

= Lisa the Skeptic =

" Lisa the Skeptic " is the eighth episode of The Simpsons ' ninth season . It first aired on the Fox network in the United States on November 23 , 1997 . On an archaeological dig with her class , Lisa discovers a skeleton that resembles an angel . All of the townspeople believe that the skeleton actually came from an angel , but skeptical Lisa attempts to persuade them that there must be a rational scientific explanation . The episode 's writer , David X. Cohen , developed the idea after visiting the American Museum of Natural History , and decided to loosely parallel themes from the Scopes Monkey Trial . The episode received generally positive reviews .

It has been discussed in the context of virtual reality , ontology , existentialism , and skepticism ; it has also been used in Christian religious education classes to initiate discussion about angels , skepticism , science , and faith .

= = Plot = =

Homer attempts to claim a motorboat from a " police raffle " that turns out to be a sting operation . While returning home , the family passes a new mall in Springfield that is being built on an area where a large number of fossils were found . Lisa protests strongly , which prompts the school to conduct an archaeological dig . During the excavations , Lisa finds a human skeleton with wings . Springfield 's residents are convinced it is an angel , and Homer cashes in by moving the skeleton into the family 's garage . Lisa remains skeptical , and asks Stephen Jay Gould to test a sample . When Dr. Gould appears at the Simpson house the next day to tell Lisa that the tests were inconclusive , Lisa goes on television to compare the belief in angels to the belief in unicorns and leprechauns . In response , Springfield 's religious zealots go on a rampage to destroy all scientific institutions . Appalled with the violence , Lisa goes into the garage to destroy the skeleton , but finds that it has disappeared . The mob soon converges on the Simpson household , and Lisa is promptly arrested and put on trial for destroying the skeleton .

Before the trial begins , the courtroom 's attention is diverted when the skeleton appears outside , carrying a foreboding message that " The End " will come at sundown . Sundown approaches , and Springfield 's citizens are frightened , but nothing catastrophic occurs . As Lisa starts to reprimand them , the skeleton suddenly silences her and is hoisted over to the entrance of the new Heavenly Hills Mall . Lisa realizes that whole saga was a publicity stunt for the mall . The bargain @-@ loving public ignores Lisa and goes shopping . Marge says that , for a few seconds while it was rising , Lisa believed the angel was real . Lisa denies this , but admits she was frightened and thanks her mother for her support .

= = Production = =

" Lisa the Skeptic " was written by David X. Cohen , and directed by Neil Affleck . Cohen was inspired to write the episode after a trip to Manhattan 's American Museum of Natural History , where he decided to turn the visit into a " business trip " , and think of a possible episode connection to the museum . He initially wanted Lisa to find a " missing link " skeleton , and do an episode reminiscent of the Scopes Monkey Trial . Writer George Meyer convinced him instead to have the focus be on an angel skeleton , while keeping an emphasis on the conflict between religion and science . Both Cohen and Meyer acknowledged how silly the " angel skeleton " idea was owing to simple questions raised such as why an angel died and why bones were left behind , but they went forward with the idea anyway .

In an early draft of the script , the skeleton was made of pastry dough baked by the mall 's window dresser . Cohen had initially written the Stephen Jay Gould role as a generic scientist or paleontologist , not knowing that they would eventually get Gould . He had taken Gould 's Introduction to Paleontology class at Harvard University . The only phrase Gould had objected to in the script was a line that introduced him as the " world 's most brilliant paleontologist " . His original final line was " I didn 't do the test . I had more important work to do " but was cut because the

writers felt it would be funnier to give him a short final line . In an earlier version of the episode , Marge would have ended up apologizing to Lisa for not supporting her , letting the ending be more of a nod to Lisa 's correct assumptions all along .

