

Tintin lights a fuse under millionaire quiz

Blistering barnacles, as the good Captain might have said. Duckbilled platypuses and Bashi-bazoukas! Could the most popular television quiz show in France be rigged? An impassioned debate is raging in the pages of the country's newspapers after the discovery by an alert viewer of a curious if arcane anomaly in last Saturday's Qui veut gagner des millions, the hugely successful Gallic version of Who Wants to be a Millionaire.

"Without being an expert, I am something of a connoisseur of the works of Tintin's creator Hergé," wrote Fabrice Le Dantec, a confessed addict of the betufted boy reporter's hair-raising cartoon adventures, which have sold more than 175m copies around the world.

"But I was nonetheless dumbfounded by the response to the one-million-franc question."

The question posed was this: in the adventures of Tintin, which doctor is it who tends Captain Haddock - Dr Rotule, Dr Omoplate, Dr Meniscus or Dr Tympan?

The contestant, Frédéric, who went on to win a record 4m francs (£400,000) at the end of the show, did not know the answer. He threw the question out to the studio audience, as permitted by the rules, and an astonishing 73% of the guests, Mr Le Dantec noted in his letter to Libération, opted correctly for Dr Rotule.

Even in a country where 44% of families possess a Tintin book, and where Tintinophile MPs go so far as to hold long debates in the national assembly on their cartoon hero's precise political affiliations, that level of response - Mr Le Dantec contended - seemed to be something more than just a happy coincidence.

"After exhaustive inquiry, I can confirm my initial suspicion, which is that the name Dr Rotule appears in only one drawing in Hergé's entire oeuvre, namely on page 25 of Destination Moon," he said. "That is to say, this particular character's name features in just one drawing out of 15,000 in 22 books."

Etienne Mougeot, vice-president of France's biggest commercial channel, TF1, which broadcasts the show, forcefully dismissed any suggestion of cheating. "The idea that one can manipulate an entire studio audience during a recording is particularly twisted," he said. "The most likely answer is that it was fortunate chance."

But other Tintin fanatics have leapt to Mr Le Dantec's defence, pointing out that while a doctor whom many readers may presume to be Dr Rotule also appears in Explorers on the Moon, and The Castafiore Emerald, he bears little resemblance to the original - and never actually tends to Captain Haddock.

Le Journal du Dimanche admitted that the accusation that the show was rigged could not easily be proved, except possibly by carrying out a national poll.

"Great snakes! The mystery remains," it said. "Solving it may one day be worth a lot more than 4m francs."

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