

**Science Fiction Book Club  
Interview with Jem Roberts November 2018**

*Jem Roberts is a series of nouns. Here are some of the less offensive ones:*

*Author, Storyteller, Performer, Editor, Comedy Historian, Songwriter, Veteran Games Journalist, Production Editor, Frank Welker Impersonator, Humanist, Voice Artist, Baritone, Pseudo Comedian, Pseudo Actor, Reliable Compère, Ukulele Player, Kazoo Virtuoso, Recording Artist, Mythology Obsessive, Folklorist, Squash Connoisseur, Non-Ginger, Beardy Folkie, Frustrated Swimmer, Native Ludlovian, Adopted Bathonian, Large Fellow.*

*He wrote a book about radio comedy, "I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue," The TV series "Blackadder," Douglas Adams, "Douglas Adams: The Frood – the Very Official Story of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy", and about comedy duo Fry & Laurie, "Soupy Twists."*

**Kevin Kuhn: Huge fan of Adams here, need to pick up your biography of him. While I'm grateful he wrote comedy, and it's masterful, I believe it's so successful, because underneath, it has many imaginative, insightful, and deep components. My question is, did Adams every try to write a non-humorous fictional novel? I treasure his humor and all his books, just curious.**

**Jem Roberts:** Well it goes without saying that comedy is far more valuable than any 'non-humorous' work could be, it's the highest form of art, and the most difficult to pull off – anyone can make a point with a 'serious' work, it takes someone like Adams to do it with comedy. I'm glad to say he never descended into seriousness in his work, though as a private individual his earlier comedy anorakdom did give way to a fanboyish devotion to science. Last Chance To See might be his most serious work, but it's still humorous.

**Robert Hamelin: Will there be a Vogon Poetry Reading after? I've quite a few prepared...**

**Eva Sable: What authors did Douglas Adams enjoy and count as influences?**

**Jem Roberts:** Vonnegut, Austen, Dickens – not Asimov, who he was very tart about. The most obvious comparison to Adams would of course be Wodehouse, and he was devoted to the Master – but the odd thing nobody admitted until The Frood came out, is that Douglas had never read a word of Wodehouse until AFTER his first novel was published! So any Wodehousian similarities in H2G2 – inventive similes etc – are oddly coincidental. Once he discovered PGW, of course, he was a voluble disciple.

**Eva Sable: He wrote some of my favorite Fourth Doctor stories. How did he perceive the experience of writing for television, particularly for such a beloved and long-running property?**

**Jem Roberts:** That whole period was one of absolute exhaustion for him as he was writing H2G2 for the radio at the same time, he never got a moment to enjoy script-editing his favourite TV sci-fi show. It was holistically frustrating, really, he never felt he'd achieved anything on Dr Who, between the limits of the show's FX and of course, the problems with Shada.

**Darin Locy: I would like to know how much input Douglas Adams had on creating the interactive text adventure game back in the 1980s that I played on the Commodore 64 computer? (based on Hitchhiker's Guide)**

**Eva Sable: And Starship Titanic?**

**Jem Roberts:** He worked 50-50 on the first game with Steve Meretzky – they both later claimed neither could tell who had written or coded what, as Douglas loved to get involved with the technical side as well as the prose. As for ST, that was of course a very different era of game-making, and they had a massive, ever-changing team working on that for year after costly year. The nucleus of ST was his, but there are many other voices in there, not least Michael Bywater and of course, when it came to the novel, Terry Jones.

**John Grayshaw: How is your biography of Douglas Adams compared to the other ones? (Simpson, Webb, Gaiman).**

**Jem Roberts:** It's the only real option for anyone who wants an even vaguely up-to-date Adams book – albeit it already seems a long time since 2014! But Don't Panic is just a patchwork quilt of half-arsed writing from hired Neil Gaiman elves – it was the original, but basically stretches to the late 80s. Nick Webb's first official book is exquisite, but it's more of a journey through Adam's psyche from a friend, and will tell you surprisingly little about his actual career – Dirk Gently, for instance, is barely touched on. And the MJ Simpson book is so totally bogged down in unnecessary detail, that's purely for the hardcore. The Frood brings together the best elements of all of them, updated for a new generation, and including the movie, latter radio shows, And Another Thing, etc. I'm hoping to get an updated version out for the US one day...

