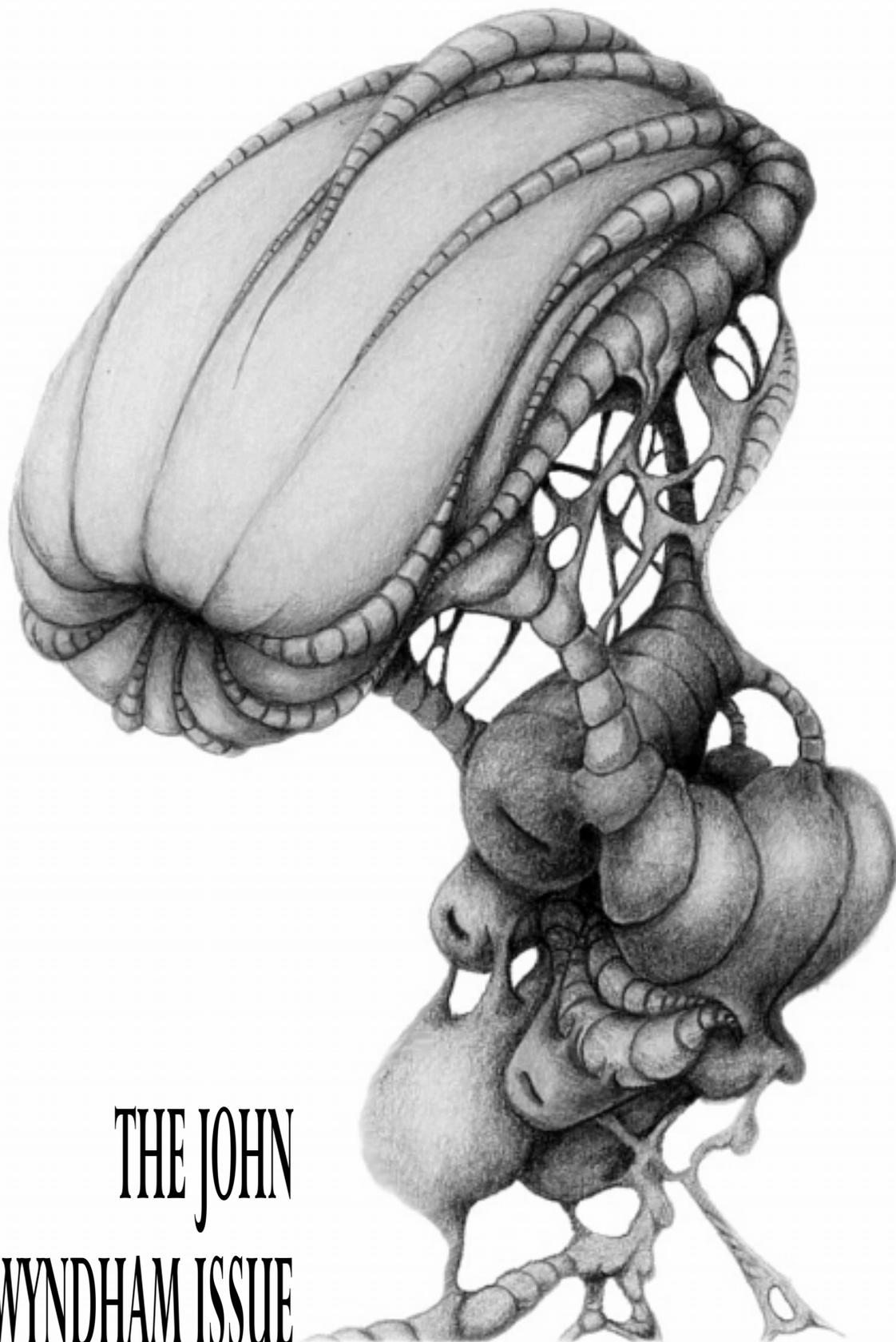


# SCRATCH PAD 46



THE JOHN  
WYNDHAM ISSUE

# Scratch Pad 46

Based on the January 2002 issue of  
*The Great Cosmic Donut life Life*, for Acnestis by  
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## The John Wyndham Issue, Part 1

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### Age discovers Acnestid Wyndhamite

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# A tribute to the triffid

by Jane Sullivan

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**TURNING PAGES, Melbourne *Sunday Age*, 25 November 2001: 'Agenda' section, p. 10:**

When I was 10, I read the most terrifying book in the world. It was about a man who woke up in hospital one morning with his eyes bandaged from an operation. Everything was very quiet. Gradually he realised he was not the only person who couldn't see. It seemed as if the entire population had mysteriously become blind overnight.

