

'A novel that has a mirrored double personality at its heart should be called *Mobius Dick*,' Andrew Crumey informs us helpfully, after his protagonist wonders if 'some imaginative novelist could conceive a logical scheme linking everything... some grand unified theory in which [people] would be quantum resonances'.

*Mobius Dick* has more than a mirrored double personality at its heart; it has the whole of history, humanity, philosophy and physics at its radioactive core. Crumey traverses time, space and multiple universes to develop a new paradigm of causality and explain, basically, why a random text message can generate all manner of emotional, epistemological, ontological, transcendental and dialectical chaos. (Or, in layman's terms, what happens when a misdirected text prompts you to think it might be from somebody you were once in love with and then makes you think you see them disappearing round a street corner.)

John Ringer is a professor of theoretical physics who 'inadvertently' stumbles into a literature seminar called 'Vicious Cycloids'. Annoyed by its 'parade of coincidences masquerading as insight', John is, nevertheless, dogged by its question of whether history is hinged on chance and coincidence and whether events are as random as they seem.

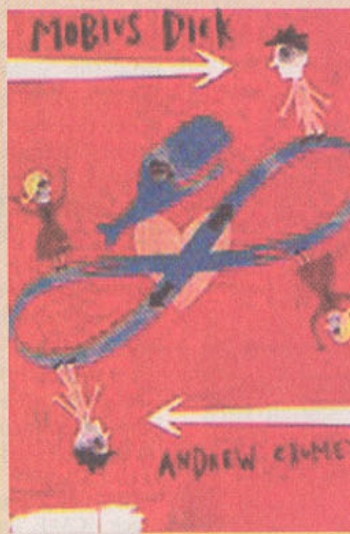
This follows his receipt of a text which simply says: 'Call me: H.' Having once loved a Helen, he obsesses that it might be from her -- all the way to Craiggarron, where he's to give a lecture and meet an old student who works at the nuclear plant there. The same student divulges Craiggarron's plan to build a network of quantum computers to create instantaneous and total global communication. Ringer worries this would be preposterously dangerous, because, harnessing the energy of the vacuum between reflective plates, the potential production of a non-collapsible wave function corresponding to a high-energy photon could wreak all manner of havoc on the universe.

(Just in case you're having trouble remembering your Copenhagen Interpretation, let me refresh your memory. When waves are measured, they mysteriously 'col-

# The Joy of Dialectical Matrix Mechanics

*Lost love plus quantum mechanics equals apocalyptic science fiction in *Mobius Dick* by Andrew Crumey*

CLEMENCY BURTON-HILL



**Mobius Dick**

by Andrew Crumey  
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lapse' in a quantum jump; thus, an electron is everywhere and nowhere until it interacts, leaving its footprint on the universe. Two conflicting stories can therefore be true, because when the universe splits after any event, what is 'real' depends on your frame of reference.)

But the wave function must collapse and, if Ringer's fears are justified and some 'stubborn, vacillating, recalcitrant' wave refuses, the hall of quantum mirrors will mutate from a device for communication into one of confusion and chaos. 'Its trapped, rebounding particles would be ghosts and vampires, oscillating eternally between one universe and the next, bridging worlds and confounding them.'

And what would it take to lead to disaster? Nothing so monumental, apparently, as a stray hair. The earth, the planet, 'perhaps even the very cosmos itself', would become 'make-believe, a joke'. What's more, it could be happening already and we wouldn't even know about it. Cue spooky music.

Spliced into John's story are alternative narratives of music, madness, memory, mobiles, Mann, Melville and, er, whales; none of whose relevance is quite grasped until the novel's apocalyptic resolution. But forget collapsible wave functions; *Mobius Dick* is so self-referential it threatens to collapse in on itself. Crumey is a talented writer and a major brain, but he will need to turn his hand to something non-scientific soon in order to prove he can transcend science fiction.

Then again, this may just be the green-eyed gripe of someone who abandoned physics with unbridled

glee after GCSEs. Because despite the exegesis of dialectical matrix mechanics (do I sound like I understand it yet?) *Mobius Dick* is quite light-hearted and fun, beginning with a text message and ending with an old chestnut. 'How vivid it all was,' he writes. 'How soon the dream is finished.'

Dream? Well, it's good to know that even scarily intelligent theoretical physicists can't get themselves out of some narrative dilemmas.

Source: *The Guardian*