

EGSM 011: We want to believe (Aliens & UFOs)

Content Warnings

- Explicit language
- Aliens (inc. abductions)
- Discussions of: conspiracies & conspiracy thinking, unreliable memories, cults
- Mentions of: COVID-19 pandemic, war, sleep paralysis, animal death, thalassophobia, injuries

ALEX

I can't believe you rejected your prophet!

HANNAH

(helpless with laughter) Apparently? I haven't been back in a while!

ALEX

That's such a... what?

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

(still helpless with laughter) I don't know man!

ALEX

This is the best episode for you ever!

TAI

Right? We didn't think we were gonna get an actual alien on the show!

HANNAH

I know!

(Show Theme - Intro)

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusiasm, the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host, Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers and today we're talking about aliens and UFOs and spooky things in space, and I am really, really jubilant to be joined by Alex, Hannah and Tai. So, as always, alphabetically, Alex, give us your pronouns and tell us what you do.

ALEX

I'm Alexander J. Newall, that's he/him, I'm the founder and CEO of Rusty Quill and I won't leave. (laughs)

HELEN

You can't leave! (laughs)

ALEX

Can't leave. Here forever.

HELEN

We need you or, like, I won't have my show any more!

ALEX

Trapped on this little blue marble we call Earth, looking up at the stars.

Trapped. Trapped forever.

HELEN

Wonderful. Hannah? Save us. Tell us your pronouns and what you do.

HANNAH

Oh boy. Oh hello, I am Hannah, I am the producer for Rusty Quill Gaming currently as well as the Rusty Quill Patreon and my pronouns are she/her.

HELEN

Fabulous. And finally Tai, can you give us your pronouns and tell us what you do?

TAI

Yes! Hello, I'm Tai, I'm the Chief Finance Officer for Rusty Quill, so I make sure the money goes where it needs to go and I'm one of them they/thems.

HELEN

(laughs) Excellent.

HANNAH

"One of them they/thems"? That's very fun to say, I like that!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

We support all they/thems on this podcast.

HANNAH

Yes.

HELEN

I've noticed throughout this series I'm like, occasionally making proclamations about the stance of the podcast, such as-

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

I mean it is - it is yours, right? Like that's - who else is gonna do it?

TAI

For sure.

ALEX

We are pro-pangolins, we are anti-anteater. Grrr....

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

That's a hot-button topic there, careful!

HELEN

Honestly, I wanna keep that trend going. So far we've established that this podcast is pro-sasquatch...

HANNAH

Mm hm.

HELEN

...and that we hold that there are 10,000 planets in the solar system, despite Bryn's objections to that.

ALEX

Oh Bryn will have hated that!

HANNAH

Oh, that's rough!

(Group laughter)

HELEN

OK, so we've got to get onto the main topic for why I wanted to have this episode which is: the US government this year, this year of all bizarre years, said: 'Oh yeah, you know UFOs? Yeah we actually don't know what those are. Have at it.'

HANNAH

Mm hm.

HELEN

And nobody noticed because we were all sitting in our little cocoons going slightly mad. So, what are we gonna do with that information everyone?

TAI

Flee the planet.

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

They've been vaguely letting hints and like little declassified things out for a while. The one last year was definitely like - yeah, I remember that day. I noticed.

(Helen laughs)

HANNAH

It's very strange, it's very hard to - I dunno, I like that they're being matter of fact about it as opposed to being cryptic, because being matter of fact about it means we might actually be able to figure some stuff out and separate what's actually happening from whatever conspiracy theories are out there that are not true. So you know, points for science, I appreciate that if the US government's got to be transparent about something, I'm glad it's UFOs!

(Group laughter)

I'd prefer they were transparent about a lot of other things but that's a separate issue.

ALEX

But how do you know? Maybe they finally got to the bottom of them all and now they're saying they don't know so that people finally start to look in the other direction. Maybe this is the tip of the iceberg.

HELEN

Oh no.

HANNAH

Oh...

ALEX

Maybe it's aliens all the way down, Hannah!

(Helen laughs)

HANNAH

Oh, Alex, why must you do this to my sanity? It's carefully constructed and very fragile!

(Group laughter)

TAI

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I have to be honest, that was my first thought is - if they're coming out and being like: oh hey, we don't know what those are, that sounds very much like - well not really knowing what we're doing has solved a lot of other problems.

(Group laughter)

In that there were problems on top of problems and you're always distracting people so I think on this one they were like: do you know what? We haven't done anything really bad in about 48 hours.

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

Yeah.

TAI

So let's give them - let's give them something to go off on, and maybe, maybe if we just say that we really don't know and we actually don't care, people will just be outraged and go and look at UFOs and aliens. But also there is the concern of like, yeah, maybe it's because there's aliens all the way down.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

What I understand right is that there are a few possibilities. Some people are saying: oh the images, the videos are just, they're weird tricks of the light or

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they're reflections off the water, that kind of thing, or they're weird kinds of lightning, because lightning can be super weird.

HANNAH

Lightning can be super weird.

HELEN

Our weather? Bizarre sometimes.

HANNAH

Mm hm.

HELEN

The second major theory is this is technology that we don't know about yet, like it's human technology that everyone's being secretive about, and considering the amount of things that are still classified, I wouldn't particularly be surprised if people are experimenting with weird-ass stuff.

HANNAH

Oh yeah.

HELEN

And then third option - it's aliens and stuff!

(laughter)

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Some of those are more exciting explanations than others.

HANNAH

For sure.

HELEN

I don't know. I...have no preference.

TAI

I don't think I have a preference, I think the thing of like weapons, it can get very X-Files.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

Where you feel like in your brain is both Mulder and Scully as one part of you goes...

HELEN

Yeah! (laughs)

TAI

..."Come on, that's clearly just what they're working on for the latest in some horrifying new way of perpetuating warfare" but then a part of you is like: "Yeah, but what if there were little green guys in there..." And, realistically,

that's - it's one of those like "who's to say?" things, and a lot of it comes down to, one of my personal things is I don't ask whether someone believes in aliens, because I think it's a bit like asking if they believe in the sky. Like - they're out there somewhere, we just haven't seen them yet.