A lot more happened in the story. Giant flesh-eating plants roamed the land on their stumpy legs, killing the sightless humans with one slash of their poisonous stingers. But it was not so much the plants that frightened me as the idea of being struck blind — a senseless, universal catastrophe. I kept rushing out of the house to check that I could still see the suburban streets and the grey sky.

That book, of course, was John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. It has become a science fiction classic, and it has also thrilled generations of readers who wouldn't usually read science fiction — like many other fans, I went on to read every John Wyndham novel and short story I could find. Whenever I hear about global warming, I remember the mysterious deep-sea aliens in *The Kraken Wakes*, who worked out a way of melting the polar icecaps and flooding the world's cities.

Going back to books that made a huge impression on you when you were a child is a bit like looking up an old flame — you might wonder what on earth you saw in your former beloved. So I'm resisting the temptation to re-read *The Day of the Triffids*: I might find it no more terrifying than the forgettable film it inspired. I did, however, look through a new book, Simon Clark's *The Night of the Triffids*, an 'author-

ised sequel' published to celebrate the anniversary, which takes up the story 25 years after Wyndham left off.

Simon Clark is a very popular British horror and science fiction writer: as one reviewer says, in apparent approval, 'the blood doesn't flow through the text so much as pump arterially into the reader's face'. Clark fans will no doubt be delighted, but his book didn't do much for me. My memories of Wyndham's prose are more about getting prickly feelings on the back of your neck than getting your face sprayed.

New readers would do better to tackle the original, and Wyndham's other seven books still in print, published by Penguin. Probably the next most popular is *The Chrysalids*, his saga of a post-apocalyptic genetically mutated society where the land of salvation is New Zealand. Another book, *The Midwich Cuckoos*, has been filmed twice, as *Children of the Damned* and *Village of the Damned*.

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris was born in Britain in 1903 and started writing short stories in 1925. For the next 14 years he wrote stories and detective novels, mostly for the US pulp-fiction market. After serving in World War Two, he decided to try a new form of science fiction he called 'logical fantasy'. *The Day of the Triffids*, first published in 1951, fitted perfectly into that murky post-war world, materially prosperous but plagued by disillusion, Cold War paranoia and fear of nuclear catastrophe. No wonder the 1950s produced a spate of science-fiction films about aliens in our midst.

The interesting and strikingly contemporary thing about the horrors in this book, however, is that they are not alien: as far as we can tell, they are man made. The blindness is caused by some glitch in satellite defence systems that pro-

duces a spectacular fireworks display around the night skies of the world. Everyone watches it, thinking it's a meteor shower (a bit like the Leonid show last Monday, but much more dramatic), and the next day everyone wakes up blind. What the hell was up there, and why did we put it up?

Wyndham postulates a world where various hardware hangs above us 'with such things as crop diseases, cattle diseases, radioactive dusts, viruses, and infections not only of familiar kinds, but brand-new sorts recently thought up in laboratories, all floating around . . .' At a time when we are worrying about bioterrorism, this seems uncannily prescient.

What's more, the triffids are not just alien invaders. They are genetically modified plants, farmed for their oil. In a depressingly familiar scenario, scientists have no idea what they have set in motion. All that is needed is one little tip in the balance of nature — like the loss of human sight — and triffids become a superior and deadly species.

Wyndham's reputation went into a bit of a decline in the 1960s, when he was damned as cosy and middle class. His characters were too stiff-upper-lip for that era's changing tastes. But the present generation of science-fiction writers, scholars and critics are reappraising Wyndham, largely in his

favour. The University of Liverpool acquired his archives in 1999, 30 years after his death, and held an exhibition in his honour. One critic, L. J. Hurst, says he marks an important place between the space opera of the 1930s and the ironical, socially oriented science fiction of the late 1960s: ' . . . his work explores — in a tone varying from whimsy to downright despair — the social and technological changes of the society he lived in'.

Another writer, Maureen Kincaid Speller, has made a journey back to her childhood reading to discover some ambiguous reactions to Wyndham's women: are they good little wifies or strong feminist role models? Take your pick. I still remember the strange all-female dystopia, modelled on an ant colony, in his short story 'Consider Her Ways'.

