

Reply to a query on the Chandrasekhar Conference

Articles

This letter was written in April 2003, in reply to an E-mail message asking if the Chandrasekhar Conference coverage is a parody or relates actual events from the conference

Hello Alan: Thanks for your question.

Part II of "Chandrasekhar" both is and is not a parody. Let's see. Part I is not a parody at all. In fact there was a physicist whose name was something like Varadarajan. Obviously from India. He did in fact look at me in a supercilious way and say " I suppose you expect me to impart some 'wisdom' to you"-an absolutely stupid thing to say but in line with the attitude of many scientists who grow bloated with contempt once someone states he's a journalist. Of course he was implying that Western journalists only talk to Hindus because they imagine they're all gurus.

Part II is mostly parody. It's content is however related to several incidents which did happen over the years and I think you'll appreciate:

1. Martin Rees did in fact deliberately bump into me in the corridor of the IAS during the Einstein Centennial Symposium in 1979. He was angry because I'd suggested that between the Big Bang and the Cosmological Principle (universal isotropy and homogeneity) one could prove just about anything. What made him even more angry was that he didn't know my credentials, and did in fact send along a colleague to ask me, not too subtly, what my academic affiliation was. I told him I was a professor of Philosophy of Science at Columbia University, an egregious fiction.

However, at the Chandrasekhar Conference Martin Rees was very friendly. Indeed my impression was that he was happy to see me again after so many years. I'm glad that something made him happy; you probably know that he's recently published a jeremiad "Our Final Hour", predicting the end of civilization before the end of the 21st century.

2. Roger Penrose did in fact try to sell me the hardback version of Volume II of *Twistors and Spinors* by himself and Wolfgang Rindler after the paperback had come out. This happened at the 11th General Relativity and Gravitation conference in Stockholm in 1986.

My report on this conference is even more than a parody, its an exercise in Surrealism and the New Novel. You can find it in the Conference Folder. Some of the articles in this folder are parodies, some aren't. The account of the Quantum Limits to the Second Law conference for example, last summer in San Diego, is quite sober - if that's the word)

I didn't want the Twistors book, but a Dutch friend and colleague, Dolf van Rede (Sadly deceased from about 4 years ago), bought it and made me a present of it. I found it totally indigestible, even with a good mathematics background, and finally sold it to the Strand Bookstore in New York City for \$10. They only wanted to give me \$5, but I persuaded them that Penrose was a very famous man and his signature was worth something.

3. Kip Thorne was in fact rude to me at that conference, though I exaggerate the extent of it in my article. My apologies.

4. I am always annoyed by the way participants, at the dinners after these events, scream shop talk across the tables all through the meal while ignoring anything else someone sitting next to them is trying to say to them. Thus at the end of my article, I've got Valerie Ferrari shouting info across two tables about

"quasi-normal" modes. At the end of the mock "dinner" we hear scientists shouting out the weird names of persons associated with various theorems , methodologies, coinages and ideologies in astrophysics and cosmology. These are all real by the way, I didn't make any of them up.

5. John Archibald Wheeler did in fact stand up during a question period (after Penrose's talk in fact), and say that Inflationary Theory was complete nonsense. Of course this sent offripples of gravitas waves all through the auditorium.

6. Ed Witten did in fact present himself as the prophet of the "new geometry", claiming that "M-brane theory" was the first real advance in geometry since Euclid.

7. Everyone mentioned was in fact at the conference or dinner, though the conversations at the dinner are of course invented.

8. The tribute of Lalitha Chandrasekhar after the dinner was not invented. It was very moving .

Thanks for writing. R.L.