

# THE UNIVERSE IN THE SPARE ROOM

BY DAVID LARSEN

The universe in the spare room was unhappy. “Look,” said Rowen. “Two plus two equals four. That’s just how it is.”

“I disagree,” said the universe. It was a dense clot of shadow the size of a football. Tiny flecks of light moved inside it, wheeling and darting like a school of fish. “Maybe I disagree,” it added. It sounded worried. “I can’t decide.”

Rowen sat on the bed. The spare room was meant to be where guests slept, but really, it was where things that didn’t have a proper home got dumped. Piles of board games and an old sewing machine and seven framed paintings sat against one wall. The little table in the corner was covered in things that Dad described as “bric-a-brac” and Mum described as “knick-knacks”. Also there was a piano. Mum had inherited it from an uncle. She kept saying she was going to learn to play it one day. It was pretty dusty.

The universe was hovering over the piano’s closed lid. That was where it usually hovered. When Rowen asked why it liked the spot, the universe had replied the piano was full of unused possibilities. Apparently it liked unused possibilities. It was not very good at explaining itself. Rowen had the impression that for a universe, it was rather young and inexperienced.

“Look,” said Rowen again. “You don’t get to decide about this. Two plus two equals four.”

“Why?” asked the universe.

“It just does,” said Rowen.

“But why?” asked the universe.

“Some things don’t need a why! Look! Two fingers!” Rowen held up two fingers. “Now two more fingers!” She held up two fingers on her other hand. She moved her hands together so the fingers formed a row. “How many fingers?”

“Four. But what does that prove?”



Rowen was not sure what to say to this. A coil of sparks formed deep in the universe’s core. The coil spiralled around itself with dizzying speed, then shot outwards in all directions. For a moment, the universe was more light than shadow. Then the light died away. It left after-images on Rowen’s eyes. She had to blink several times before she could see the universe again. In the week since she’d found it hiding in the spare room,

this was the first time it had done anything like this.

“Two plus two *can* equal four,” said the universe, sounding newly sure of itself. “But it doesn’t have to. I see that now.”

“Rowen,” called Dad from the hall. The universe slid quickly backwards into the piano. The piano groaned alarmingly. “Dinner in ten minutes.”

“OK,” Rowen called back.

"It's all right," she said quietly to the piano. "He always leaves the vegetables till last, and then he worries about burning them. He won't come in."

The universe poked a little dome of shadow through the piano's chestnut front. It paused a moment. Then it seemed to decide it was safe and emerged all the way. Its lights were damped down to nothing. Something inside the piano made a loud twanging noise. "That was close," the universe said.

"Why don't you want anyone else to see you?" Rowen had asked this several times already over the last week. She had yet to receive a satisfactory answer, but she believed in persistence.

"Because of the observer effect," said the universe with an air of exaggerated patience, as if it were telling Rowen something very obvious. "If two people see me at once, I'll start being what you think I am."

"And that would be bad?" asked Rowen.

"That would be terrible. It would be like two plus two always having to equal four."

Rowen believed in persistence. "Two plus two *does* always equal four," she said.

"That's just what your universe wants you to think," said the universe. "My people are going to be allowed a bit more freedom." Its lights were springing back to life; little glints were whirling about in an ecstatic dance. Rowen had never been able to decide

about those lights. Why did they look very far away rather than just very small?

