



Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story

By Jim Holt



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The Washington Post Notable Non-Fiction of 2013

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Tackling the “darkest question in all of philosophy” with “raffish erudition” (Dwight Garner, *New York Times*), author Jim Holt explores the greatest metaphysical mystery of all: why is there something rather than nothing? This runaway bestseller, which has captured the imagination of critics and the public alike, traces our latest efforts to grasp the origins of the universe. Holt adopts the role of cosmological detective, traveling the globe to interview a host of celebrated scientists, philosophers, and writers, “testing the contentions of one against the theories of the other” (Jeremy Bernstein, *Wall Street Journal*). As he interrogates his list of ontological culprits, the brilliant yet slyly humorous Holt contends that we might have been too narrow in limiting our suspects to God versus the Big Bang. This “deft and consuming” (David Ulin, *Los Angeles Times*) narrative humanizes the profound questions of meaning and existence it confronts.

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Editorial Review

Review

Starred review. Winding its way to no reassuringly tidy conclusion, this narrative ultimately humanizes the huge metaphysical questions Holt confronts, endowing them with real-life significance. A potent synthesis of philosophy and autobiography.

If Jim Holt's deft and consuming *Why Does the World Exist?: An Existential Detective Story* has anything to tell us, it's that such a comment is less about literary riffing than deep philosophy. --David Ulin

A guided tour of ideas, theories and arguments about the origins of the universe.... Through discussions with philosophers of religion and science, humanists, biologists, string theorists, as well as research into the scholarship of days past--from Heidegger, Parmenides, Pythagoras and others--and an interview with John Updike, Holt provides a master's-level course on the theories and their detractors. The interludes find the author positioning himself as an existential gumshoe, but also working through the sudden loss of a pet and, later, the death of his mother. Holt may not answer the question of his title, but his book deepens the appreciation of the mystery.

The pleasure of this book is watching the match: the staggeringly inventive human mind slamming its fantastic conjectures over the net, the universe coolly returning every serve.... Holt traffics in wonder, a word whose dual meanings--the absence of answers; the experience of awe--strike me as profoundly related. His book is not utilitarian. You can't profit from it, at least not in the narrow sense.... And yet it does what real science writing should: It helps us feel the fullness of the problem. --Kathryn Schulz

Why is the universe characterized by such abundance and complexity? Why does it exist at all? How did it come into being? Could there have been something else instead? Could there have been nothing else--that is, nothingness--instead? Is the human mind capable of resolving these matters? Can anyone do justice to all this in a 279-page book? I can answer only the last of these questions. Yes, someone can: Jim Holt, in *Why Does the World Exist* --Andrew Sullivan

He [Jim Holt] leaves us with the question Stephen Hawking once asked but couldn't answer, 'Why does the universe go through all the bother of existing?' --Ron Rosenbaum

There could have been nothing. It might have been easier. Instead there is something. The universe exists, and we are here to ask about it. Why? In *Why Does the World Exist?*, Jim Holt, an elegant and witty writer comfortably at home in the problem's weird interzone between philosophy and scientific cosmology, sets out in search of such answers. ...There is no way to do justice to any of these theories in a brief review, but Holt traces the reasoning behind each one with care and clarity--such clarity that each idea seems resoundingly sensible even as it turns one's brain to a soup of incredulity.... I can imagine few more enjoyable ways of thinking than to read this book. --Sarah Bakewell

It's the mystery William James called "the darkest in all philosophy" "[W]hy is there something rather than nothing?" For Jim Holt, it is a question that may never find an answer, but one endlessly worth asking. In this highly engaging book, Holt visits great thinkers in mathematics, quantum physics, artificial intelligence, theology, philosophy, and literature. These conversations don't lead him toward any conclusion, but they make for a lively, thoughtful read, whether your worldview tends toward Spinoza (in which "reality is a self-

sustaining causal loop: the world creates us, and we in turn create the world") or like Stephen Hawking, still searching for the final theory of everything. Holt is a generous guide, laying out a brief history of how philosophers have approached these questions before bringing us along on his tour of modern thinkers--some of whom are also fairly eccentric, hilarious talkers. The author's willingness to include his personal struggles with being and nothingness--as when he faces the death first of his dog, then of his mother--grounds the book in intimate, humane terms. We may never know why the universe exists, but we know how to grieve those who exit it. --Kate Tuttle

In *Why Does the World Exist?* Mr. Holt picks up this question about being versus nothingness and runs quite a long and stylish way with it. He combines his raffish erudition with accounts of traveling to tap the minds of cosmologists, theologians, particle physicists, philosophers, mystics and others. --Dwight Garner

So much in middle-class life and literature is rote: We decide what to have for dinner, we floss, we pick up something to read. Hurray for Jim Holt, who cracks our formulaic stupor with his crisp, jolly new book, *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story*. Already, I've started a list of folk who will find it gift-wrapped from me at the holidays. --Karen R. Long

An elegant and witty writer converses with philosophers and cosmologists who ponder the question of why there is something rather than nothing.

Back and forth he goes between scientists and philosophers, testing the contentions of one against the theories of the other. --Jeremy Bernstein

... an eclectic mix of theology, cutting-edge science (of the cosmological and particle-physics variety) and extremely abstract philosophising, rendered (mostly) accessible by Mr. Holt's facility with analogies and clear, witty language.

A reminder that the quest for foundational truths is not only a supremely human activity but also one that brings us, if not absolute truth (which may be unknowable), at least better and better approximations of the truth... A gifted essayist and critic... Holt intersperses his intellectual investigation with brief but revealing glimpses of his own life, including the death of his mother, when existential musings on the nature of being seem anything but abstract. --Jay Tolson

[Holt] is a spirited interlocutor and a deft explainer, patiently making sense of subjects ranging from Platonism to quantum mechanics, while nonetheless marveling at their seemingly fantastical nature... This cheerful persistence--combined with anecdotes celebrating the thrills of travel, good food, and drink--helps to sweeten what is, finally, a somber vision, in which reality may take the form of 'infinite mediocrity' and 'the life of the universe, like each of our lives, may be a mere interlude between two nothings.'

Holt writes a warm, humane, funny, gripping and poignant tale about Being and Nothingness in the 21st century, a book that every educated person should read. His 'detective story' hides a winsome primer on the big questions of life, which no one--except the most ignorant or self-absorbed--can afford to avoid. --Arlice Davenport

Holt has a religious temperament, if not a religion, and he thinks the notion of God is a possible explanation of the mystery of being rather than the reverse or the refusal of one... [He] is an expert juggler of the paradoxes that go with so many kinds of negation...the fun of his quest has to do not only with what he wants to know but with his eagerness for live dialogue. --Michael Wood"

The author takes on the origin of everything in this wonderfully ambitious book encompassing mathematics, theology, physics, ethics and more. --Michael S. Roth"

About the Author

Jim Holt, a prominent essayist and critic on philosophy, mathematics, and science, is a frequent contributor to the New York Times Book Review and the New York Review of Books. He lives in New York City.

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