

Red Dwarf

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Red Dwarf is the most successful and long-running comedy yet shown on BBC2.¹ First broadcast on 15 February 1988, the show was celebrated ten years later by *Red Dwarf* night hosted by Jean-Luc Picard himself, Patrick Stewart, a die-hard Dwarf. The content of that evening stands as testimony to *Dwarf's* achievement of cult status, demonstrating many of the features—quizzes, trivia, shared expertise—described as key features of cult TV.² The evening began with a spoof version of a then-popular cookery program *Can't Cook, Won't Cook* (1995-1999), in which the cast was challenged to cook a chicken vindaloo (a mouth-burningly hot curry)—the favorite dish of lead character, Dave Lister. The *Dwarf* version was billed as *Can't Smeg, Won't Smeg* (smeg being a generic term of abuse within the show—as in “smeg-head”³) and given added resonance for fans as *Can't Cook, Won't Cook's* regular host—TV Chef Ainsley Harriot—had made a well disguised appearance as the Gelf Chief in the Season Six episode “Emohawk—Polymorph II” (6.4). This was followed by a version of another popular BBC show, a *Dwarf*-themed *University Challenge* (1962-present), in which members of the cast lost (not surprisingly) to a team of *Dwarf* fans. Another special, *Red Dwarf A-Z* saw famous fans including Stewart, Stephen Hawking, and Terry Pratchett focusing on different aspects of the show. The evening concluded with a screening of the Emmy award-winning episode “Gunmen of the Apocalypse” (6.3).

Red Dwarf's 52 episodes were broadcast between 1988 and 1999—a generally infertile period for science fiction on British television. The heyday of British SF was the 1960s and 1970s, and by the 1980s the bigger budgets and more advanced SFX of American film and television had made UK efforts seem rather out-of-date.⁴ Indeed, the jewel in the crown of UK sci-fi, *Doctor Who*, was cancelled in 1989. Abandoning serious programming, the British approach was to combine the genre with comedy, inspired perhaps by the success of Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1981). *Hitchhiker's* had its origins in a BBC radio show, and there is a similar origin story for *Red Dwarf*. The concept started out as a series of sketches—*Dave Hollins: Space Cadet*—broadcast as part of the Radio 4 series *Son of Cliché* (1983-1985), written by *Dwarf* showrunners Rob Grant and Doug Naylor.⁵ The two main characters in four of the five sketches were Hollins and a computer named Hab (a reference to *2001's* HAL), Hab being voiced by Chris Barrie, who would go on to play one of the central characters in the TV version. Numerous other sci-fi influences can be detected in *Red Dwarf*—most notably *Dark Star* (John Carpenter, 1974) and *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), and the series as a whole is littered with references to classic films.

Red Dwarf is set about 3 million years in the future. The first episode (ironically titled "The End") introduces the audience to the crew of the Jupiter Mining Corporation spaceship *Red Dwarf* and the show's central character Dave Lister, "a curry-loving slob."⁶ Lister is the lowest ranking member of the crew, and the early shows are built around his antagonistic relationship with his pompous and officious boss (the second lowest-ranking member) Arnold J. (for Judas)

Rimmer.⁷ In the course of the episode Lister is faced with the choice of giving up his pregnant cat Frankenstein (it is against Corporation regulations to have unquarantined animals on board), or face 18 months in the ship's stasis chamber while the crew complete their tour of duty. Lister opts for stasis. However an accident—caused by Rimmer—results in an on-board radiation leak that kills the crew, and it takes the aforementioned 3 million years for the radiation to subside to a level where Holly, the on-board computer, can set Lister free. Although the last man alive, Lister is not alone. The ship has the facility to support one hologramatic lifeform—and Holly chooses Rimmer as the person most likely to keep Lister sane. There is also the Cat—a humanoid creature that evolved over the millennia from Frankenstein. These three form the basis of the Red Dwarf crew for all eight seasons (although Rimmer is absent for part of Season 7). Season 3 sees the team joined on a full-time basis by sanitation mechanoid Kryten. Holly—a key component of the early shows (who undergoes a “sex change” between Seasons 2 and 3 when Hattie Hayridge replaces Norman Lovett)—is absent in Seasons 6 and 7. The final two seasons introduce a central female character—Kristine Kochanski—and (for Season 8) the resurrection of the full Red Dwarf crew.