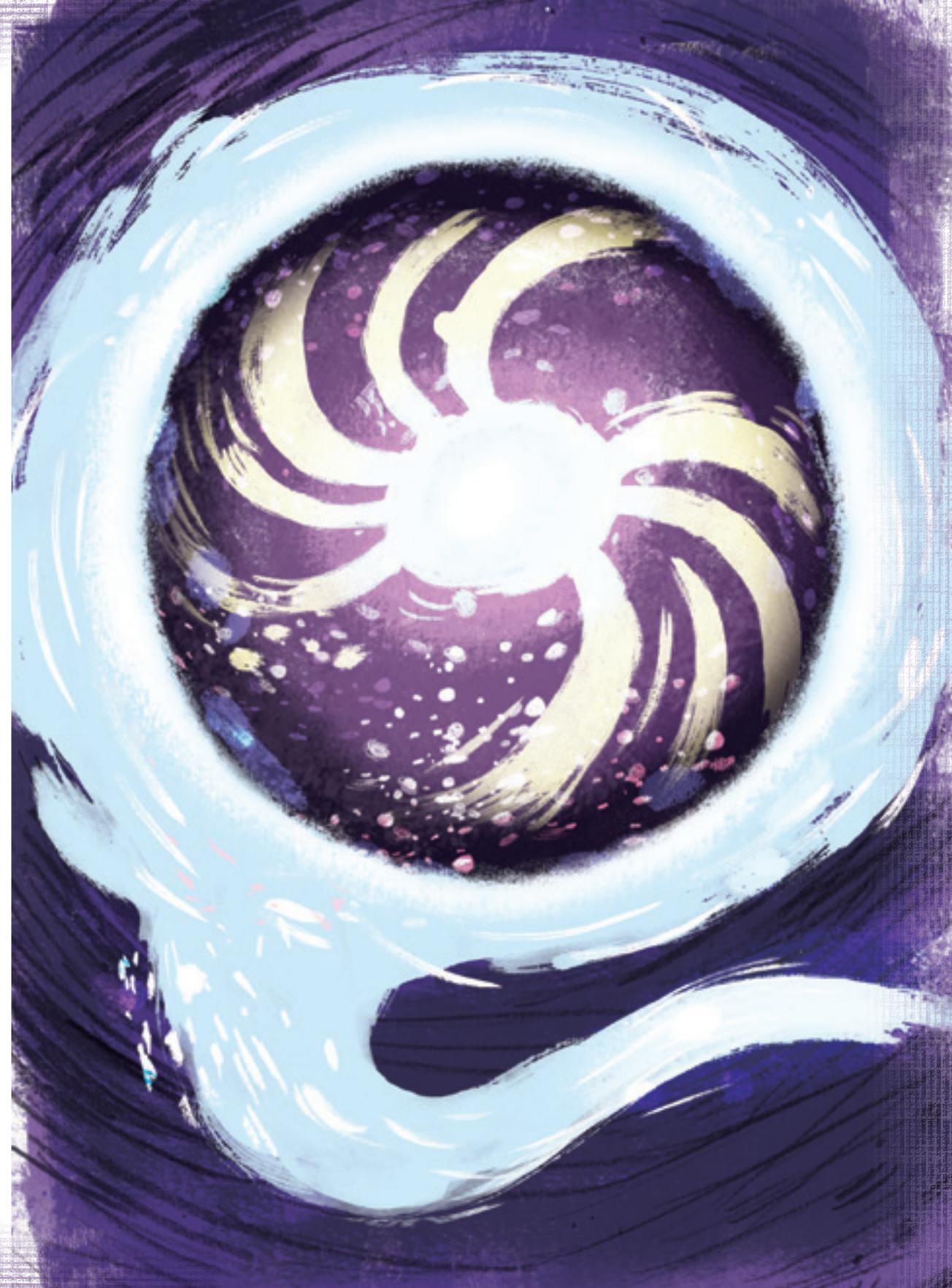
She leant back against the wall. "Do you mean you have worlds inside you?" she asked. "Worlds with people on them? Really? Whole worlds?"

The lights dimmed slightly. "No," said the universe. It sounded a little ashamed. "Not yet. It's harder than I thought. That's why they sent me here."

"They?" said Rowen.

"Yes," said the universe. "They said I needed to see a universe with a proper axiomatic foundation." It sighed, and its lights dimmed a bit more. Their dance seemed to slow. "You can't build worlds until you have your basic physics sorted out,' they said. 'And before you can have physics, you need to decide what your laws of logic are going to be,' they said. Can things be true and false at the same time? That sort of business. I thought maybe I could work all that out as I went, but they said that would be – well, I forget exactly what the word was, but they said it wouldn't be a good idea. They think I'm too impatient." It sighed again. "Apocalyptic," it added. "That was the word."

Rowen wanted to go back to two plus two equals four. She was not happy with the idea of it equalling anything else. On the other hand, she was going to have to go eat dinner in a moment, and the universe was answering her questions.



It had spent all week not really answering her questions.

“Can things be true and false at the same time?” she asked.

“It depends,” said the universe. This was the sort of answer Rowen was more used to.

“You’re actually not being very clear,” she said.

“All truth is local,” said the universe. This was also the sort of answer Rowen was used to.

“But that’s why you came here? To find this stuff out.”

“Your universe is so *boring*,” the universe said angrily. Its lights flashed on and off in strange rippling patterns, as though tendrils of darkness were flexing inside. “It makes such obvious choices! Particulate matter! Linear time! And it cheats! It breaks its own rules – I’m sure it must! Because somehow ... somehow ...” It trailed off. “Somehow it gets things like you,” it finally continued in a small voice. “I don’t see how. You’re too improbable to exist. I don’t think I’m ever going to work out how to do it.”

Rowen was not sure what to say. The universe needed cheering up – she could tell. “Well,” she said carefully. “My mum says when a problem’s difficult, it’s a mistake to start by deciding the answer you want and then trying to solve the problem so you’ll get it. She says if you do the working properly, the answer

will take care of itself.” The universe said nothing. Delicate ribbons of light tied knots inside it and untied them again.

“She was talking about maths, though.”

“Dinner!” called Dad. Rowen stood up.

“That is sound advice,” said a deep, quiet voice. It seemed to come from all directions. The whole room thrummed with it. “You won’t hear better.”

“Easy for you to say,” said the universe savagely.

“Persevere, fledgling,” said the voice. “And be courteous. Manners cost nothing, and you’re my guest. You should go to dinner, Rowen,” it added. Rowen stopped looking around for the speaker. She had a feeling she knew who it was. “Though I’m afraid your father has burnt the vegetables again.”



illustrations by Daron Parton

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by David Larsen

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Published 2017 by the Ministry of Education  
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.  
[www.education.govt.nz](http://www.education.govt.nz)

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 170 8 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū  
Editor: Susan Paris  
Designer: Liz Tui Morris  
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop  
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



## SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 NOVEMBER 2017

<b>Curriculum learning area</b>	English
<b>Reading year level</b>	Year 8
<b>Keywords</b>	argument, debate, fantasy, humour, logic, physics, science fiction, surrealism, universe