HANNAH

I love it.

ALEX

See that's a really big distinction. Like a REALLY big distinction because it's like - you've listed those three and I'm gonna be Captain Downer. I'm gonna, I'm gonna give the hot take, it's not aliens. It's not aliens. It's definitely 1 or 2, but that's because I'm totally with Tai on this one where it's like: aliens? Yeah, of course. Of course - like just follow that to its logical conclusion, of course.

TAI

Just mathematically.

ALEX

Yeah, yeah.

HANNAH

That's just how that works, yeah.

ALEX

That doesn't mean that I believe buzzing is happening. And I mean buzzing in the sense of like, slang for aliens in a UFO coming along, messing with some farmers and then bouncing off back into the Andromeda nebula. Like I don't believe buzzing happens. But you can separate out crop circles from the actual consideration of alien life.

ALL

Yeah.

HELEN

Yes, I think we probably all agree there's aliens out there, we may never meet them, but the idea that they're here? (makes dismissive, unconvinced noises)

ALEX

Also depends how you define alien.

HELEN

Oh yeah.

ALEX

There's been some interesting studies to do with...I forget what it's called, it's a form of colonisation theory which is, there's an argument to be made that

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basically a couple of meteorites landed on earth and that's where life comes from.

TAI

Yes!

HELEN

Mm-hm.

ALEX

So when you get to that it's like: cool! Define "alien" then...

HANNAH

Ah hah!

TAI

Mm...

HELEN

Aww.

ALEX

But like there's some interesting data that is, that is a hypothesis some people hold, that is not the same as a proven theory, but...

HANNAH

Mm hm. Mm hm.

ALEX

...yeah, there's some interesting stuff there.

HANNAH

No, Alex is claiming definitively that we're all aliens, that's it.

(Group laughter)

ALEX

We are all aliens! Star Trek: The Next Generation had it right and we're all humanoid not due to make up considerations, but...

TAI

It's, I think it's interesting when you think about what qualifies as an alien. Because then I think about the kind of things that we see...I mean everybody's seen those like, clickbait headlines saying: "FISHERMEN FOUND THIS WASHED UP ON THE SHORE - WHAT HAPPENED NEXT WILL BLOW YOUR MIND!"

HELEN

Oh yeah. (laughs)

ALEX

(groans)

HELEN

And it's always just like a seal.

(Group laughter)

TAI

It is, or it's like, it's a blobfish but out of the water, or it's like a bit of a messed-up octopus or something.

HELEN

(laughs) Yeah.

TAI

And you're like - well the thing is, there is so much stuff still in the sea that we don't know what it looks like, what it does, what it is.

ALEX

Yeah!

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

We're still discovering what's here on the planet, and I think again just to go back to this point, we can all agree that like definitely there are aliens, and I just wanna really hammer that home because I have such a problem when I

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speak to people and they say: "No, I don't believe in aliens, I just don't think there's anything else out there in space, we'd have seen them already." I'm like...

ALEX

What?!

HANNAH

No!

TAI

We haven't even seen what's at the bottom of the sea!

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

We're bad at seeing stuff!

TAI

We are! We're bad at seeing stuff, there's so much stuff to see, and the average person, absolutely myself included, cannot properly conceptualise the sea in their head.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

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Because it's so big. So the idea that you can do that with the entirety of existence...it's just hubris.

(Helen laughs)

ALEX

Did you ever read the book "The Kraken Wakes" at all by, er, I think it was John Wyndham?

TAI

No.

HELEN

No.

HANNAH

No. But as a fan of Seattle's new hockey team, I'm excited by this title! (laughs)

ALEX

It's either "The Kraken Wakes" or "The Kraken Awakes" or something like that, it's been years since I read it. But the entire premise is basically that everyone's like: oh, there's aliens! And it's not, it's just there's stuff that lives really deep in the ocean.

HANNAH

Ahh!

TAI

Mm hm.

ALEX

And it turns out there's intelligent life down there and it's not happy with what we're doing. Like that's the entire premise though is it hits a lot of the same notes where it reads like: ALIENS! And it's like, no, it's just the ocean's terrifying.

HELEN

Yeah!

HANNAH

Yeah. Just that feels uncomfortably plausible, honestly.

TAI

Yeah.

HANNAH

That somewhere else on this planet is eventually someone that's gonna be like: "The fuck are you doing?"

ALEX

Well it gets, it gets really, really awkward because their master plan is raising the sea levels. Which gets a little close to home.

HANNAH

Mm!

TAI

Uh oh!

HANNAH

Hey! We're...helping...!

TAI

I can see that, things living under the sea or even, I mean this is another thing, if the, I'm sure we'll get into the questions of faster than light travel and such and so forth, but if we think about these things as something that we don't understand, knowing that we already don't know what species are on the planet, who's to say these UFOs aren't just cloaking failures by something that already co-exists here with us with us without our knowledge.

HELEN

Ooh...

HANNAH

I like that one!

HELEN

And that's the other thing, right, we don't know how many senses other things might have.

TAI

Mm.

HELEN

Like can't shrimp - aren't there like forbidden shrimp colours that we don't see?

HANNAH

Mantis shrimp!

TAI

We've heard about this one, and I just want to say on the mantis shrimp, it is that they have cones within their eyes that can perceive types of light that we can't.

HELEN

Yeah.

TAI

But they actually only see like three colours.

HANNAH

(disappointed) Aww!

TAI

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It's not the true 16 colour - we would all be seeing like a kaleidoscope all the time, it's kind of more like how...yeah, some animals can see UV but they're still looking at a different type of light on top of a black and white image.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

Not to ruin mantis shrimps for everybody I just, I like to ruin little factoids!

HELEN

That's okay.

ALEX

Well you're also - yeah, you're driving perilously close to my hot button which is: how many senses do humans have?

TAI

(gasps) Well...

HELEN

Six!

ALEX

Loads!

