



HANDLE WITH CARE:

This magazine contains countless, minute, electrically-charged particles moving at extremely high speeds.

BY DAVID LOWE

I was trained as a nuclear physicist and was once asked to lighten up a conference with a comical nuclear power speech to a room full of engineers and journalists. The event was cancelled due to a minor nuclear incident somewhere or other. The nuclear industry decided that it wasn't a time for making jokes, even though the incident was quite trivial, the atomic power equivalent of a leaking radiator.

Anyway, I'd thought quite a lot about this speech, and always felt frustrated at not being able to show a wider public that nuclear physics and physicists could be fun: this was before the success of the TV series *The Big Bang Theory*. On a more personal level, I wanted to take revenge for a dinner party I'd attended twenty years earlier at which a potential new girlfriend introduced me to her flatmates, who all happened to be extremely anti-nuclear trainee psychiatrists (War and Greenpeace: TolsToy Story). Over a disgusting spaghetti Bolognese, I was demolished, humiliated, and lost the girlfriend, but couldn't understand why, as my interest in nuclear physics was intellectual, almost metaphysical. I was a bit like Sheldon, I suppose, but well before geek chic. I was a proto geek, a nerd without a herd. The "girlfriend" abandoned me, it was her room in the flat or me – real estate!

In my speech, I was going to start with a few silly ideas on how to improve the image of nuclear power. Paint nuclear reactors green to make them seem more environmentally-friendly was my opener. There was to be a cocktail before the conference, so the comedy threshold of my listeners would have been quite low.

Get Starck to design a reactor. His lemon squeezer is an internationally recognized icon. A stylish neutron squeezer would make cooling towers cool, or abandon the minimalist Le Corbusier-style of nuclear power stations and go in for a more "Belle Époque" French look, with giant Guimard metro entrances and Morris column-style reactors. Art nouveau for *énergie nouvelle*! Organize a coming-out of nuclear energy much

like the gay and feminist movements of the sixties and seventies. Set up a Nuclear Pride Parade with slogans like: "Take the fusion out of confusion"; "You can't cure cancer with a windmill"; "It's not uranium, it's sunshine-ium!"; "Take the 'bile' out of Tchernobyl, the **** out of Fukushima." Paint jokes on the side of reactors like "This Way Up", but written upside down, or "WARNING: This product cannot be guaranteed to function normally near a black hole". Every now and again, print a radioactive symbol with four leaves instead of three and ask people on finding one to make a wish.

I'd then go on to explode a few myths. For example, the sun provides so-called green energy, but the fusion used by the sun to create this energy generates highly volatile radioactive waste, which is thrown out willy-nilly into space – so is solar power really green? Are we not just being selfish towards the rest of the universe? We are asked to conserve energy, but every physicist knows that in a closed system, energy is always conserved!

Carbon capture is the ecological equivalent of brushing dust under the carpet, but don't worry, the apocalypse will most probably be due to natural causes anyway. Thinking that an insignificant little species on an out-of-the-way planet lost in a vast universe full of apocalyptic forces of immeasurable strength can actually have an influence on cosmic events is irrational sentimental mythomania.

I'd finish with a few physicist jokes like:

A neutron walks into a bar and asks, "How much for a drink?" The bartender replies, "For you, no charge."
OR

Two atoms are walking across a road. One of them says, "I think I lost an electron!" "Really!" the other replies. "Are you sure?" "Yes, I'm absolutely positive."
OR

What did the nuclear physicist have for lunch? Fission chips!
OR

How many theoretical physicists does it take to change a light bulb? Two. One to hold the bulb and one to rotate the universe.

In my mind, the audience drowns out this last "joke" with thunderous applause, and as for that girlfriend and her psychiatrist friends, revenge is a dish best served cold: *une assiette anglaise!*