

CAN ASTEROIDS DESTROY THE WORLD?

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By ARTHUR ZULU

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"So, one day little Gulliver went to Brobdingnag, the country of giants"; the teacher was telling the students. "Suddenly it began to rain and a huge hailstone struck him, and he disappeared to the ground." The children stared at their teacher in wonderment. "Each time he wanted to rise up," continued the teacher, "more hailstones sent him down. This continued till Glumdalclitch, his keeper discovered him and dug him out." End of story. The relieved students laughed.

That `s not a laughing matter. For that scenario some say, will soon be a possibility for the earth and its inhabitants.

That means that soon we and our children would be having to duck, not hailstones, but on-coming comets from outer space. But when Asteroids — the giants ones, come calling, then the play is over.

Dinosaurs know it is not a plaything when gigantic asteroids hit the earth. Of course they are not around now to tell us the story. Geologists are, however, on hand to point out huge craters dug by falling meteors. There is one in Arizona for sightseers.

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Now, asteroids don't just dig craters. The one that hit Tunguska, Siberia ignited the forests and decimated the wild life. But that's just a tip of the iceberg.

Let's get on a more serious note. A suicidal asteroid could turn the earth to cinders minutes after the blast. Or, knock the earth into several pieces leaving each part to orbit to oblivion. And a benevolent one could wipe out whole cities, or nations, or continents.

The universe is a terrible place. Although there is order in the galactic formation, there are millions of periodic and non-periodic comets out there. You could tell when Halley's comet would come, but you cannot be sure of comet Hale-Bopp.

Thank Heavens for the atmosphere. Thousands of earth-bound comets have perished there, leaving occasional flares and ashes to tell the story. But one day, one of the several wondering comets could catch us napping. Not even the best scientific wonder could stop it. One passed dangerously close the other day, and exited before anyone could say "Our Father!"

Planet earth may not be all-time lucky. It may have the fate of Jupiter. When comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 hit it, Jupiter was not knocked out of orbit, nor was it smitten to the finest particles. But two earths could comfortably fit into one of the mighty wounds of Jupiter resulting from the blow. And come to think of it. Only a few pieces of the comet hit Jupiter!

Now, suppose Shoe-maker had hit earth?

Do not shudder at that because it may be that one Kamikaze asteroid is racing toward earth at a million times the speed of light as you read this. So if we had been ducking smaller comets, we have to get set for the show down. Because even before we could get our telescopes to get a closer look, the killer comet would have done its worst. Time out!

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About the Author:

ARTHUR ZULU, The Most Controversial Writer in the World, is the author of the best – selling book, HOW TO WRITE A BEST-SELLER. Download your copy and FREE excerpt at :
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Asteroid Attack

By K.A.Cassimally

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Earth, 'our mother planet', is being attacked everyday by about 25 tons of dust and sand-sized particles. An asteroid, the size of a small car, hits Earth's atmosphere about once in every year.

Fortunately she knows how to defend herself. When that small car-sized asteroid enters her atmosphere, she burns the asteroid up before the latter touches her surface. So no damage is done.

But what exactly are asteroids? Asteroids are fragments from the formation of the Solar System some 4.6 billion years ago. Fortunately, most asteroids are found in the Asteroid Belt found between the planets Mars and Jupiter, the gas giant. Scientists think that asteroids found in the belt can be as big as 940 km across.

Like everybody though, Earth cannot cope with each and every one of the asteroids.

If an asteroid has managed not to be completely burned up while sprinting into Earth's atmosphere, then ??? Scientists think that the collision would cause local damage to the surrounding area.

If that same asteroid however measures more than 1 km across when it touches Earth's surface, disaster is on its way. Scientists believe that this impact could have worldwide effects. Man however is helping or trying to help our mother Earth.

Astronomers are now observing and tracking asteroids, which are at an average distance from Earth to Moon. By immediately tracking potential dangers and learning more about their orbital paths, scientists have more time to study potentially threatening situations. In the next few years, NASA hopes to discover more than 90% of all Earth's threatening objects larger than 1 km across.

But we have to stop these threatening asteroids from hitting Earth so as to 'save' ourselves.

In some movies, we see a missile being launched straight towards a big asteroid. The latter then explodes and the film usually ends. But in reality, it's not that simple. Did you ever think what might happen to the biggest remains of that big asteroid? Maybe it would go and enter Earth's atmosphere or maybe not. If it does pass this first test, maybe it will cause big damages or maybe not. You will agree with me that man cannot take such a risk.

An idea suggests that if a small asteroid is indeed intending to hit Earth, an engine is to be anchored in it. This engine is simply going to push the asteroid away.

Yet another strategy to put the asteroid out of the way is to attach solar sails to it. The 'gentle' pressure of sunlight on the sails will deflect the asteroid away from Earth.

Luckily an asteroid the size of a football field manages to hit the Earth only every thousand years or so but mind you I do not know when such an asteroid did hit Earth last.

K.A.Cassimally is the editor in chief of Astronomy Journal, a small publication of the RCPL Astronomy

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Club, Mauritius. Here is the new website (to be launched in February 2004):
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