HANNAH

Lots!

TAI

Tons.

ALEX

So many! You can sense when you're upside down even if you aren't seeing, smelling, tasting, touching it, like-

TAI

Yes!

ALEX

That's a sense. You can feel when you're under physical pressure even though it's not a touch, like, humans have like 27 senses!

TAI

You can feel where your own body is in relation to your body, that's a sense, that's a separate perception.

ALEX

As a separate sense, yeah, because it doesn't require physical touch.

TAI

Yeah.

HANNAH

I'm bad at that one! (laughs)

ALEX

You've got about 20-something senses, so yeah. It gets weird when you start conceptualising that outside of us.

HELEN

Yeah. Is one of those senses, you can sense when there's another person in the room?

TAI

Yeah.

HANNAH

Yeah.

HELEN

Because I feel like that's something I have, like, okay, the anecdote that I always think of is I'd gone to bed and my partner at the time was still watching Match of the Day.

ALEX

Okay! (laughs)

HELEN

And um, I fell asleep and he came in the room and he'd just opened the door, I woke up and screamed my head off, because all I could see was like this silhouetted dark figure in the doorway.

(Group laughter)

TAI

Oh no!

ALEX

Look I can't speak to your ESP...

(Helen laughs)

...though I'm presuming of course that we're all agreed that all aliens are definitely telepathic regardless of context, right?

(Group laughter)

TAI

No Alex, I don't think we can go with such blanket statements like that!

ALEX

(laughs like an evil genius while everyone else giggles)

HELEN

But like, I believe that like, you can tell if someone's in a room with you, a lot of the time.

HANNAH

I mean that makes sense because I mean every, I think it's every living thing basically emits like an electromagnetic field of some level.

TAI

Yeah.

HANNAH

It's very, very small compared to things like, you know, technology but I mean, there's stuff in there moving around and it's, you know, that's what happens so it would make sense that there's some awareness of it.

ALEX

But now you're getting into the territory of like, defining alien abduction experiences.

HELEN

Ooh...

TAI

Yes!

ALEX

Where there's been a lot of studies where - oh, I can share two, I've got two very fun facts for this.

HANNAH

Yay!

HELEN

Yes, yes!

ALEX

So one is that there have been a number of studies in an attempt to induce abduction experiences that succeeded.

HELEN

Ohhhhh!

TAI

Wow.

ALEX

So what they did is they - like people signed up for it, they primed people psychologically to the idea of aliens, and then they induced a sleep paralysis episode...

(Helen gasps)

...and a significant chunk of the subjects were all like - yeah, I was visited by aliens. And then, when provided footage that debunked that, had a real hard time believing the footage over their experience. Which is interesting.

TAI

Mm hm.

HELEN

Wow...

ALEX

But my second, which is my absolute favourite, favourite aliens fact, and this is one of those ones where I'm gonna find out it's been debunked or something, but I'm gonna stick to it!

(Helen laughs)

ALEX

Alien abduction insurance is a thing in the US.

HANNAH

(laughs) I didn't know that!

TAI

Mm hm.

ALEX

Where you basically - you can get various levels of coverage, and all of them require that if you can prove beyond reasonable doubt that you have been abducted by an alien, you'll get a payout. There is one formally recorded case of someone getting that payout.

HELEN

(gasps) Ohhhh!

ALEX

There's a few insurance houses that do it, there is one confirmed insurance payout for someone who demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that they had an abduction experience under the terms of the insurance policy.

TAI

Wow.

HELEN

Alex, please tell me you have more details of this, that is fascinating.

ALEX

That's everything I've got. That's it!

HELEN

Nooooo! (laughs)

ALEX

You've got to go away and research it yourself!

HANNAH

Oh I'm, I'm researching the hell out of that, absolutely!

(Helen is still laughing)

TAI

Oh wow.

HELEN

That's so tantalising!

HANNAH

That's amazing!

TAI

It is.

ALEX

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I came at that via some friends who worked in insurance and then years ago did a quick little Google search and went “ooh, interesting.” But I'm in no doubt that that's been debunked or something else, but it's like my favourite little nugget to share when it comes to stuff like this.

HELEN

Sure, but it's interesting though!

HANNAH

I don't know, I feel like insurance companies would be kind of hard to pull one over on...

TAI

Right?

HANNAH

...because aren't they dealing with that kind of thing all the time of people trying to trick them?

ALEX

I think being brutal, it's probably more likely due to a failing in their wording.

TAI

Yes.

HANNAH

Mm.

ALEX

Where they were like: "You never said there had to be a UFO, I was kidnapped!
This covers it!" Like...

(Helen laughs)

TAI

Yeah.

HANNAH

Yeah, that's - that's fair.

TAI

Define "abduction".

HANNAH

Someone found a loophole.

ALEX

I feel like it's probably like they got them on a technicality but it's still a cool
little thing.

TAI

Mm.

HANNAH

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But it's still true, and it's still fun!

HELEN

(laughs) That's like that - there's a law in a US state where you have to, you're legally required to tell someone if your house is haunted if you're trying to sell it.

ALEX

Oh yeah, yeah you are!

HANNAH

Yep. Yep.

HELEN

I love that, I love that stuff!

HANNAH

We have fun over here.

TAI

(laughs)

HELEN

The intersection of bureaucracy and the paranormal is so fascinating! So interesting!

TAI

The, the US government would litigate the ghost world if they could, like, for back taxes or something.

HELEN

(laughs)

ALEX

Immediately!

HANNAH

Man, I'm convinced they are, honestly! Like they probably know, they're probably taxing it somehow, I don't know!

(laughter)

Sorry, I'm just being pessimistic here!

HELEN

Taxing the ghosts!

TAI

On the point of alien abductions I think it's really interesting for you to say there's so many people that have these - they've had these like induced experiences.

ALEX

Mm.

TAI

And I think there's so much where it intersects with how unfortunately human memory is really unreliable, especially when it comes to very emotive experiences.

ALEX

Yeah.

HELEN AND HANNAH

Mm hm.