As with Karel Capek's 'robot', Wyndham's most famous work introduced a word to the English language. When Canadian scientists recently developed an indestructible genetically modified flax plant to be harvested for oil, they called it a triffid. Fortunately this triffid doesn't lumber about killing people. Not yet.

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## The John Wyndham Issue, Part 2

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### Two introductions to 'John Wyndham as novelist of ideas'

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#### The 2001 introduction

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Owen Webster was a British journalist who migrated to Australia in the early 1960s. He was not interested in 'science fiction' as a specific genre, but had read quite a few of the books that we regard as SF. In 1959, as part of a correspondence self-education course, he wrote the following essay about John Wyndham.

When Owen Webster arrived in Melbourne, he published much freelance journalism and essays for the literary magazines, and became a well-known broadcaster (including short weekly radio essays for the ABC's 'Scope' program, and his long TV interview with Frank Dalby Davison). In 1970, the new, exciting *Sunday Review* (later *Nation Review*) provided him with a regular income by publishing his weekly back-page essay and occasional long articles. Owen's only published novel, *So* by 'Adam Pilgrim', appeared in August 1970. *The Outward Journey*, the first volume of his biography of Frank Dalby Davison, was published posthumously in 1977.

I met Owen because of the enthusiasm of Peter Innocent for Owen's work and my magazines. I visited Owen, his wife Gail, and his young children Justin and Amber, in early January 1971. Encouraged by Owen, I resigned from the Education Department, which led to me being hired by

Publications Branch, which led to my life as an editor. In 1973, Owen gave me a copy of his essay about John Wyndham, although he believed that no one but he, me and a few *SFC* readers might ever be interested in its subject matter.

As related next page, the Websters' marriage failed in late 1974. *Nation Review*, by then on the skids, dropped Owen's weekly column. Owen also lost his Literary Fund grant.

Owen committed suicide in early 1975. Gail took Justin and Amber to Adelaide, never to be heard of again. Peter Mathers, in 1975 one of Australia's most exciting novelists, was named as Owen's literary executor. Since then, Peter Mathers seems to have disappeared, having published nothing but a few short stories and minor plays since 1973. Even Peter Innocent disappeared some time in the late eighties. Today it's almost impossible to find Owen Webster's books, even in secondhand book stores.

As John Wyndham's star rises, because of the recent efforts of Andy Sawyer, the Foundation, the people at Liverpool University, and critics such as Maureen Kincaid Speller, Owen Webster's best-known legacy could well become the following essay.

— Bruce Gillespie, 28 November 2001

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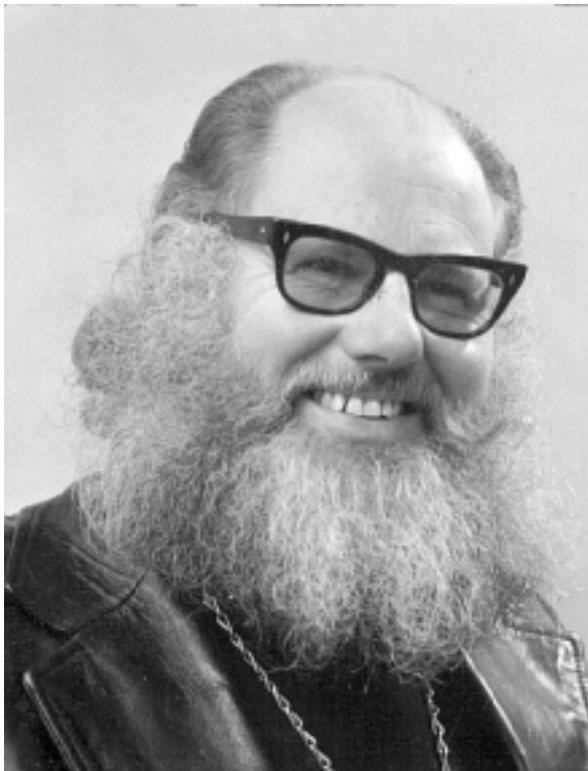
## The 1975 introduction: About Owen Webster

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'John Wyndham as Novelist of Ideas' did not appear in the lifetime of the author. Neither did the review I always meant to write of *So*, his only novel. Having just read *So* for the third time, I'm still not sure that I can write that review. Having lived through nearly a year since Owen's death, I'm not sure that I can introduce the author.

