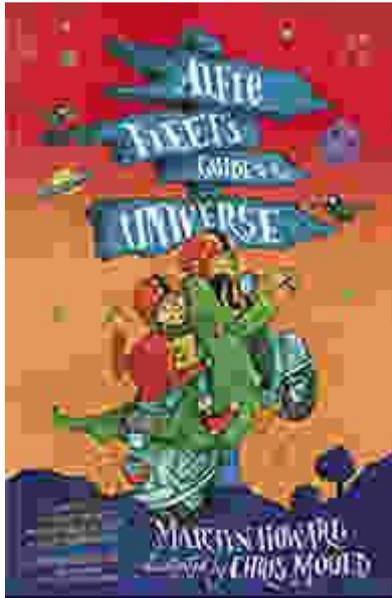


Alfie Fleet's Guide to the Universe

Martin Howard, illustrated by Chris Mould



Done with Dartmouth? Out of love with Lime Regis? Bored of Bognor? How about trying something more adventurous for your holidays this year. A far-away destination that might be advertised in the brochures of the Unusual Travel Agency?

That's right, the Unusual Travel Agency. This remarkable intergalactic tourism business was spawned by Alfie's adventures in *The Cosmic Atlas of Alfie Fleet* (the first book in the series). And by now you might have guessed that the Unusual Travel Agency isn't for the faint-hearted. If weird planet visits aren't your cuppa, then best stick to your guided tours of the tearooms of Bognor Regis because *Alfie Fleet's Guide to the Universe* won't be taking you on any orbit you're used to.

The story charts Alfie's fact-finding missions to various planets for his travel brochure. Using the tried-and-trusted Stone Circle method of teleportation (and trust moped Besty for on-planet transportation), Alfie and his companion, Professor Bowell-Mouvemont, fut-fut across the cosmos, never quite knowing where they'll land next. But a slight hiccup on one planet

opens a portal to a world of deep unpleasantness in the form of Sir Willikin Nantbiter, a cantankerous old git who wishes to destroy their travel-agency and take over their headquarters with immediate effect. The members of the Unusual Travel Agency – along with Nantbiter's unwilling kid – must escape Nantbiter's motley crew and hatch a plan. A plan that preferably doesn't involve dark lords, pirates and close shaves with death... Oops.

Like the first book, *Alfie Fleet's Guide to the Universe* is the brainchild of a completely unbridled imagination. Mart's neurons have truly been bubbling overtime, creating ridiculous planets, landscapes, predicaments and perils that, whilst containing mild threat, will also have you snorting loudly.

In some places, snorts erupt in the middle of other snorts, creating an embarrassment of snorts (so if you're self-conscious, do not read in public).

And what exactly is it that makes it so funny? Well, first up, the names are ludicrous, the insults are double-barrelled and the dialogue's slippery-quick, like a well-chucked spear from a member of the Skingrath tribe on the planet of Outlandish. A trip to Wingspan to see flying people with winged-hats? Yes please, you chicken-legged pillow-fluffer. There are just too many examples of hilariousness to list. I gave up dog-earing pages for reference when it became clear that EVERY SINGLE PAGE contained something gut-twistingly funny. But for me, the over-arching cause of mirth is Mart's golden gift for characters and characterisation.

I absolutely loved Lord Poobin, Dread Ruler of the Poobinian Empire (retired), who now runs a tea-room, and the pirate with the annoying parrot, and the long-bearded Catsic the Henge. And of course, Professor Bowell-Mouvemont, with his malapropisms and sideways logic. And plenty more besides.

When all these fantastical characters appear, I *hear* them, I *see* them. They are so full of *life*. And, bumbling, brave, revolting or really-quite-pleasant, they each have a back story to commend or condemn them and language so rich and real that every single one could carry an entire book alone. Alfie is possibly the only character who might be described as 'normal' (although that does not mean he's perfect) – and that's the way it should be; he is the sun to an orbiting cast of curiosities.

If you like Blackadder, Monty Python, Salvador Dali and Professor Brian Cox, then this is right up your alley. And I very much hope that the Unusual Travel Agency remains open for business. Because although I need a little rest to catch my breath, I would very much like to go travelling the universe with Alfie Fleet again.

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Reviewer: Rachel