

# Stephen Fry— Last Chance to Think

KYLIE STURGESS

Stephen Fry is an English actor, comedian, author, television presenter, director—and skeptic. During his university years he teamed up with *House, M.D.* actor Hugh Laurie to appear on the whimsical sketch show *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*. He has written several very well-received books, including *The Liar*, *The Hippopotamus*, and half an autobiography called *Moab is My Washpot*. More recently he produced a scholarly but friendly guide to understanding and writing poetry, *The Ode Less Travelled*. He also appeared on popular British TV shows like *Blackadder*, *Jeeves and Wooster*, and the quiz show *Q.I.*

En route to one of the last filming locations in Australia for his new documentary, *Last Chance to See*, Stephen Fry

snapped a quick photo from his hotel window and posted it on the popular online site Twitter. The whole Twittosphere immediately knew where he was, for the arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge was in the background. He was in Sydney but only for a short time. Within a few hours, I had contacted Mr. Fry's agents and organized an interview.

**KYLIE STURGESS:** You have just returned from a lengthy around-the-world investigation based upon Douglas Adams's book *Last Chance to See*, written in 1990, which I use when teaching high-school English. What inspired you to recreate the journey that he and Mark Carwardine completed [when they teamed up to find out what was happening to exotic, endangered creatures worldwide—animals that they may never have gotten another chance to see]?

**STEPHEN FRY:** Douglas did describe it as his favorite book, and I think that was because it changed his life. [It was] his "second chapter," if you like. He never had a third chapter because of his early death, but I know how important it was for him to go around the world and look at the extraordinary habitats and the rare creatures that relied on them. And caring for the disappearing species was something he devoted a lot of time to.

Now, what inspired me to recreate the journey was, firstly, that Douglas's family asked me to; plus it was a desire I've always had to go into the wild. Like so many people of my generation I grew up on natural history on TV, and it never occurred to me that one day I would actually be looking at lions close by, that I'd be with hippopotamuses, gorillas, lemurs, rare birds, diving turtles, and all these amazing things . . . blue whales breaching in front of your very eyes. It affected me profoundly, and it affected Douglas.

It's very hard to say which was my most influential experience. There are one or two moments which bring one close to the most ecstatic euphoria that one can ever experience (without the use of pharmaceuticals or alcohol). I'd say it was seeing hundreds of green turtles hatching out of their nest and streaming

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over the dunes into the sea. This was off the coast of Malaysia.

It's not until the female turtle is about twenty-five years old that she can lay eggs—that the "turtle is fertile," as they'd say in America. She mates with the male and then she swims in—not necessarily on a moonlit night; there's a great mistaken belief that this is keyed to some biodynamic phase of the Moon; it's not actually true—to the place where she was born and crawls up the beach (not having been on land since she was born, she finds the place again using Earth's magnetic field), lays 80 to 120 eggs and covers them up. And I was right beside this huge beautiful animal doing just that; she took 90 minutes to lay the eggs, an incredible sight, and then she lumbered back into the water.

**STURGESS:** In that documentary, apparently there's an account of a healing ceremony in Madagascar, which is something you've touched upon before in your novel *The Hippopotamus*. Why do you think pseudoscientific claims, such as holistic healing, continue to pervade our society despite advances in medicine?

**FRY:** Well, my interpretation is no more valid than anyone else's, but I would say in terms of medicine, people want to take control of their own lives, and ironically they seem to think that they are taking control of their lives more by using so-called complementary or alternative medicines than by using orthodox medicine. In other words, they think it's a statement of originality and individuality. To you and me it seems self-evidently ridiculous, this homeopathic medicine. It is so preposterous, and yet some people I know and respect insist on believing it.

The powers of the placebo are so strong that it may be morally wrong to call homeopathy a lie because the moment you say it then a placebo falls to pieces and loses its power. I am a great believer in double-blind random testing, which is the basis of all drug testing. People still insist on things like holistic healing and things that have no real basis in evidence because they want it to be true—it's as simple as that. If you're dying of cancer or very, very ill, then you'll cling to a straw. I feel pretty dark thoughts about the kind of people who throw straws at drowning, dying men and women, and I'm sure most of us would agree it's a pretty lousy thing to do. Some of these people perhaps believe in the snake oil they sell or allow themselves to believe in it. That's why James Randi is so good, because he knows what magicians know: if you do a card trick on someone, they will report that it was unbelievable, they describe the effect the magician wanted, and they miss out all

the steps in between that seemed irrelevant because the magician made them irrelevant, so they didn't notice them. People will swear that a clairvoyant mentioned the name of their aunt from nowhere, and they will be astonished if you then play a recording that shows that thirty-two names were said before the aunt's name, none of which had any effect on them. That's because they wanted to hear their aunt's name; they wanted the trick to work, so they forgot all the failures in the same way as people forget all their dreams that have no relevance to their lives, but they mark when they dream of someone they haven't met for ages that they see the next day. I would be astounded if everyone had coincidences like that—yet people say that is somehow closed-minded of me!

