab research were the real geniuses and were controlling the results of all the experiments.

Chapter 24. Slartibartfast shows Arthur the immense workshop where his brethren are beginning work on the building project for which they were revived. Then he repeats the **climactic** revelation, stated by the narrator in the previous chapter, that mice ran the Earth and that Earth was destroyed just five minutes before it was to fulfill the plan for which it was created. Now the Magrathians must build a replica of Earth so the original program can be completed.

Chapter 25. Slartibartfast tells Arthur that millions of years ago a race of hyperintelligent beings decided to find out the Answer to the big Question about Life. To do so, they had a huge superintelligent computer built, called Deep Thought. After the computer was turned on by two handpicked programmers, Lunkwill and Fook, it was asked for the Answer. Its deliberations were interrupted by two irate philosophers, Majikthise and Vroomfondel, protesting that their jobs were being taken away. Lunkwill and Fook calmed their fears by promising them seven and a half million years of profitable speculation on Deep Thought’s answer.

Chapter 26. Slartibartfast offers to show Arthur what happened on the day of the Answer.

Chapter 27. Arthur returns with the old man to his study and is wired to a machine that suspends him in midair in a state of invisibility. Below him he sees a huge city square with crowds awaiting the Answer. Loonquawl and Phouchg, two sober attendants who have been groomed from birth for this moment, press Deep Thought, who finally utters what might be called the cosmic **understatement**. The Answer that took seven and a half million years of thought is “Forty-two.”

Chapter 28. Afraid that they will be lynched by the disappointed crowd, Loonquawl and Phouchg grill Deep Thought, who says the problem is that they don’t have the right Question to go with his ultimate Answer. When asked if he can provide the Question, Deep Thought begins to speak in quasi-religious **diction** about the greater computer that will come after him, an organic matrix that will be called Earth. With that revelation, the tape ends.

Chapter 29. Meanwhile, Zaphod, Trillian, and Ford recover from their gassing and find themselves in a plush waiting room, where they are told the mice are ready to see them.

Chapter 30. In a **denouement**, or unraveling of plot complications, Slartibartfast clears up any remaining

mysteries about the history of Earth, explaining that Deep Thought designed the planet, the Magratheans built it, and the Vogons destroyed it.

Chapter 31. Slartibartfast takes Arthur to an office where he is reunited with Zaphod, Trillian, and Ford, who are now the guests of Benjy and Frankie, the two mice that escaped from Trillian. The mice tell Slartibartfast that now that Arthur has survived, they no longer need a replica of Earth to learn the ultimate Question. All they need is Arthur's brain. Arthur, however, declines to hand his brain over and is set upon by the mice and their henchmen. The four run for the door as every alarm on the planet goes off.

Chapter 32. The four run down a corridor, leaving the mice, who try to make up a Question to go with the Answer "Forty-two." Finally, they settle on "How many roads must a man walk down?" Pursued by computer-powered cops with zap guns in a classic **chase scene**, the four friends run for their lives.

Chapter 33. Suddenly the shooting stops, and Ford discovers that the two cops keeled over when their life-support computers inexplicably exploded. The four find Slartibartfast's aircar and take off.

Chapter 34. The friends return to the *Heart of Gold*, where they find Marvin moping near a police craft, the power source for the fallen cops. Marvin had plugged himself into the craft's external power feed and started sharing his views on the universe, driving the ship's computer to commit suicide. This cut off life support to the cops.

Chapter 35. Safe at last, the four leave the Horsehead Nebula and head for the Restaurant at the End of the Universe (the title of the next book in the Hitchhiker series).

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research might focus on the following activities.

1. Upending the Conventions

Adams uses many of the conventions, or customary features, of science fiction. He doesn't just use them, however; he playfully transforms them by either exaggerating their characteristics or treating them in ironic or unexpected ways. Students can find and

discuss examples of Adams's freewheeling use of sci-fi conventions, such as

- the humanlike robot
- the shipboard computer
- alien planets and peoples
- advanced technology

2. Responding to the Protagonist

What do students think of Arthur Dent? Is he an Everyman figure that they can identify with, or is he just another amusing stock character?

3. Creating a Hitchhiker's Intergalactic Adventure

Some students would enjoy inventing an episode of their own for the *Hitchhiker* series. Have them begin by imagining a new planet, an alien race, and a threat to Arthur and Ford. Encourage them to come up with offbeat names for their creations and a clever way for the hitchhikers to narrowly escape once again.

MEET THE WRITER

Douglas Adams (1952–) was born in Cambridge, England, and graduated from St. John's College, Cambridge, in 1974. He created *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* for British radio and transformed his Arthur Dent scripts into four immensely successful novels—*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (1980), *Life, the Universe and Everything* (1982), and *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish* (1984). Then in 1987, Adams moved on to a new hero and a new genre, Dirk Gently and detective fiction, filled with more irreverence and zany inventiveness.

READ ON

Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). A masterful novel of fantasy and satire; a landmark of English literature.

Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles* (1950). Classic short stories set on Mars in the future.

Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961). Novel about a human who is born in space and then brought to Earth; he eventually creates an ideal society where individuality is respected and feelings of community are fostered.

Gabriel García Márquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World." A famous tale in the magic realism genre.

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