The incomprehensible, horrible thing about Owen's suicide was that he loved life so much. If he should die, who then should live? *So*, which was attributed to the fictitious 'Adam Pilgrim', is a novel all about trying to live life. When I first read *So*, in late 1970, it gave me hope that perhaps I could control my life, and not let it drift in the disastrous direction it was taking. Reading *So* was the beginning of the five best years of my life; or should I say, the first five good years of my life. I still cannot accept that its author is dead.

This Introduction has become confused and congested already. I begin by talking about a person and switch immediately to talking about a book. It's just that I cannot separate the two. Because of the book, I got in touch with Owen and met him and his family. From then on, I rang him about every six months and visited the Websters' place even less seldom. Yet so much that he and Gail said to me changed my life or helped me to change my life. When I came back to read *So* again in 1973, I found that it was a different book. When I had read the book for the first time, nothing in it



Owen Webster's official publicity photo, early 1970s. In 1975, when he died at the age of 47, he suddenly looked much older than this.

had happened to me. The book sat on the table and reproached me because I had experienced so little of what was there. When I came to the book for the second time, many things I had not noticed the first time spoke directly to me. They were events and feelings that had happened to me since I had read the book first, and might never have happened to me if I had not read it. Now that I've read the book a third time, many of its perceptions seem even more extraordinary. Passages of prose that I had not noticed the first time now struck me with their meaning.

Meanwhile, Owen Webster went beyond *So* in achievement, but progressed little in his public literary career. After a lifetime of being a pilgrim, this stocky, acerbic Englishman settled down with Gail and their two children, Justin and Amber, to a life that I regarded as the nearest any people could reasonably find to heaven on earth. They lived in a mock-Tudor cottage built into the side of a hill at Warrandyte. Trees and a garden (well described in *So*) surrounded the house, which was separated from the road by a creek and a valley. There Owen worked for more than four years on what was to be his last work, the first volume of his biography of Frank Dalby Davison. Justin grew up there; Amber was born there.

So what, I keep asking myself, went wrong? Why did heaven on earth become so hellish that Owen took leave of life? Probably I will never know. Shortly after I returned from overseas (February 1974) I missed my last chance to visit the Websters'. They had a birthday party for Owen. Shortly afterward, Julie and her husband arrived from England. Julie was the daughter (whom I had always presumed to be fictitious) to whom *So* is written as a letter. Owen did not expect the real Julie ever to read it. This arrival caused some extreme tensions, the exact nature of which I never discovered. Next I heard, the Websters set out on a long trip to Queensland in the steps of Frank Dalby Davison, in search of Australia and — as I understand now — in search of a disintegrating marriage. In December 1974, Owen rang me, needing help and advice from me, who had always asked help from him. I saw him twice after that. He could barely speak or concentrate; he could no longer write; his marriage had dissolved; he was so poor that he had to sell the dream cottage. On 14 March 1975, he took his own life.

Perhaps he would not have been driven to despair if only the second main article of faith in his life had not disappeared at the same time. Owen used to say that he wanted to excel in the three rs: reading, writing and rooting. After a long and complex sexual career, he had thought he had found the perfect marriage partner in Gail. Indeed, their life must have been splendid for at least four or five years; not many people have even that. After a nondescript career in journalism in England, he came to Australia in the early sixties and immediately set out to become a literary figure here. He published *So* himself; a Commonwealth Literary Grant enabled him to finish the first volume of the Davison biography. By August 1974 his marriage had broken up; in November 1974 he was told that the Arts Council had not renewed his grant. Owen was destitute, deriving no income

from his writing, and was alone for the first time in twenty years. He could no longer continue living.

I still hope the Davison biography will appear. Meanwhile, we have his book *So* (and I wonder whether any copies are left to buy, or were all the remaining copies destroyed when the house was sold). What does it have to say?

*So* is a devious book, like its author. It is written as a letter by an author who signs himself at the end as just 'Your Father'. None of the characters has a name. The narrator describes his early years, both in the first-person and in the third-person narrative form. Most of the book tells of the narrator's first marriage. It is obvious that most of the events are based on events in Owen's life, yet it is not an autobiography. The author even describes how he had to fictionalise some events in order to reconstruct the total effect they had on him. Much of the book is very funny. This is because the narrator laughs at his younger self, and sees *comi-tragedy* in social situations rather than individuals. The story of his honeymoon is chilling, funny and one of the few good passages about this common disaster to appear in fiction.