**John Grayshaw: What's the funniest or most interesting thing you found in Douglas Adam's archives? And will it be published?**

**Jem Roberts:** Anything worth publishing is in The Frood, really – there was one rather fun courtroom chapter of the lost LUE draft which we didn't have room for, and I perform that as part of live author events.

**John Grayshaw: Douglas Adams was 6 feet tall by age 12. Was he teased as a child?**

**Jem Roberts:** He never mentioned it if so – he was always awkward in himself, without any outside influence! Maybe his school friends were afraid he'd punch them. Comedy may have helped him with his awkwardness, but the cliché of dealing with bullies doesn't really compute here.

**John Grayshaw: What were some of Douglas Adam's hobbies other than writing?**

**Jem Roberts:** Scuba-diving, bathing, and most things to do with immersion in water. Music, obviously, he was always a frustrated rock star and always noodling away, or performing on stage with Pink Floyd.

**John Grayshaw: I heard Douglas Adams climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in a rhino costume? How did he stay in shape?**

**Jem Roberts:** Sort of a sore point, as the poor fellow died in the gym, and may even still be with us had he been less concerned with 'staying in shape'. But he was always inclined to excess girth to go with his excess height, and there was never a time he wasn't actively trying to minimise that – the first ever Hitchhiker jokes were dreamt up as he jogged around the village where his Mum lived.

**John Grayshaw: Any fun stories about his friendship with Graham Chapman?**

**Jem Roberts:** It wasn't a hugely jolly time as it was before Graham dried out, so it was mainly spent guzzling gin and being pissed before lunch. Still, writing a dub script for Ringo Starr, on Son of Dracula, was surely an exciting moment for young Douglas.

**John Grayshaw: Did Douglas Adams really suffer from Writer's block or just lack of confidence?**

**Jem Roberts:** I think it was a real hatred of solo writing, more than a lack of confidence. It was the wrong job, but the financial rewards made it impossible for him to ignore. He wanted to be making comedy with friends, not stuck on his own squeezing it out as best he could. It's a strange lie that we're left with this idea that every word of Adams' output was painstakingly crafted, when most of his latter output was wrung out of him at the way-past-eleventh hour, just poured out as best he could. That it's so good is testament to his natural skill.

**John Grayshaw: If Douglas Adams had lived longer would he have finished "Salmon of Doubt" and would it have been a Hitchhiker's or a Dirk Gently book?**

**Jem Roberts:** I don't think there was much scope for it to work as a Hitchhiker title, but who knows? He definitely wanted there to be a sixth Hitchhiker book, so it would have come for sure, but I feel his next would have been a Dirk story one way or another – he had more than just the known Salmon of Doubt stuff on the go, so he was very much in Dirk mode at the end, on the page that is.

**John Grayshaw: What would Douglas Adams have thought of the 2005 Hitchhiker's movie?**

**Jem Roberts:** Catch-22, as his death so entirely defined the film we ended up with. No matter how it would have turned out with him on board throughout though, he'd definitely have praised it to the skies, as it had taken most of his professional life to get made. We got what he wanted – a Hollywood take on H2G2.

**John Grayshaw: What is Douglas Adams' legacy?**

**Jem Roberts:** I'd like to think in a couple of centuries he will still be enjoyed just as much as Jane Austen or PG Wodehouse are today, in writing The Frood, I certainly considered I was writing about one of the true lasting greats of humorous literature. So much of the way we live today was predicted accidentally by Adams, from having our own Guides in our pockets to the Sub-Etha and so on. We're all living in his universe, it's just a shame he's not here to enjoy it with us.