TAI

And then it doesn't help when as well you have things like the other signs of aliens sort of showing up, things like crop circles or sometimes it'll be unexplained. Again I'm thinking of like The X-Files, unexplained like, you know, animal death in the area, or somebody's acting weird or something.

ALEX

Oh yeah, yeah.

TAI

It always ends up getting attributed to, first of all the crop circles, I think that one's always just been down to a dude with a plank on some rope.

ALEX

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But that - but I'm fascinated that that became aliens at some point! Because the people who did it went: "Yeah, we did it." And then everyone went: "No you didn't!"

(Group laughter)

And they went: "No, we, we did. Like this is how we did it." And everyone's like: "No you didn't, it's aliens." "No really, we were just drawing shapes, we didn't even SAY it was aliens, you just assumed!" And these people have actively come out and said: "We invented crop circles." And everyone's like: "You're a liar! You're working for Big Alien!"

(Group laughter)

TAI AND HANNAH

"Big Alien"!

ALEX

It's gone so bizarre, that specific sub-culture. To be blunt I wouldn't, I would not trust most elective officials to, you know, keep the taps running.

(laughter)

The idea that they could elaborately like manage an entire conspiracy on that scale...

HELEN

(laughs) Secret alien, yeah!

HANNAH

Yeah.

ALEX

...just the older I get, the more I see that no one has any idea what's happening, on the entire planet.

HELEN

Absolutely!

ALEX

The level of like, coordination and control and will to make that happen? I don't see it.

TAI

From that point of view I'm gonna recommend again for you specifically Alex is "Waking Gods" by Sylvain Neuvel, which is about what if aliens did come a long time ago, and what if there was a whole thing where people did know something about, I don't want to spoil it, but you'll like it.

ALEX

Understood, added to the list.

TAI

Also about aliens, it is very relevant where again these ones are unknowable because of cultural differences and their own feelings of their morality on whether or not they should interfere with Earth.

HELEN

Mm.

ALEX

Oh don't get me started on the Prime Directive. Eugh.

(laughter)

HELEN

So that's really interesting because one - so one of my favourite like classic Tumblr posts of all time is where someone's like: okay, so we all talk about how aliens must be really frightening, but what if they're really scared of us because of our traits as predators? And they're like "they have a set of teeth and then all their teeth fall out and they grow new ones!"

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

Yeah!

HELEN

And you know - they can break a bone and then they just click it back into place and it heals up, and you know, they can live in temperatures of up to this many degrees, and like...

TAI

Yes, it's Earth as Space Australia!

HELEN

We're actually quite scary!

ALEX

Well that's, that's genuinely one of the proposed solutions to the Fermi Paradox. Fermi was a mathematician who ran the figures on the likelihood of

life in the universe and encountered a paradox, which is: listen, if you assume, I'm not gonna pluck the actual figures, I don't have them memorised, but it would be like okay, let's assume that one in every million stars has planets. One in every million of those has planets that are even vaguely capable of sustaining life. One in every million of those has you know, the right conditions and it happens and you have basic life. One in every million of those is likely to make it to intelligent life. Blah blah blah blah blah. But what it comes down to is that the universe is so goddamn massive and there is so much stuff in there that even if you make those odds like prohibitively, prohibitively rare, the universe should still be swimming in life. And that, even if you, if you follow that even further like intelligent life wants to travel, if you assume that which is...there's an argument that that's not the case but whatever, you should be unable to move for galactic senates and...

(Group laughter)

...and, and you know, hyperspace bypasses that are demolishing Earth on the way - like you should be encountering that. So the paradox says that the maths says we should encounter them, and that means that there have been a number of proposed solutions to the Fermi Paradox, why are we not seeing them? One of the solutions is that basically, we are in the equivalent of quarantine or a nature reserve.

(Group laughter)

Because we're too dangerous. We're too, either we're too hostile, we're biologically incompatible, we are not to be trusted, like, whatever. But for

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some reason we're in a pocket deliberately. It's not a very well-believed solution to the Fermi Paradox, but it is one way that you can make the maths square is that, yeah, either we're too terrifying or just too gross...

(Helen laughs)

...and that the rest of the universe has gone like: no, none of that, we'll hide ourselves from them because that's just awful, oh god no.

HANNAH

I mean, fair enough. (laughs)

HELEN

Us and our disgusting hair!

ALEX

Humans are disgusting! We're all just gross, disgusting predators, urgh!

HELEN

(laughs) Hannah, do you have any - because I do want to talk a little bit about sci-fi books because this is totally with, that's totally within the remit of this conversation.

HANNAH

Oh yeah!

HELEN

Hannah, have you read about any sci-fi books about aliens and stuff like that that you'd like to recommend, like is there any that floats your boat?

HANNAH

Er, nothing comes to mind, I'll be honest. I do, I do have a story that sounds like a bit of a sci-fi book from my own past!

(laughs)

HELEN

I will, I will go for that, I will absolutely go for that!

HANNAH

Okay, cool! So I grew up in a small town in Northern Idaho which for anyone who doesn't know sort of US states, that's exactly the sort of place a story like this would happen.

TAI

(laughs)

HELEN

Okay.

HANNAH

And when I was in kindergarten there was a, well there was a kid in my class who was very weird, very creepy, just did not like me for some reason and it got to the point that my parents decided they wanted to pull me out of this particular school. And they went and talked to the teacher about it, and this teacher adamantly insisted that they could not pull me out because she was not done training me yet, because I was some sort of alien messiah from another star. I think she said a blue one.

HELEN

Er...!

TAI

Wha...?!

HANNAH

Sent to help us and save humanity or something. And actually my parents were VERY adamant on pulling me out after that, and they did.

(Helen laughs)

But yeah, apparently I'd been like doodling sacred geometry and that was part of her proof, I don't know if that's true or not. But there were many people in that town that were pretty convinced that there was like a mother ship over the town.

TAI

Oh my god!

HANNAH

To my knowledge none of this is true, just to clarify!

HELEN

(laughs)

TAI

We've been employing the next leader of the aliens, or the prophet of the aliens?