There are plenty of classic sci-fi elements to the show, and this contributes to its cult status. But for most fans this comes second to the (laddish) humor, with the show's commissioning editor, Peter Ridsdale Scott, stating that it was first and foremost a comedy.⁸ The writing team of Rob Grant and Doug Naylor (often credited under the single name Grant Naylor) came from a comedy, not sci-fi,

background, having worked together on several radio and television projects.⁹ Key members of the cast also had strong comedy backgrounds. Chris Barrie, who played Arnold (and his parallel universe counterpart, Ace) Rimmer, was a voice artist who had worked with Grant and Naylor on *Spitting Image* (ITV, 1984-1996).¹⁰ Norman Lovett, who took the role of the computer, was a stand-up comedian who originally auditioned for the role of Rimmer. The role of Lister went to punk poet Craig Charles who, in his own words, “had no acting experience whatsoever”¹¹ but decided to audition for the part after producer Paul Jackson sought his advice as to whether the character of the Cat (played by Black British actor, singer, and dancer Danny John-Jules) might be considered racist in the politically-correct 1980s. As a result of Charles gaining the role, two of the leading characters in the show were Black—yet, as has been noted, *Red Dwarf* avoids casting any critical spotlight on racial issues.¹²

While race may not be important to the dynamic of *Red Dwarf*, class is. Although focusing on male interaction within the show, Elyce Rae Helford notes that Lister and Holly are working-class, and privileged over the more middle-class Rimmer—a self-acknowledged coward who nevertheless aspires to officer status. And working-class masculinity receives a further boost in later seasons when contrasted with the middle-classness of Kristine Kochanski.¹³ This focus may be seen as a hallmark of the show’s “Britishness,” drawing on its apparent obsession with class distinctions. And there are other forms of caricature. Lister is the archetypal anti-hero slacker who is at his core a decent person with a commitment to doing the right thing, and so is easy for the target audience to identify with. His nemesis, Rimmer, is

the pompous, officious and arrogant superior (and a real-life failure whose incompetence led to the accident that caused the death of the Red Dwarf crew). The Cat, ostensibly non-human, also draws on a particular sub-cultural form of Black masculinity¹⁴—with his zoot suits, narcissism and attitude.

In addition to acting as a counterpoint to representations of masculinity, the addition of Kochanski in Season 7 disrupts the all-male alternative family bonds that have developed between the key characters over the first six seasons. Indeed it has been argued that the show should be seen as fitting into the genre of comedy that focuses on the surrogate family (with all the tensions that entails)—linking *Red Dwarf* with British sitcoms *Father Ted* (1995-1998) and *Men Behaving Badly* (1992-1999).¹⁵ The similarities between *Red Dwarf* and *Men Behaving Badly* are not restricted to the surrogate family: *Red Dwarf* might be described as “men behaving badly” in space. Reviewing the show on TV.com, paul001 highlights the “ladishness” of the show, describing it as “The classic British comedy [about] [t]he last human (Dave Lister) who just wants to eat curry, drink beer and get laid. A cat that has become humanoid that just wants to sleep, eat fish and get laid. A hologram that is so cowardly that he's never been laid.”¹⁶ A desire for curry (at least on the part of Lister) and sex (or rather lack of it) are certainly themes that dominate the humor throughout the run of the show, alongside issues surrounding Lister’s poor personal hygiene.¹⁷ Indeed, one of Craig Charles’ criticisms of the failed US pilot version of the show was that it was too clean and had “no grunge.”¹⁸

