

DOLPHIN POINT

Genre: Comedy-Drama / Period Piece (Scientific Absurdism)

Length: 97 pages

Language: English

Based on true events

Festivals:

Austin Film Festival (Submitted as a competition entry)

The Donners' Company Screenwriting Award (Submitted as a competition entry)

Nicholls Fellowship (advertised as a candidate via the Black List)

LOGLINE

To find out how to communicate during initial contact with extraterrestrials, NASA funded a project in 1963 in which a neurobiologist was to teach Delphines English. When a young woman and LSD come into play, the experiment takes a surprising turn. Based on true events.

PITCH

The Right Stuff by way of Wes Anderson. A film about the strangest experiment in the history of space research — one that actually happened, was actually funded by NASA, and actually ended exactly the way you're afraid it did.

It begins with the most beautiful question a human being can ask: *is anybody out there?* It ends with a man in a towel and safety goggles operating a jackhammer beside a swimming pool full of tripping dolphins.

Between those two points sits a comedy that never mocks its characters. Every person here is brilliant. Every person here is serious. That's what makes it funny — and that's what makes it hurt when it stops being funny.

WHY THIS FILM, WHY NOW

Because it is a love letter to science that refuses to lie about science.

We are living through a moment obsessed with intelligence that isn't human — building it, fearing it, arguing about whether it understands us. *Dolphin Point* is about the first time we seriously tried, with government money, to talk to a mind that wasn't ours. We got it wrong in almost every way available. The film shows exactly how, and exactly why we tried anyway.

It is also that rarest thing: a genuinely funny movie with a real idea inside it. The comedy is character comedy, not gag comedy. The absurdity is documented, not invented. And underneath it runs a question the audience will carry out of the theatre — *what do we owe a mind we don't understand?*

Finally: it has a heart, and the heart is a dolphin named Peter. The audience will not forget him.

SYNOPSIS

Green Bank Observatory, 1960. Astronomer **Frank Drake** points the world's largest radio telescope at the stars and hears nothing. His friend, the anthropologist **Gregory Bateson**, offers a reframing: how can we expect to understand extraterrestrials when we can't understand our own dogs?

Enter **Dr. John C. Lilly** — brilliant, charming, entirely unbothered by convention — who arrives at Green Bank with a proposal. He has aliens already. They live in a tank. They love fish. The assembled scientists, giddy on champagne and a fresh Nobel Prize, name themselves **the Order of the Dolphin**.

NASA writes the cheque.

On St. Thomas, Lilly builds **Dolphin Point**: a house where the sea flows into the living room and dolphins swim through it. Three dolphins arrive from the studio that makes *Flipper*. Bateson observes. A photographer documents. And then **Margaret Howe**, twenty-two, with no doctorate and no invitation, arrives by boat and talks her way onto the team in under five minutes.

Margaret has the idea that changes everything: you cannot teach a language by clocking out at five. A mother doesn't go home at night. So they flood the upper floor, hang the bed from chains, install an elevator for the dolphin, and Margaret moves in with **Peter**.

It works. Slowly, imperfectly, it works — Peter begins to shape human sounds. Margaret paints her face black and her lips white so he can see her mouth as he sees a blowhole. Something real forms between them, and one long, wordless evening in the pool it becomes something neither science nor language has a name for.

Meanwhile Lilly, changed by an accidental dose of LSD at a Hollywood party, has stopped believing the barrier is linguistic. He decides it is *mental*. If consciousness is energy, two minds need only meet at the same frequency.

So he injects the dolphins with LSD.

When the drug fails to produce the breakthrough, he reaches for a jackhammer — to shake them out of it with vibration.

That is the night the man from NASA arrives.

Bateson drops his notepad and walks out. The funding is withdrawn. The report reaches Drake's desk at Green Bank a few weeks later, and he reads it without expression, then steps outside beneath his enormous telescope, looks up at the stars, and puts his face in his hands.

Principal Characters

DR. JOHN C. LILLY (45–50)

Neurophysiologist, behavioural researcher, principal investigator. Thin, wire-rimmed glasses, immaculate suits — at first. Lilly is not a fraud and not a fool; he is a first-rate mind with no brakes. He asks the right question ("how does anything talk to anything?") and then follows it off a cliff with perfect composure. Over the film his tie disappears, his hair unravels, and his certainty grows. He is never cruel and never doubts he is doing science. That is precisely the problem. The film's engine and its warning.

MARGARET HOWE (22)

No degree, no credentials, no permission. Arrives by boat because she heard there were dolphins. Sharp, deadpan, entirely unintimidated by a room full of men with doctorates — and right about the thing they've all missed: communication is intuitive, relational, lived. She wins the argument against Bateson on the merits. She moves into the flooded room because it follows logically from her own idea. The film's heart, and the person who pays the highest price for being correct.

PETER

A young male bottlenose, roughly adolescent. Taken from a television studio, separated from the two dolphins he knew, delivered to strangers. The film gives him a POV sequence early — no dialogue, no anthropomorphism — and never lets the audience forget he is a subject rather than an instrument. He learns words. He gets jealous. He waits for Margaret. He is not a metaphor; the closing card is for him.

GREGORY BATESON (54–59)

Anthropologist, cyberneticist, participant observer — and the film's conscience. Impeccably dressed, pipe permanently unlit, notepad always open. He supplies the founding insight and then spends the rest of the film watching it get abused. His slow disintegration is told almost entirely through his tie: knotted perfectly in reel one, hanging over his shoulder at the end. When he finally drops the notepad and leaves, it lands harder than any speech would have.

DR. FRANK DRAKE (30)

Astronomer, Project Ozma, author of the Drake Equation. Opens the film staring at the sky and closes it with his face in his hands. Warm, patient, genuinely hopeful —

the man who wants to believe someone is out there. He is offscreen for most of the middle, which makes his return devastating: he reads the final report, walks outside, looks up, and understands what was done in the name of his question.

CARL SAGAN (29)

Young, charming, sunglasses, convertible, first class. Drops in periodically to check on progress and is delighted by everything he sees, because he only ever sees the good day. His enthusiasm is real and completely uninformed. Functions as the audience's optimism — and as a quiet indictment of oversight that arrives by convertible and leaves before dark.

JUAN, PABLO, HECTOR, ERICH (*the staff*)

The Puerto Rican crew of Dolphin Point. They build everything, clean everything, carry everything, and are treated as background by every scientist in the film. They also happen to be the only characters who ask the obvious questions — *what is the dolphin supposed to do in the living room?* — and get no real answer. Comic chorus by design, unimpeachable common sense by function.

JOHN LOVATT (30)

Photographer, hired to document the experiment for posterity. Present at almost everything, participant in nothing. Raises the camera and lowers it. The film's record-keeper — and a reminder that all of this was, in fact, recorded.