HANNAH

There you go.

HELEN

In-credible.

ALEX

Did you ever make contact again, with like anyone who was wrapped up in that belief of you as an alien messiah?

HANNAH

N- well god, I hope it was just her, I hope that whole group of them didn't think that, although they did like have meetings and stuff...

(Helen laughs)

...so there is a world in which that...

TAI

Wow.

HELEN

Oh my god.

HANNAH

Alex, I never considered that there may be a cult in my home town that thinks I'm an alien messiah, thank you for putting this in my head!

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(dissolves into giggles)

HELEN

On that bombshell!

ALEX

Wow!

HANNAH

(still laughing)

TAI

Oh my god.

HELEN

I think we're gonna move to a break.

ALEX

Wow!

HANNAH

Bye!

HELEN

Oh, Hannah! (laughing)

[BREAK]

HELEN

And welcome back! I for one welcome Hannah, our alien overlord.

HANNAH

(laughs) No...

ALEX

I always suspected, I just never said!

HANNAH

Well thank you. I, I just, I just wanna make it very clear, I don't think this is true, I don't think that I'm - I - just to put it out there!

(Helen laughs)

But, I don't know. Again, hopefully there is not a group of people in a small town in Idaho that thinks that's true because that would be awkward. But we'll deal with that if and when it comes up, I guess!

HELEN

Oh, god bless you. I want to go back to something that Tai brought up briefly earlier which was faster than light travel.

TAI

Mm.

HANNAH

Ooh, yes.

HELEN

I know nothing about this, so I'm going to immediately hand over to whoever wants to talk about it. I just know it means going very, very fast.

HANNAH

Yeah.

ALEX

I'll deliberately take a back seat, because you know what I'm like on topics like this.

(Group laughter)

TAI

I brought it up, and since I've been designated the layman for this one as we have Earth's ambassador, the alien messiah, and Alexander J Newall...

(Hannah laughs)

...I, I will explain! So the idea of faster than light travel is that travelling at the speed of light is theoretically the fastest that anything can possibly go. And so the idea that you could travel faster than light is, basically it's a point of science

fiction. And I guess the, theoretically the idea is that you would be travelling so fast you wouldn't have to worry about things like it taking 16,000 years to get from here to, you know, the next planet that you wanted to hop over to. I imagine that there's probably a much more scientific way of explaining it, but as far as I'm aware, faster than light travel is still very much completely theoretical and even, in sort of dubious theory.

ALEX

Well, you say that...

HANNAH

Oh!

TAI

Oh god...

HELEN

Oh!

ALEX

There's been some recent developments in this field.

TAI

Oh!

HANNAH

What?

ALEX

So. I'm gonna leave aside wormholes as a separate thing.

HANNAH

Sure.

ALEX

There has been some people who've started to do some very interesting work to do with warp theory.

TAI

Oh yes!

ALEX

Named after the Star Trek stuff, sure, but actual like, some people have started to develop some ideas of what warp theory would look like. And the really interesting stuff is, I'm gonna oversimplify here and this isn't, this is still in the hypothesis stage, it's not in the theory stage where it's got demonstrable - they've got some interesting empirical evidence that they're starting to base this on. The speed of light is an absolute, you can't change it but what you can do is you can sort of...make a little pocket where it doesn't obey the rules of the universe, and then things can move faster within that pocket.

HANNAH

Oh shit, what?!

HELEN

Mm.

HANNAH

That's super neat!

ALEX

It's super nascent, bleeding edge research, but people have started to investigate the feasibility of warp fields. A couple of people have previously claimed to make like teeny-tiny ones but I think that's been debunked? But people are looking into warp theory as a field of study now.

HANNAH

This makes me so happy!

HELEN

That's so interesting! So a warp drive might exist at some point?

HANNAH

Ah!

ALEX

It's, it's conceptually odd.

HANNAH

Mm hm.

TAI

Is this similar to the, I read something, I absolutely skimmed it so I'm paraphrasing, but it was something recently about, I think the idea from Futurama of the ship doesn't move, it moves space around it?

HELEN

Ohhh!

ALEX

Yeah! Yeah, yeah! That's basically what it is! So what you, like the theory behind it, I'm gonna oversimplify, is: you can't make light move faster than it does.

TAI

Mm hm.

ALEX

And nothing can move faster than light, because it requires an infinite amount of energy for mass to travel beyond the speed of light, basically.

HANNAH

Mm hm.

ALEX

But what you can do is make what is effectively a time-space bubble around a thing. And the idea is that if we can make that, you can move despite the universe instead of through it.

HELEN

Mm.

ALEX

It's really hard to explain and the maths doesn't really make sense, but I'm not a genius, shocker.

(Helen laughs)

But yeah, people are actively looking at it now as opposed to it just being no one's even trying, there are now active people researching that specifically as a topic.

HELEN

That's very cool.

HANNAH

I really would love if you could send me the article or paper that this is from.

ALEX

It's been a while, it was like last year I stumbled on it, I'll dig it up and then chuck it along again, but yeah...

HANNAH

Yay, thank you.

ALEX

...it's just nice to know that someone out there is actively...

HANNAH

Yeah!

ALEX

...like “no, I'm gonna make this happen!” as opposed to “wouldn't that be nice.”

HELEN

Okay. So we've talked a bit about what we think the UFOs may or may not be, talked a bit about aliens. I wanna get a little bit deeper, and ask one of the more philosophical questions that I have written down.

ALEX

Yesss!

HELEN

Which is: why do we think we are so fascinated by the concept of aliens?

TAI

Ooh...

HELEN

Like why is it something that everyone has an opinion on this? Or at least, in my experience they do.

TAI

I think maybe people aren't gonna like this because it's, it's somewhat of a pessimistic view and I'm happy to listen to other people's points and be corrected if they feel that I am being too pessimistic, but I think...we've always been interested because as long as we've been able to sort of look up and we have recorded sort of history of people looking up and wondering: what is in the stars outside of, you know, what made us, but maybe like, what lives out there? It has been out of...things aren't going great down here, are they?