*So* tells the story of a person who is impatient with all forms of humbug and public deception. To me, this was always Owen's most attractive characteristic, although others hated him for it. Owen suffered fools, but not people who surrendered to foolishness. Rebellion against the unacceptable was central to his belief in a dynamic, ever-changing, ever-improving life. He once called himself 'the oldest angry young man in Australia'.

It is easy, then, to see why the narrator in *So* collides so easily with so many aspects of the class-ridden, humbug-defended society of England after the Second World War. Here we see behind the scenes at courts where pompous judges automatically convict the poor and free the gentry; where local citizens object to music criticism that dares to prick the self-importance of local amateur performers; where people work for next to nothing for years at a time and supposed to be grateful for their good luck. Eventually the narrator arrives in Australia, but not before observing the depths of the society he is leaving.

Sexual liberation also takes a struggle, but in this aspect of his life the narrator is more passionate, more concentrated, and even more tending to the visionary. When I read

the book at the age of twenty-three having, as they say, never been kissed, this aspect of the book confused me the most. Was sex a matter of 'ought'? Was I condemned, then? I wrote a letter to Owen saying, more or less, that I would like to join the pilgrimage, but could not — that I had opted out of ordinary life. Owen sent back a copy of the book, inscribed: 'To Bruce Gillespie, a more committed pilgrim than he thinks'. This was so, but my potentialities, such as they were, lay deep and took long to become apparent.

Owen believed in the potential of people — that the greatest betrayal of life and oneself is to be content to be an 'ordinary' person. He saw the English as a race of people who had drifted out of the life of the world, protesting merely that they wanted to live quiet, 'ordinary' lives. He saw this as death. To be content with the sexual second best was also a form of death, said *So* quite clearly. Take responsibility for one's own actions; live for the best. Perhaps Owen died because he had reached the best, and had fallen back. I'm still sad for him, for me, for the marriage that disappeared, for the books never written.

The following article, however, *was* written, then hidden. Owen wrote it in 1959, then forgot about it until he discovered that it fitted the *SFC* style very well. He gave it to me in early 1973, but about that time the frequency of *SFC* slowed down considerably. It's a prophetic article, like all Owen's best work. 'What will be the theme of the next [Wyndham novel]?' asks Owen at the end of the article. 'Or can there never be another one now?' Basically, there never was another one. *The Trouble with Lichen*, which appeared soon after, is an hysterical melodrama. Wyndham did not like *Chocky*, five years after, and neither did the critics. So Owen prophesied that Wyndham had finished his life's work ten years before he died.

Is there some answer here for me? Did Owen see that his life's work and potential were over (although I will never concede this), and he decided to do the decent and appropriate thing by ending his physical life? Or was he a false prophet, as he feared? I've only my own experience to test this. But now I can never ring Owen and tell him how much I enjoyed life.

— Bruce Gillespie, November 1975

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# John Wyndham as novelist of ideas

by Owen Webster

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I

A lusty hatred of the human race convincingly argued in imaginative form qualifies John Wyndham for consideration as a novelist of ideas pertinent to our times and as a writer with a sense of *Zeitgeist*. He is, of course, usually classed as a writer of first-rate science fiction and, in a superficial sense, his four novels conform to the formula of the horror film: 'innocent' people are beset by a Monster or a Thing from Outer Space and have to set about destroying it before it

destroys them. The difference with John Wyndham is a distinct reluctance to destroy the Thing in the end; indeed, in *The Chrysalids*, the third of his novels in this genre, he does not do so, and in the second, *The Kraken Wakes*, the outcome is uncertain.

He writes slickly and conversationally without literary pretensions, and the people of the books are never more than single-visioned mouthpieces and shadows from Newton's sleep; nevertheless, he remains more than a science fiction writer. He is a satirist and at times perhaps a visionary:

his rich imagination is rooted, if not in a knowledge of the human heart, at least in an understanding of the interplay of social and economic forces in human ecology.

These ingredients alone, however, do not constitute a novel of ideas; and so long as one's standards are derived from the effervescent debating exercises of Peacock and Norman Douglas, it might be difficult to see Wyndham as a novelist of ideas at all. His characters, as people, are not only as insubstantial as, say, the Bishop of Limpopo, or even Calamy and others from Huxley's early novels; they haven't the shadow of an idea in their spectral heads.

