

LEWIS CARROLL AND DOUGLAS ADAMS

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On July 4 1826 both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson died, precisely 50 years after signing the Declaration of Independence. The only surviving signer was Charles Carroll. On July 4 1862 Lewis Carroll first told the tale of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* to Alice Liddell.

Which brings me to my topic: two British authors who lived about a century apart, Lewis Carroll and Douglas Adams. Lewis Carroll was the pen name of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, born on January 27 1832. Douglas Adams, author of (among other works) *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, was born on March 11 1952. When *Observer* described Adams as “the Lewis Carroll of the twentieth century” they probably didn't know how right they were. In this article I explore the similarities between the works of Douglas Adams and those of Lewis Carroll.

The number 42 definitely held a significance for Lewis Carroll, as he referred to it repeatedly in his works. Take, for example, the seventh stanza of Fit the First of *The Hunting of the Snark*:

He had forty-two boxes, all carefully packed,
With his name printed clearly on each:
But, since he omitted to mention the fact,
They were all left behind on the beach.

Chapter XII of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, “Alice's Evidence”, contains this line: “Rule Forty-two. *All person's more than a mile high to leave the court.*” The sixteenth stanza of Canto I of *Phantasmagoria* is:

“No doubt,” said I, “they settled who
Was fittest to be sent:
Yet still to choose a brat like you,
To haunt a man of forty-two,
Was no great compliment!”

Carroll also made many more subtle references to 42. Chapter II of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* contains the line: “Let me see: four times five is twelve, and four times six is thirteen, and four times seven is—oh dear! I shall never get to twenty at that rate!” Quite true—she will never reach twenty. Four times five is twelve in base 18, and four times six is thirteen in base 21. Continuing this pattern (adding three to the base each time), she can get up to four times twelve (nineteen in base 39). However, the pattern breaks down at four times thirteen in base 42!

The number 42 is part of the central theme of the *Hitchhiker* trilogy of four (which actually has six and a half books). A computer is built to calculate the answer to life, the universe, and everything, and after a few million years it comes up with 42. Unfortunately, it can't calculate the question, so a giant computer (called the Earth) is built to find the question. Just before the program finishes, the Earth is demolished to make room for a hyperspace bypass, to the annoyance of the most intelligent species on the ‘planet’ (the mice, naturally).

The Hunting of the Snark is subtitled *An Agony in Eight Fits* (from “Fit the First” to “Fit the Eighth”). “Fit,” writes Martin Gardner in *The Annotated Snark*, “has the double meaning of a convulsion and a canto.” But this sense is all but obsolete; the OED quotes Samuel Johnson and Lord Byron. It seems unlikely that it was by chance that Douglas Adams titled the episodes of the *Hitchhiker* radio series (on which the books were based) from “Fit the First” to “Fit the Sixth”.

If you’re still not convinced, compare the White Queen’s line in *Through the Looking-Glass* (“Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast”) to the end of Chapter 15 of Adams’ *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* (“If you’ve done six impossible things this morning, why not round it off with breakfast at Milliways, the Restaurant at the End of the Universe?”).

But while Adams mentioned many of his influences in his writings (collected posthumously in *The Salmon of Doubt*), including Monty Python, the Beatles, and Richard Dawkins, he never mentioned Lewis Carroll. He did, however, make subtle and not-so-subtle swipes at everything from cricket to insurance companies. I end with some of his commentaries on language.

- The word can also, according to *The Ultra-Complete Maximegalon Dictionary of Every Language Ever*, mean the noise made by the Lord High Sanvalvwag of Hollop on discovering that he has forgotten his wife’s birthday for the second year running. Since there was only ever one Lord High Sanvalvwag of Hollop, and he never married, there is an ever-increasing body of opinion which holds that *The Ultra-Complete Maximegalon Dictionary* is not worth the fleet of lorries it takes to cart its microstored edition around in (*Life, the Universe, and Everything*)
- It is a curious fact, and one to which no one knows quite how much significance to attach, that something like 85 percent of all known worlds in the galaxy, be they primitive or highly advanced, have invented a drink called jynnan tonnyx, or gee-N’N T’N-ix, or jinond-o-nicks, or any one of a thousand or more variations on the same phonetic theme...Old structural linguists get angry when young structural linguists go on about it. Young structural linguists get deeply excited about it and stay up late at night convinced that they are very close to something of profound importance, and end up becoming old structural linguists before their time, getting very angry with the young ones (*The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*)
- *Why* is the only question that bothers people enough to have an entire letter of the alphabet named after it. The alphabet does not go “A B C D What? When? How? But it does go “V W X Why? Z. *Why* is always the most difficult question to answer. You know where you are when someone asks you “What’s the time?” or “When was the battle of 1066?” or “How do those seatbelts work that go tight when you slam the brakes on, Daddy?” The answers are easy and are, respectively, “Seven-thirty-five in the evening,” “Ten-fifteen in the morning,” and “Don’t ask stupid questions.” (*Hockney’s Alphabet*)
- So, the vaguely uncomfortable feeling you got from sitting on a seat which is warm from somebody else’s bottom is just as real a feeling as the one you get when a rogue giant elephant charges out of the bush at you, but hitherto only the latter has actually had a word for it. Now they both have words. The first one is “shoeburyness” and the second, of course, is “fear.” We started to collect more and more of these words and concepts, and began to realize what an arbitrarily selective work the *Oxford English Dictionary* is. It simply doesn’t recognize huge wedges of human experience (*The Salmon of Doubt*)