HANNAH

Mm.

TAI

Kind of dissatisfied with all of this. It's, it's never been because we've made so much progress that we should now start thinking about space, or if it is, the people who are measuring that progress are measuring with a very narrow-minded view. So yeah, I think most of it, the reason we're fascinated with the idea of it is because we imagine that there must be something brighter and better, and if we're thinking about species, something more advanced than us,

or the idea that we will discover some- it's the instinctive human drive for knowledge.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

But I think specifically when we look at aliens and UFOs we're drawn into what some people will consider conspiracy theories, and what very realistically ARE conspiracy theories about aliens in government and what have you, because we don't like the way things are, but we don't believe we have the power to change them and so we imagine, as Alex was saying before, nobody's in charge, it's all rudderless. We imagine that there must be someone in charge and if people won't tell us who, or we don't believe in the authority figures that we're given, then there must be somebody behind them pulling the strings.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

So. I hope somebody has a much more optimistic view of why we're interested in aliens, but...

ALEX

I've got a more pessimistic one than that if you want!

HELEN

(laughs)

TAI

You do? Oh, hit me with it Alex, I'm ready for that existential crisis!

HANNAH

(laughing) I've got an optimistic one, we'll save that for the end!

ALEX

Hannah, I'll push us beyond the realms of even sad into just misery, and then you can, you can pull it back.

HANNAH

I'll do my best!

(Group laughter)

ALEX

I think the clue's in the name. By which I mean: notice that we're talking about aliens, we're not talking about xenobiology.

HANNAH AND TAI

Mm.

ALEX

And "alien" as a word predates the concept of little green men.

HELEN

Mm.

ALEX

"Alien" as a word means, basically, "not us".

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

Yeah.

ALEX

Not us. And when the world was a bigger place, "not us" was other people.

HELEN

Yeah.

ALEX

And at some point we closed that sphere and knew the world, and we ran out of "not us"-es. If you exclude just full-blown hardcore bigotry...

TAI

Hm!

ALEX

...conceptually humanity likes to define itself by what isn't "us", in inverted commas.

TAI AND HANNAH

Mm.

ALEX

And if everyone's on the same planet and we're all human, we create a thing that can fill that goal. And I think humans en masse have a tendency to lift from history and project into the future, regardless of whether it's a good idea or not.

HELEN

Yeah.

ALEX

Which is why you get a lot of colonial space narratives.

HELEN

Yes!

TAI

Yes!

ALEX

It's why you get a lot of either they're coming to us and wiping us out or we're going to them as the advanced species and wiping them out, et cetera et cetera et cetera.

HELEN

Mm hm.

ALEX

It's all iterations on the old conquistador problem.

TAI

Yes.

ALEX

But I still think it speaks to that a little bit, and I know that's very pessimistic as a view. I think that en masse, and this is me like being just fully misanthropic...

TAI

Hm.

ALEX

...I think more people are pessimistic regarding alien life than optimistic. I think if you proved that alien life out there was intelligent and was on its way, you're gonna get a lot more people going "send some nukes" than you're gonna get going "let's roll out the red carpet".

HELEN

Mm.

ALEX

Based on just “other? Bad.”

TAI

Yeah.

ALEX

And I know that makes me very misanthropic and not very, er, like, woo, humanity!

(Group laughter)

But, thankfully Hannah's here to pull us back into anything else.

HANNAH

Oh, no pressure! All right.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Once again, Hannah, save us!

ALEX

Save us Hannah!

HANNAH

Okay!

ALEX

Alien messiah!

HANNAH

Oh, it's just the theme of the episode, yeah - holy crap!

(Group laughter)

Okay. You did actually both touch on sort of my thesis I guess which is essentially curiosity. The thing that separates humans from anything else we know of is that we want to know stuff just for the sake of knowing it, even if there isn't like a practical reason. And so on the Earth, like Alex mentioned we kind of got to the point of like: well we've sort of seen pretty much everything here and can kind of understand it, so there is of course still, you know, depths of the ocean, who knows what the hell's down there, but even still, we know where that is.

ALEX

Yeah.

HELEN

Mm.

HANNAH

Like we can point at it, and it obeys our laws of physics, and it's like okay, we know the rules of that game. If we can just figure out how to play it correctly, we can go find out what's down there and we can know more of the stuff.

ALEX

Yeah.

HANNAH

But space, which is like you know, thinking about like these ancient civilisations with you know zero light pollution looking up at night like, my god, that must have been just absolutely awe-inspiring.

HELEN

Yeah.

HANNAH

And there's so much up there, clearly. But we can't possibly touch it, like we were talking about and like we now know more and more, although maybe if Alex's research that he brought up is correct the, you know, maybe we can one day travel faster than light.

ALEX

(stage whisper) I think their research is really optimistic, sorry!

HANNAH

That's okay! That's okay! But it's, you know, exactly. Like in terms of probably our lifetimes at least, we're never gonna be able to go there, but it's right in front of us like it, the sky is always present, we always see it but we can never touch it, and I think that that just really pokes at our human curiosity and I think that one of the most, like, beautiful things that we've done in history is sending out the Voyager probes, which...

TAI

Oh god, yes.

HANNAH

...if anyone doesn't know, it's just these two lovely little robots that we sent off in opposite directions in space and each of them contains a golden record, like literally a record, like the old version of CDs, that contains like sounds of life on Earth and like weather and animals and audio samples of people in a multitude of different languages saying basically like, "hey, we extend greetings and we want to be friends. And hopefully someone can eventually answer us." And they're still out there, just going.

HELEN

I will say that my idea is quite similar to yours as well which is I think, I think that one of the things that humans have in abundance is our imagination. And I think that the night sky is a boundless well of imagi- like, there's no way you can look at it and think: what is that? What is up there? And I think as soon as you realise there could be other people, I don't think you can help it. I don't think you can help imagining it. And because I think that imagination is one of

humanity's greatest strengths. I also want to ask another question which may be a little deep, I think it's probably gonna be our last question because we've got about 10 minutes or so left, and this could take a while. We know that there's gonna be microbes and bacteria and stuff like that, but if there was more advanced kinds of aliens out there, what do we think that they would actually be like? Like would they have to...would they have to be non-carbon-based for example? Would they have limbs, would they be invisible? Like what do we reckon they might be like?