= = Themes = =

Author Joley Wood compared " Lisa the Skeptic " to an alternate reality game , in analyzing the effects of watching the television program *Lost* on contemporary culture and our own perceptions of reality . Dan O 'Brien cited the episode in a discussion of ontology , skepticism , and religious faith , in his book *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* . O 'Brien leaves it up to the reader to decide whether or not Lisa was justified in her skepticism . In *The Simpsons and Philosophy : The D 'oh ! of Homer* , " Lisa the Skeptic " is cited as a prime example of why Lisa is seen as the epitome of a nerd . The book also cited the episode in noting that Lisa is not infallible , for when the Angel appeared to speak at the end of the episode she became as frightened as everyone else . Lisa 's frustration with the marketing gimmick used by the mall developers is seen by Turner 's *Planet Simpson : How a Cartoon Masterpiece Documented Defined a Generation* as yet another example of her conflict with corporations throughout the series . Like O 'Brien , Turner also analyzed the episode in the context of Lisa 's questions about existentialism , self @-@ absorption , and consumption . In *The Psychology of the Simpsons : D 'oh !* , the authors discuss Lisa 's level of anger displayed in the episode , noting that in this particular case her anger gave her the wherewithal both to confront social injustice , and keep her mind clear for critical thinking . Mark Demming of Allmovie noted that Lisa symbolically stood for the side of reason , while her mother Marge symbolized belief and spirituality in the episode .

In their 2010 book *The Simpsons in the Classroom* , Karma Waltonen and Denise Du Vernay note that the episode is one of the best for teachers and professors to use in religion or cultural studies courses , noting the irony that though Lisa is the only skeptic through most of the episode , she is the only one who is offended at the publicity stunt . Parvin 's *The Gospel According to the Simpsons : Leader 's Guide for Group Study* is a group study guide companion to Pinsky 's *The Gospel According to the Simpsons* . In the section pertaining to " Lisa the Skeptic " , a skeptic is defined as : " a person who doubts , questions , or suspends judgment on ideas generally accepted by others " . The study group is asked to debate the episode in the context of skepticism as related to other unexplained phenomena , including UFOs , the Loch Ness Monster , the Abominable Snowman , the Bermuda Triangle , Atlantis , near @-@ death experiences , reincarnation , mediumship , psychics , and fortune @-@ telling . In Pinsky 's book itself , he noted that Lisa faced the difficult task of confronting religious hysteria and blind faith , and also attempted to reconcile science within her own belief system . He also wrote that when Lisa asks Stephen Jay Gould to estimate the age of the skeleton , the issue is never raised of why angels or other spiritual entities would even leave skeletons behind in the first place .

= = Cultural references = =

The scene in the courtroom where Lisa is put on trial for stealing the skeleton is seen as a reference to the 1920s Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton , Tennessee , which dealt with issues of separation of church and state and the debate between creationism and evolution . The publicity stunt created by the mall developers in the episode has been compared to scientific hoaxes such as the Cardiff Giant and the Piltdown Man . When Lisa asks if the townspeople are outraged at the end of the episode for being fooled by a publicity stunt , Chief Wiggum is about to answer her but is distracted when he catches sight of a Pottery Barn in the new Heavenly Hills mall . A shot of the diggers in silhouette against the sunset is modeled after *Raiders of the Lost Ark* ( 1981 ) .

= = Reception = =

In its original broadcast , " Lisa the Skeptic " finished 37th in ratings for the week of November 17 ?

23 , 1997 , with a Nielsen rating of 9 @. @ 5 , equivalent to approximately 9 @. @ 3 million viewing households . It was the third highest @- @ rated show on the Fox network that week , following The X @- @ Files and King of the Hill .

Donald Liebenson wrote for the Amazon.com movie review that " Bart Sells His Soul " and " Lisa the Skeptic " were among the best episodes of The Simpsons . He also noted , " Without being preachy ( or particularly funny ) , this episode is pretty potent stuff " , citing the theme of Apocalypticism towards the end of the episode . In the July 26 , 2007 issue of Nature , the scientific journal 's editorial staff listed the episode among " The Top Ten science moments in The Simpsons " . " Lisa the Skeptic " was utilized in a Salt Lake City Episcopal Church Sunday School class in 2003 , to stimulate a discussion among fourteen @- @ year @- @ olds about belief in angels , and the juxtaposition of science and faith . The episode was compared and contrasted with Proverbs 14 : 15 .

The episode is used by the Farmington Trust ( UK ) for Christian religious education , to teach children about skepticism . The episode is used as a tool , to involve the students in a debate about religion and science , as well as to discuss Lisa 's own skepticism , and her respect towards others . A group of The Simpsons enthusiasts at Calvin College have also analyzed the religious and philosophical aspects of the episode , including the issue of faith versus science . The episode has been compared with Gabriel García Márquez 's short story " A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings " and utilized as a teaching tool in a Saugerties , New York grade school class . In an exam on the subject , students were asked to use details from both " A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings " and " Lisa the Skeptic " , in order to analyze the quotation " Appearances can be deceiving " .