That said, there are considerable variations across the Seasons in terms of setting, theme and production values. Seasons 1 through 5

are set on *Red Dwarf* itself, although from Season 3 onwards the production values are much higher and action moves beyond the ship. For Seasons 6 and 7 the crew is left with only the much-smaller *Starbug*, making for a more intimate affair. By Season 8 the *Red Dwarf* ship is back—along with a much-expanded cast. By general agreement the departure of Rob Grant at the end of Season 6 led to an overall decline in the quality of the scripts. If awards are the measure of quality, then Season 6 marks the high point of the show; it won the British Comedy Award for Best BBC Comedy Series and an International Emmy for “Gunmen of the Apocalypse” (6.3). The documentary that accompanies the DVD of the Season notes that this was a strong series that departed from the earlier format, with a new look for the characters, better special effects, and very strong scripts. Craig Charles has commented that this season has some of the funniest episodes¹⁹. On the negative side, a long-running rift between Charles and Chris Barrie meant that it featured less interaction between the characters and, at times, threatened to become “a monster of the moment marathon.”²⁰

Critical acclaim aside, if online ratings are taken as a guide, and one particular episode needs to be selected to give a flavor of the blend of sci-fi and comedy that made the show such a hit, the fan favorite is undoubtedly the Season 5 episode “Quarantine” (5.4).²¹ It opens with the crew landing on a deserted ice-planet and discovering an abandoned research centre. Tensions between the crew lead to Rimmer returning alone to *Red Dwarf*. The centre’s one survivor is the hologramatic incarnation of one of the scientists working on “positive viruses,” who has become infected with a “psychopathic holo-plague.”

On their return to the ship Rimmer puts his fellow members of the crew into quarantine, but the only one infected turns out to be Rimmer himself. The result is a psychotic Rimmer, dressed in a red and white gingham dress, complete with bonnet and blond plaits and his friend Mister Flibble (a psychotic penguin glove puppet) chasing the crew until, making use of the positive “luck virus,” Lister acquires all the items necessary to neutralize Rimmer’s infection.

Despite its success and its cult status, the show’s production history was not without problems. The pilot was written in 1983, but lack of interest from the BBC meant that the show was not commissioned until 1986, and filming of the first season was hampered by an electricians’ strike.²² The break-up of the writing team, with Rob Grant departing to pursue his own projects, meant there was a three-year hiatus between Seasons 6 and 7 and a further two-year gap until Season 8 was screened in early 1999. Rumors of a film continue to circulate but seem to founder on lack of finance—a problem exacerbated by the BBC’s lack of interest in securing transmission rights.²³ But it would also seem fair to say that the humor that characterized *Red Dwarf* has been superseded by comedies with darker undertones, such as *The League of Gentlemen* (TV series 1999-2002, film 2005), while the successful revival of *Doctor Who* (2005-) has changed the landscape of British television sci-fi.

At the time of writing (early 2008) *Red Dwarf* is not regularly being screened on British television. The laddish BBC cable channel Dave screened episodes (mostly from Season 6) on 16-17 February to mark *Dwarf’s* twentieth anniversary, and fans have ample material to fall back on. All seasons have been released on DVD, each with a very

impressive “extras” package including, among other features, commentaries by cast members and fans, deleted scenes, out-takes and “making of” documentaries. On dvdverdict.com Bill Gibron praises the additional material highly, claiming that , by owning all the series, “you end up with your very own *Red Dwarf* encyclopedia.”²⁴

Supplementing this are four novels written by Grant and/or Naylor—*Infinity Welcomes Careful Drivers* (1989), *Better Than Life* (1991), *The Last Human* (1995), and *Backwards* (1996)—and the interactive DVD game *Beat the Geek*, issued in 2006.

I leave the final words on this show to Bill Gibron: “[*Red Dwarf*] is one of the best-written, most wonderfully acted sitcoms of all time. . . . It took a premise that shouldn’t have worked (sci-fi show), tossed in a cast of relative unknowns, mixed in a little complicated plot lining, and garnished with a big fat helping of humor. . . . From the pitch-perfect performing to the clever writing and direction, it is a show that leaves a lasting impression once it has been experienced.”²⁵ And is this not the very definition of cult TV?