ALEX

Can I give you a hot take on this one?

HELEN

Oh I love a hot take!

HANNAH

You're full of the hot takes on aliens Alex, and I appreciate it!

(Helen laughs)

ALEX

Us, but I'll explain why.

HELEN

Okay, okay.

ALEX

So looping all the way back round to the Fermi thing, one of, like the great filter is the reason or reasons that we're not seeing people. And one of the arguments is, if it takes a lot longer to make intelligent life than we think, given how old the universe is, given how old the Earth is, and so on and so on, we could just be the first.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

Hm.

ALEX

Meaning: what we mean by aliens are actually just our great, great, great, great grandkids, who at some point bounce off into the stars and start to speciate in isolation from one another.

TAI

Ooh...

ALEX

So I sometimes catch myself thinking that the aliens is actually just iterations of us.

HELEN

Mmm.

HANNAH

That's a really fascinating theory, I think that's very interesting.

TAI

It is!

HELEN

That is interesting, but it's not as cool...

HANNAH

Good, good hot take! Good hot take!

(Helen laughs)

ALEX

It's not quite as exciting as saying "lots of tentacles".

HELEN

No.

TAI

No, it's one of the reasons I brought up faster than light travel earlier though is one of the things people talk about with, as you said with the Fermi Paradox people will go “well god, there's so much space out there, someone must have popped up like us now.” I think first of all, it is built on the assumption, like you said, that all life has been developing from the same point, or that the way

in which we develop, have reached a point of like developing interest in, in space and all that kind of stuff has happened on the only scale possible, and so the idea that like, I'm not gonna get into the idea that we were visited by aliens in the past because that's a whole different kettle of fish...

(Helen laughs)

...and some people have some very specific ideas on what they think the aliens did. But the idea of maybe, you know, aliens in the future just being us but sort of going forward is, is really interesting. But one of the things that comes up is always: why haven't we seen aliens? And it's like, yeah, you've assumed that everything has developed along the same sort of trajectory as we have and again we were talking before about certain things like ownership, we might assume that aliens have. One of the things is yeah, straight up, what if they're some beings that communicate through a series of electromagnetic impulses directed only by eyes that they can only see in the fourth dimension.

(Alex laughs)

And you get into this whole kind of thing of like, there was actually a really interesting show about this and it was, I think it was kind of, very David Attenborough sort of, but it was about what life might look like on other planets, and it's so, it's so good.

ALEX

Oh, I've watched that.

HANNAH

I feel like I might have too.

TAI

And it's so dependent on what the planet looks like.

HELEN

Mm.

TAI

So again it's like: do we assume it's something that's akin to Earth, in which case if we're talking about why haven't we met them yet, it's assuming that that Earth is the exact same age as us and intelligent life takes exactly as long to develop as it has, or that we are, like we said, we're way behind, we're still in the equivalent of species puberty and all the other aliens are like “oh we're not having any truck with that while they're going through all of this, we'll check back on them in a few generations”, you know?

HELEN

Mm. What do you reckon Hannah?

HANNAH

I guess the only thing we really can know is we seem to have figured out pretty well like what the different building blocks of stuff in the universe are, like the Periodic Table, like we...

TAI

Mm.

HANNAH

...like we kind of seem to get stars and how they make stuff at this point, and that's just where all the stuff comes from. So it's like well okay it's probably, and unless we're totally wrong about that which is entirely possible, but it seems like it's, well okay it's some combination of those elements, and you know, who knows what that looks like? Unless of course they're, you know, made of dark matter or something, which we really don't understand yet and is kind of most of the stuff in the universe, turns out. But yeah, that's the other interesting thing is you can always just say "or it's dark matter" and it's like well, yeah, we have no idea what that would be like. But I think it's kind of fun to not have any idea. I sort of relish that, and you know, that's going back to the whole curiosity thing I suppose. I enjoy the notion of, like, we can't possibly know but maybe someday, someday we will.

HELEN

Yeah. You mentioned dark matter and now I'm thinking about what I learned recently about negative matter from Dr Paul.

HANNAH

Mmm?

TAI

What? There's a third kind of matter now?!

HELEN

Yeah, so it's theoretical, theoretical matter.

HANNAH

Okay.

HELEN

So basically negative matter is something, the way it was described to me, and listener, I think this will come after the space episode so you'll remember this as well. If you kick it, it'll go in the opposite direction, essentially. And its existence would just completely nuke our understanding of many physical laws. And it would really mess us up.

ALEX

Oh god, you're giving me flashbacks to quantum physics.

TAI

Oh god, right?

HANNAH

Yes! Those are good flashbacks!

ALEX

What's that? Spin. What's spinning? Well nothing's spinning, it's just spin. Well, well something's got to be spinning, what is it? It's just spin. Spin something, then take the thing away and leave the spin. Well what does that mean?!

(Group laughter)

It's gibberish!

(Group laughter continues)

It's nonsense!

HANNAH

Is it a wave or a particle? I don't know, what do you think it is, that's the answer. What?!

ALEX

God!

TAI

This is some serious science when a couple of weeks ago I figured out that as an adult at my age (which is a person's business and nobody else) but, I figured out that I could not, if somebody asked me, explain how wind worked, and I would just like to challenge anybody who thinks that's really silly to go on the internet and try and get a definition of how wind works that doesn't just end at the point it introduces the Coriolis effect. Because, first of all: physicists are mad about the Coriolis effect and even having it come up right now.

(Group laughter)

But at the point at which it just starts talking about weather systems and things like that, I'd just like you to try and go a bit deeper, because I actually had to have a physicist friend of mine explain that it's just the extreme scale of the same thing we all learn in science class of molecules bumping into each other.

