

An unfitting tribute

THE SALMON OF DOUBT: Hitchhiking the Galaxy One Last Time by Douglas Adams (Macmillan, £16.99)

MARK SANDERSON

Collected jottings and a short story on the anniversary of the death of Douglas Adams

DOUGLAS Noel Adams was fond of pointing out that he was born in 1952 in Cambridge — nine months before Crick and Watson discovered DNA there for themselves. The creator of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* franchise, which has been exploited on radio, television, a CD-Rom and the Web, as well as in the old-fashioned form of five novels, died in a Californian gym on 11 May last year.

He has not been allowed to rest in peace. Well-meaning folk have raided the hard-drive of his much-worn Macintosh and published their findings to mark the anniversary of his death. The title of the collection comes from a still-born novel that Adams had been tinkering with for years.

So, are these samples of DNA evidence of a major talent? Would they stand up in a

court of critical law? No, m'lud. The 11 chapters of *The Salmon of Doubt* account for a mere 80 pages of this 300-page work. The rest consists of odd articles, interviews and introductions to other books which have been arbitrarily arranged into three sections called *Life*, *The Universe and Everything*.

Nevertheless, the picture that emerges from these jottings appears to be a pretty accurate portrait of the artist as a funny man. DNA comes across as a modest agnostic, uncomfortable with his height (6ft 5in), ashamed of his nose (large), fond of Bach, *The Beatles*, PG Wodehouse ("pure word music") and a nice cup of tea (made the British, not the American, way).

He is interested in ecology and creation theory and, on occasion, conveys his enthusiasm for both with wit. He only becomes boring when he bangs on and on about "stuff": cameras, computers, "little

dongly things". A battle with the architects of his Islington home has clearly scarred him, yet he has not lost his sense of humour: "I tend to like local cooking unless I'm in Wales." He is not afraid, in this age of cultural relativity, to be heretical: "*All opinions are not equal*."

However, DNA's fans — of whom there are millions — will buy this book for *The Salmon of Doubt*, but they really, really shouldn't. It is an incomplete shaggy dog story with a half-missing cat instead of a dog and, in addition to Dirk Gently, the spoof detective, a three-ton rhino called Desmond.

Like the rest of this omnium-gatherum, it is vaguely amusing yet everybody would have far more fun simply rereading *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* instead. There's plenty of evidence of comic genius in that.

As for the eponymous salmon, it fails to make an

appearance. Another fish, though, does manage to bring out the best in Adams. Riding *The Rays*, written in 1992, starts off as a facetious account of a free trip to Australia to test-drive a Sub Bug, "a jet-propelled underwater buggy sort of thing", and to compare the experience with that of hitching a ride on the back of a manta ray. Adams, of course, soon learns that such a harmful stunt is out of the question.

Suddenly his flippancy falls away as a ray glides into view: "As it moved, shimmering and undulating its giant wings, folding itself through the water, I felt that I was looking at the single most beautiful and unearthly thing I had ever seen in my life."

DNA's awe and way with words gives the reader goose bumps. At least such moments — all too rare in this collection — suggest why Adams should be both mourned and celebrated.



Comic genius: Douglas Adams

Is this the end of life as we know it?

THE POSTHUMAN FUTURE: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution by Francis Fukuyama (Profile Books, £17.99)

NICK HACKWORTH

WHAT if we don't seize the power?" asks geneticist Lee Silver of biotechnology, a power that promises to put us in control of our evolutionary destiny and propel us into a "posthuman" future. Developments in biotechnology are indeed likely to amount to the most radical

technological revolution ever seen, changing the very physical and mental make-up of mankind: changes that will have far-reaching social and political consequences.

Here Francis Fukuyama, famous for his often-misunderstood neo-Hegelian work, *The End of History and the Last Man*, sets out his stall with admirable clarity, emphasising the radical nature of biotechnology; the threat it poses to human nature; the threat it poses to global social and political stability, and arguing persuasively the necessity of regulating biotechnology on a global basis. The range of issues raised in such a short book is indicative of how important this debate is and the relatively little public and media attention afforded to the topic stands as a condemnation of the poverty of contemporary political discourse.

The book is divided into three parts. The first focuses on specific biotechnologies and the effects they are likely to have, biologically, socially and politically. It does so in language aimed at the general reader, thus

serving as a brief primer in biotechnology. The second part is pure political philosophy. Here, Fukuyama articulates his controversial belief that there is such a thing as human nature, which he defines as "the sum of the behaviour and characteristics that are typical of the human species, arising from genetic rather than environmental factors", and that it is from this nature that human rights derive, some of which are threatened by the potential consequences of biotechnology. Fukuyama finishes with practical advice on regulation; what should be regulated and how.

As Fukuyama acknowledges, the issue of regulation and control of biotechnology is particularly fraught because its potential consequences run the full gamut of possibilities from the utopian to the nightmarish. In the dystopia of unfettered biotech development by private companies, our social elites will translate their transitory social and economic advantages into permanent genetic advantage, creating an ever-widening

genetic gap between classes. As a glimpse of what might be bred, Fukuyama quotes a comment by Geoffrey Bourne, former director of the Primate Center at Emory University, in the United States, who said: "It would be very important to try to produce an ape-human cross," and notes that one company, Advanced Cell Technology, successfully transplanted human DNA into a cow's egg and grew the embryo for a couple of days before destroying it. Yet the same technologies that provoke such fears could cleanse the world of a host of genetically determined diseases, prolong life and produce super-abundant crops to feed the world.

While acknowledging the positive aspects of biotechnology, Fukuyama makes a compelling case for limiting the fields in which biotechnological research and development should be allowed and he calls for an immediate ban on human cloning to set a precedent. One core characteristic of human nature, as Fukuyama defines it, is the demand for "an equality of recognition or respect" which Fukuyama translates as a right to an equality of "human dignity". That right will count for nothing if only the rich can afford "designer babies" and scientists mix human with non-human genes, thus ruining the relative biological equality of our species.

Some have criticised Fukuyama's assessment of biotechnology as alarmist and have castigated him for unnecessarily dragging the question of human nature into the debate. Neither criticism seems particularly justifiable. In any case, the real value of this book lies in its clear explanation of the problem and in the possibility that it may raise the profile of biotechnology in the media and in public awareness.

If we don't give this issue the time and thought it deserves, we might soon find ourselves in a "posthuman" future we don't like, with little hope of a return to the past.



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