

WILDLY IMPROBABLE Ideas



Sixty years since he moved to Stalbridge in Dorset where he wrote the *Hitch-Hikers Guide to the Galaxy*, the late Douglas Adams still grips the imaginations of legions of fans. Kevin Jon Davies spoke to Fergus Byrne about his book *42: The Wildly Improbabel Ideas of Douglas Adams*.




Mark Wing-Davey as Zaphod Beeblebrox (1981 TV show)



Kevin Jon Davies, photograph Andy Hollingworth



David Learner as Marvin (1981 TV show)



Kevin Jon Davies, an illustrator and documentary maker, remembers the first time he met *Hitch-Hikers Guide to the Galaxy's* writer Douglas Adams. It was a bit of a fluke. Adams had written an episode of the hugely popular *Dr Who* and a friend asked Kevin if he would like to come along to an interview with Adams. It was only afterwards that he realised he had been invited because he owned a fancy new tape recorder that turned out to be vital for the interview. That was in 1978. Little did Kevin know that he would one day be writing books and making TV shows about a man who created characters and stories that gripped the imaginations of legions of fans.

In June Kevin will be talking at the Sturminster Newton Literary Festival about *42, The Wildly Improbable Ideas of Douglas Adams*, a lavishly illustrated coffee-table book which trawls through the personal papers, drafts, scripts, notebooks and diaries of the much-missed humorous author (and later tech guru) Douglas Adams, who died aged just 49, in 2001.

Although not a biography, the book covers his life, from cradle to grave, including his time living in Stalbridge, his years at Cambridge Footlights and at

the BBC.

Kevin still has the cassette tape of that early interview and has used it occasionally in documentaries. He describes himself as a 'rubbernecker' at the BBC studio in those days. He was trying to 'worm' his way onto *Dr Who* sets to see how it was made and to learn as much as he could about TV. He had decided at age 10 that television was his future and got his first job as an illustrator at the BBC. That was where his interest in the *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* and Douglas Adams began to develop.

'It was the philosophical kind of content behind the thinking and behind the jokes that I think grabbed a lot of people' says Kevin 'and that's why it's lasted so long, because it still has some depth to it.'

For the uninitiated, *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is a science fiction comedy series created by Douglas Adams. It follows Arthur Dent, an ordinary human who is unwittingly brought on an intergalactic adventure moments before the Earth is destroyed. Guided by Ford Prefect, an alien and a researcher for the titular Guide, Arthur encounters a series of bizarre and humorous characters, including the



Kevin as a young animator working on the TV series in 1980

depressed robot Marvin and the eccentric two-headed President Zaphod Beeblebrox. The series is known for its wit, satirical commentary, and the iconic phrase, “*Don’t Panic!*”.

One of the more profound findings within the story is a search via a super computer for the ‘answer to life the Universe and everything’. The program set to eventually find the answer takes some time. In today’s computing world it would be a bit like mining for Bitcoin. The answer, however, (*spoiler alert*) turns out to be 42, a result that simply proves the folly of pursuing the question.

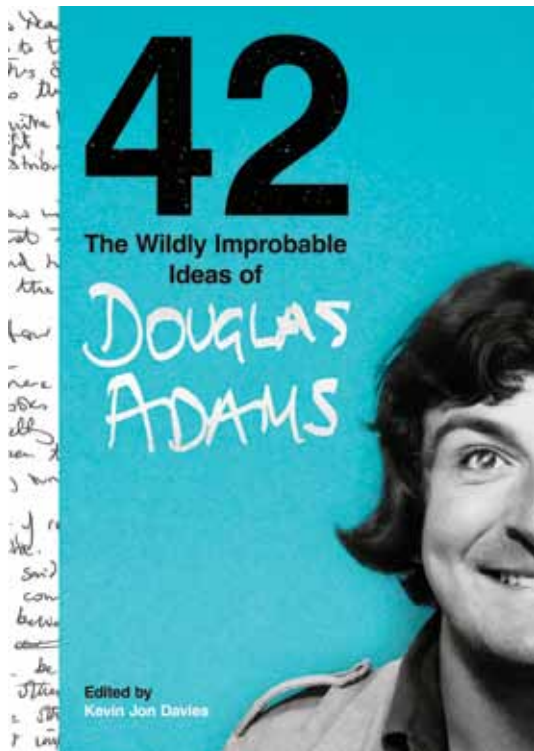
According to Kevin, Douglas Adams ‘agonized’ over the book. He found writing very difficult and when Kevin began to go through his archive of 67 boxes of Adams’ personal effects, mostly to do with his writing, he soon realized he was wading through a very personal record. ‘I remember thinking, Douglas wouldn’t want anyone looking through this stuff, let alone me.’ He described it as ‘so private and personal.’ When he was approached some time later and asked to produce a book based on the archive, the brief was not to write a biographical book about Douglas Adams, but to compile from the archives an insight that would give voice to what was going on in Adams’ mind.