HANNAH

Yeah.

TAI

And when you do it at a huge enough level, off it goes. But if you want a more in-depth discussion, like version than that, you either have to already know a lot of physics, or just be happy with an answer that's like: planet spinning, clouds moving, wind happens.

HELEN

Yeah. I'm happy with that!

TAI

I mean me too but then when we start getting into negative matter and antimatter and quantum matter I'm like ohhh! I just want the aliens to be some kind of like...

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Tai I can't believe, you've just given me a crisis because I'm now just sitting here thinking: what is wind? What is wind?

TAI

Right?

HANNAH

I think about that sometimes.

ALEX

So I'll take it in a hard left because I feel like my first answer didn't quite answer your question.

HELEN

Oh okay.

ALEX

And your talk about wind has really answered this for me. So this is one that I genuinely think, this isn't just a like, a philosophical thing, which is...so, who here reads their Arthur C. Clarke?

HANNAH

Little bit.

ALEX

You know, a spoonful of Arthur C. Clarke in the morning helps your science fiction go down.

(Group laughter)

HANNAH

Absolutely!

ALEX

So there was a specific book: Childhood's End.

HELEN

Ooh.

HANNAH

Mmm.

ALEX

Anyone heard of that?

HANNAH

No.

HELEN

No, but it sounds lovely.

ALEX

So Childhood's End is a story about, and I'll retell this and then I'll say, this is what I really clue into.

HELEN

Mm.

ALEX

Childhood's End is a story about how over the years people notice that the behaviour of their children is starting to change from one generation to the next, in a way that doesn't make much sense. At the same time, aliens turn up. There's a bunch of kind of classic Arthur C. Clarke stuff where they look like the literal devil and it's cultural blah blah blah, whatever. But like, the idea is that these aliens are here to help humanity into its next phase of evolution and interaction with the universe, and what it is is that the children of humanity are reaching a point where they're engaging with, like, what's called "The Overmind".

HELEN

Ooh!

ALEX

And what the idea is really, really simply is: okay, a computer is anything that has a sufficient amount of interacting parts that emergent patterns happen, okay?

HELEN

Mm hm.

ALEX

The brain is a type of computer.

TAI

Mm hm.

ALEX

The universe is a series of things that interact with one another and make emergent patterns.

TAI

Mm. Mm hm.

HELEN

Hm!

ALEX

So from a sufficiently broad perspective, you can say that the universe is capable of thinking.

HELEN

Ooooh!

ALEX

So the Arthur C. Clarke idea was that that mind, when creatures are susceptible to it, makes contact. And it makes contact in a way that makes no sense and for this one it was every single kid on the planet just starting to dance in perfect synchronicity as like a side effect of it.

HELEN

Oh!

ALEX

But they are losing their individuality, they are being subsumed within that Overmind.

HELEN

Mm hm.

ALEX

Is that morally abhorrent, should they be terrified, are they being crushed by this thing, are they joining it wilfully? And it pretty much comes down to it doesn't matter, it's a conceptual inevitability that these things tend towards unity.

HELEN

Mm hm.

TAI

Ah...

ALEX

And I'm going very big picture here, but that's something that keeps me up at night as a thought. Not in a terrifying way, but in a...if you think of the universe as just a big system of interacting elements, does that make the universe the alien?

TAI

Mm!

ALEX

And if it does, what does the universe think about? What does the universe want, what's it doing? Can it interact at that level? Would it be possible to speak with it? But these are big, huge, enormous, massive philosophical things, but that's the one that I actually engage with the most, I think a little bit less like someone's gonna come and shake our hands...

HELEN

Mm.

ALEX

...and more like, there are ways of perceiving the universe that we inhabit that interact with things in a way that could have sentience, I guess.

TAI

Wow.

HELEN

That's absolutely fascinating.

ALEX

There's a lot of writing on it and it's very interesting, but I won't go any further because you can just, you can just fall off this cliff into a sea of like existential deconstruction.

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(Group laughter)

HANNAH

Oh it's a lovely rabbit hole!

HELEN

Yeah! Do you know what, I'm gonna take that lovely out that you have offered, because we are coming to the end of the episode.

ALEX

But I need to know what your aliens look like, Helen! What do your aliens look like?

HELEN

I don't know. They're just all very sexy, that's my answer.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

They are intrinsically sexy, you don't need to know what they look like, you just know it.

(Group laughter)

TAI

Sweet.

HANNAH

You're calling into question your suitability for the Ambassador of Earth position, Helen, I don't know!

(Group laughter)

ALEX

I love it!

HELEN

Ah, you've got me there Hannah, you've got me there!

ALEX

I love it! The UFO lands, the aliens come, they say: "Greetings earthling" and Helen as the Ambassador of Earth's just like: "How YOU doing..."

(Group laughter)

TAI

There's a whole TV show around that, the Ambassador of Earth and her affair with an alien! Oh dear.

HELEN

(laughs) Yes, okay, right. On that note, thank you so so much for talking about this with me, this is rocketing up to some of my, one of my favourite episodes that we've done, this has been fantastic.

HANNAH

Oh yay!

HELEN

I hope you all had a good time.

TAI

Oh yeah!

HANNAH

Very much so.

HELEN

(laughs) Lovely. Thank you, listener, as well for coming on this journey with us. I hope that you have enjoyed it, and keep that curiosity and imagination and thinking about the universe going.

HANNAH

Keep looking up!

TAI

Yes.

HELEN

Yeah, keep looking up. Excellent! Thank you.

ALEX

Oh, and if you see a probe out beyond the Kuiper Belt, I think we left that there. If you could bring that back to us, that'd be grand. It's got like an LP on it, you can keep that.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

Now, I will see you on the next episode. But for now it's goodbye from me. Goodbye! And it's goodbye from all of them - do you want to say goodbye everyone?

HANNAH AND TAI

Goodbye!

ALEX

Toodle-oo! Live long and prosper!

(Helen cackles)

(Show Theme - Outro)

HELEN

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(Show Theme – Outro Ends)

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