**STURGESS:** Of course, it's not just the pseudosciences that pervade; there are also paranormal beliefs. I was wondering if you're surprised that the same beliefs exist today?

**FRY:** No, I am not surprised. I hope I know enough about history and human nature to agree that there is one born every minute and to know that there is desperation to make sense of things, and making sense of the universe isn't easy. Making sense of our own lives isn't easy. There are different ways of doing it—by observing people, by reading novels and poetry, by looking at paintings, listening to music, allowing our minds to concentrate on the experiences we had and the observations we've made about how people behave. Then in a wider sense we can look at the world and make observations about how animals behave and what they look like and why they look like it, why rain falls, and all kinds of phenomena that occur, and we can do this by observation, experiment, repetition, and understanding. This is essentially what we call the scientific method, the empirical method, more importantly.

Or, we can cheat—we can just say “there's an invisible person that makes it happen,” or the stars tell you, or it's all predestined, or it's something to do with an inborn power of the mind, which isn't the power of learning. In other words, you can be *lazy*; instead of bothering to find how numbers work or observing how animals behave, you just say it's all according to some cosmic vibration. Sad, but people naturally want to cut corners, much as water wants to go the shortest route to the sea, so human beings want to find the shortest route to the truth, but unfortunately that takes them to the great “ocean of bullshit” that lies out there and to all those people prepared to make money out of them. All the cold-reading clairvoyants and the nonsensical astrologers and absurd ESP merchants and other such people who talk about vibrations and energies. . . . God, if there's a word that drives me mad it's “energy” used in a nonsensical way—don't get me started!

Let's just say that, to me, the true mystery of the universe is something that is available to all, not through the arcane rules of some nonsensical, unprovable drivel—but is there for your eyes, it is there to see by just simply recognizing observable laws and repeatable instances of things like sunsets and how they work. And seeing what we've done on the basis of that understanding, so every time that you flick a light switch or

turn on a GPS, you have to realize on what that GPS is predicated, on the science—without it the GPS couldn't possibly work. The fact that Earth must be round, the fact that it must move at this speed, the fact that geostationary orbit means this, the fact that triangulation means that—all these things tell us so much how science is right.

**STURGESS:** You're also the host of a TV show in the United Kingdom called *Q.I.*, which stands for “Quite Interesting.” It's been described as a “comedy panel quiz,” yet it could very well be called a show that questions illogical thinking and dangerous beliefs. Do you consider comedy to be a “way in” for people to challenge irrational thinking?

**FRY:** Comedy is always about the real world. Philosophers or religionists will make a pompous, abstract statement and a comedian will say, “Is that true on a *Wednesday*?” Comedians want a cut and dried example of the facts of the world. Because comedy is about observation—as is science—it's about repeatable patterns, and it's testing some statement that may be preposterous or may be true. Statements made of grandeur and abstract truth are always tested by comedians, so in that sense, comedy is a very good way to get the credulous onside, if you like. Because it says “Is that true? Is it really true? Let's see!”

**STURGESS:** Finally, your love of technology is well known—you've written for many years on technology in a variety of publications; you have a very popular podcast called *Podgrams* that is available on your Web site and on iTunes. Recently you've embraced Twitter and written about the experience and have been the focus of media attention because of it. Do you think that your love of technology is an important part of your appeal to your audience? And what do you hope for technological advances in the future?

**FRY:** My audiences all share an interest in technology because those that don't have stopped being my audience. It's about what one hopes for and what happens. Of course like everyone else I hope for 3-D television and for fantastic robots I can have sex with that then turn into machines that clean my room! I'm a human being—I want slavish satisfaction; I want joy and pleasure to be brought to me by the machines. But I also love the connections that technology gives me with other people. I am worried about privacy and that one day the machines might stop and we won't know what to do with ourselves and not be able to cope! So my hope for technology is that it will continue to be free and open and will become dominated not by business interests as now, not by politicians, religious fundamentalists, or maniacs, but by the general sum of humanity, whom I think to be good and enlightened for the most part.

I know there are dark and hideous slimy corners of the Internet, but one is able to avoid them. The Internet is like a great city; of course it has slums and red-light districts and weird temples and strange churches, but it also has grand cultural palaces, remarkable museums and libraries, places of entertainment, shops and stores, and exciting parks. □