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¹ <http://www.galactic-guide.com/articles/9R15.html>, and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dollarpound>. The final series attracted an audience of over eight million viewers.

² Sara Gwenllian-Jones and Roberta Pearson, *Cult Television*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, p. ix.

³ The word itself deriving from smegma - a substance which accumulates under the foreskin of uncircumcised males.

⁴ John Cook and Peter Wright, *British Science Fiction Television*,

London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 15.

⁵ Chris Howarth and Steve Lyons, *Red Dwarf Programme Guide*, London: Virgin, 2000, 3rd edition, p. 2-3.

⁶ Craig Charles, "Launching Red Dwarf," documentary accompanying the Season 1 Region 2 DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2002.

⁷ In keeping with the show's humor the name carries connotations of arse-licking.

⁸ Peter Ridsdale Scott, "Launching Red Dwarf," documentary accompanying the Season 1 Region 2 DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2002.

⁹ Chris Howarth and Steve Lyons note that Grant and Naylor had worked on *Carrott's Lib* and *Spitting Image*. In the documentary accompanying the Season 1 Region 2 DVD Red Dwarf producer Paul Jackson notes that he had worked with both writers on *Carrott's Lib* and *Three of a Kind*, as well as having worked with Craig Charles on *Saturday Night Live*.

¹⁰ As well as his role in *Red Dwarf*, Barrie went on to play the lead role in the BBC sitcoms *The Brittas Empire* (52 episodes, 1991-1997) and *A Prince Among Men* (12 episodes, 1997-1998).

¹¹ Craig Charles, "Launching Red Dwarf," documentary accompanying the Season 1 Region 2 DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2002.

¹² Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*, London: Sage, 2002, p. 100.

¹³ Elyce Rae Helford, "Masculine Anxiety in Red Dwarf" in *British Science Fiction Television*, edited by John Cook and Peter Wright, London: I. B. Tauris, 2006, p. 243, 250. See also Craig Charles, "Dwarfing USA," documentary accompanying the Season 5 Region 2

DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2004.

¹⁴ See Stuart Cosgrove, "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare" in Angela McRobbie (ed.), *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989 for a detailed analysis of the subcultural meaning of the zoot suit. In the documentary accompanying the Season 1 Region 2 DVD Danny John Jules (who plays the Cat) discusses attending the audition "in character" wearing his father's wedding suit, which he describes as a "zoot suit."

¹⁵ Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom*, London: BFI. 2005, p. 44.

¹⁶ http://www.tv.com/red-dwarf/show/132/reviews.html?review_id=20846&flag=1&tag=reviews;continue;6

¹⁷ "He picks his ears clean with tin openers, he trims his toenails with his teeth, he cares less about his appearance than a member of the Dutch royal family and he sprays the contents of Sugar Puff sandwiches around his bunk room." Chris Howarth and Steve Lyons, *Red Dwarf Programme Guide*, London: Virgin, 2000, 3rd edition, p. 8.

¹⁸ Craig Charles, "Dwarfing USA," documentary accompanying the Season 5 Region 2 DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2004. This documentary also gives a blow-by-blow account from Doug Naylor of all the problems experienced in putting together the US pilot for the show which, it is unanimously agreed, was a disaster.

¹⁹ Craig Charles, "The Starbuggers," documentary accompanying the Season 6 Region 2 DVD, BBC Worldwide Ltd. 2005.

²⁰ Bill Gibron,
<http://www.dvdverdict.com/reviews/reddwarfseries58.php>

²¹ Based on fan ratings given at http://www.tv.com/red-dwarf/show/132/reviews.html?flag=3&tag=subtabs;ep_reviews and <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094535/usercomments>.

²² Chris Howarth and Steve Lyons, *Red Dwarf Programme Guide*, London: Virgin, 2000, 3rd edition, p. 60.

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Dwarf.

²⁴ Bill Gibron, <http://www.dvdverdict.com/reviews/reddwarfseries58.php>.

²⁵ Bill Gibron, <http://www.dvdverdict.com/reviews/reddwarf.php>