A hefty book, *42, The Wildly Improbable Ideas of Douglas Adams* introduces readers to the many musings

and ideas that often did not make it into his stories. Kevin says that when Adams did begin to grow a sizable following, he really enjoyed the book tours, signings and lectures as he travelled across America, Canada or Australia. Because he found writing ‘essentially a lonely, lonely business.’

A very early adopter of technology, Adams was also an early supporter of the environment and especially endangered animals. His stepfather, Ron Thrift, was a vet and at one point brought him along to watch the birth of a calf. Adams was enthralled by the process. His grandmother had been an RSPCA member and had a houseful of animals, ‘to the detriment of his sinuses’ says Kevin. In 1985 Adams was invited by *The Observer* to go to Madagascar to look for an endangered lemur called the Aye-aye. ‘And he wrote, very evocatively and movingly about meeting this creature’ says Kevin. Adams was gripped by how we come to be so separate from this creature living in the jungle.

The experience was such that Adams went on to co-write a radio documentary series and book about endangered animals *Last Chance to See* which, although a factual book, Kevin thinks is one of his funniest. ‘He certainly was passionate’ says Kevin, who thinks that if he hadn’t died so young he may have gone on to write more science books. ‘He wasn’t really a terribly political animal’ says Kevin of Adams’ interest in the



42 *The Wildly Improbable Ideas of Douglas Adams*



Douglas Adams wins at Sturminster Newton carnival

environment. ‘He was coming from the science and the factual point of view, and just the sheer common sense that we’ve got to do something about saving the planet and saving these animals.’

Kevin explains that although Adams was an early adopter of word processors, he had already written *Hitch Hikers Guide* ‘the hard way’ on old fashioned typewriters and using hand-written notes, many of which feature in Kevin’s book. He relates Adams’ brother’s memories of hearing what he described as ‘the fastest two-finger typist’ working away upstairs in Stalbridge. ‘They’d hear him banging away at the typewriter, and then long periods of silence and then screams and then playing music—the same tracks over and over and over again, like some kind of mesmeric talisman, getting the stuff to come out.’

Like the message in the song *Tears of a Clown*, the man who wrote some of the funniest passages of science fiction comedy was beset by his own challenges. ‘There’s a few pages in there’ says Kevin ‘particularly in the Hitch Hiker section, where he’s berating himself, over not delivering and not getting it done. He was a famous procrastinator and he got very low at times.’ Kevin thinks that went back to his childhood ‘Really, he was a troubled kid. I think he apparently didn’t speak for the first few years of his life. He was a very slow developer, but then boy did he take off eventually becoming such a wordsmith!’

Kevin has a wealth of knowledge about Douglas Adams’ life and will undoubtedly discuss some nuggets at the Festival. He says he’s going to include some unique items, such as the story of Adams winning the Sturminster Newton carnival fancy dress competition in 1968, and the fact that at one point Adams had a job as a bodyguard to an Qatari Royal Family, which he then passed on to Griff Rhys Jones after he tired of it.

But Kevin has one question that he hopes readers may be able to help with. Apparently Douglas Adams had an accident while driving a tractor and ended up spending three weeks in Yeovil hospital in the late 60s. Kevin wonders if there are people who worked at the hospital in those days that may be able to shed more light on the story.

The heartbreaking news that Douglas Adams had died of a heart attack, while in California trying to get *The Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* film made, was a blow to so many fans. Kevin remembers one of Adams’ last comments was ‘Hollywood is full of Vogons’. The film was eventually made in 2005. It was Directed by Garth Jennings and produced by Bridport-based Nick Goldsmith.

Kevin Jon Davies will be speaking about Douglas Adams at the Sturminster Newton Literary Festival on June 8th. To find out more visit: <https://sturlitfest.com>.