But there are other criteria by which novels of ideas may be judged besides those of intellectual debate. Indeed, once one's critical sights have been lowered from the peaks of Dostoevsky and Musil the novel of ideas may take many forms; and unless one's sights are lowered they would be unlikely to encounter any English novelist of the first half of the twentieth century who merited serious aesthetic target practice along the multidimensional front potentially offered by such a flexible art form as the novel.

At the shorter range offered by the modern English novel, then, another type of novel of ideas may be admitted to include Wyndham. This is a form of satire in which the ideas are related not to personal behaviour or a narrowly circumscribed ecology, but to all kinds of social action in a broad cultural setting. The people are shown only as social types — the scientist, the politician, the policeman, the liberal humanist, and so on — but they take part in unfolding a narrative that expresses ideas not in the abstracted form of intellectual debate, but implicitly and in an applied manner, as in certain aspects of *Erewhon*, and in *The Plumed Serpent*, *Brave New World* or *Animal Farm*. And in this sense perhaps such novels have a more practical value than those novelists' novels in which clever mouthpieces discuss the author's ideas. For ideas have no value except in terms of the behaviour that embodies them: individuals hold ideas reflecting their personality structures; and personalities, like schools of thought and political philosophies, grow from cultural circumstances. This, at least, is the romantic viewpoint as opposed to the classical; and adequate classical treatments of modern civilisation are extremely rare, demanding as they do an almost superhuman compass of a gigantically complex macrocosm to precede microcosmic re-expression of it. Perhaps *Ulysses* and *La peste* are the only modern examples. It may be that the disappearance of classical integrity is symptomatic of a dying culture: a consequence of speed, democratic forms of art patronage, and a loss of quietude. In such circumstances, prophetic denunciation, provided it is colourful and not too equivocal, is as acceptable to the novel-reading public as the benign approvals of a comic spirit.

Wyndham's literary progenitors, therefore, are more likely to have been Richard Jefferies and Samuel Butler than Mary Godwin and Bram Stoker. He knows his H. G. Wells, but where Wells is discussed he is rather censorious. In *The Day of the Triffids*, Wells' short story 'The Country of the Blind' gives rise to this dialogue:

'In the country of the blind the one-eyed man is king,'  
'Oh, yes — Wells said that, didn't he? — Only in the story it turned out not to be true.'

'The crux of the difference lies in what you mean by the word "country" — *patria* in the original,' I said. '*Caecorum in patria luscus rex imperat omnis* — a classical gentleman called Fullonius said it first; it's all anyone seems to know about him. But there's no organised

*patria*, no State, here — only chaos. Wells imagined a people who adapted themselves to blindness. I don't think that is going to happen here — I don't see how it can.'

And in *The Midwich Cuckoos*, *The War of the Worlds* is discussed:

'My experience, hitherto, of interplanetary invasion,' said Zellaby . . . 'has been vicarious — indeed, one might even say hypothetically vicarious, or do I mean vicariously hypothetical — ? . . . At any rate, it has been quite extensive. Yet, oddly though, I cannot recall a single account of one that is of the least help in our present dilemma. They were, almost without exception, unpleasant; but also they were almost always forthright, rather than insidious. Take H. G. Wells's Martians, for instance. As the original exponents of the death-ray they were formidable, but their behaviour was quite conventional: they simply conducted a straightforward campaign with this weapon which outclassed anything that could be brought against it. But at least we could try to fight back . . . There you have the prototype of innumerable invasions. A super-weapon which man fights valiantly with his own puny armoury until he is saved by one of several possible kinds of bell. Naturally, in America it is all rather bigger and better. Something descends and something comes out of it. Within ten minutes, owing no doubt to the excellent communications in that country, there is a coast-to-coast panic, and all highways out of all cities are crammed, in all lanes, by the fleeing populace — except in Washington. There, by contrast, enormous crowds stretching as far as the eye can reach, stand grave and silent, white-faced but trusting, with their eyes upon the White House, while somewhere in the Catskills a hitherto ignored professor and his daughter, with their rugged young assistant, strive like demented midwives to assist the birth of the *deus ex laboratoria* which will save the world at the last minute, minus one.

'Over here, one feels, the report of such an invasion would be received in at least some quarters with a tinge of preliminary scepticism, but we must allow the Americans to know their own people best. Yet overall, what do we have? Just another war. The motivations are simplified, the armaments complicated, but the pattern is the same and, as a result, not one of the prognostications, speculations and extrapolations turns out to be of the least use to us when the thing actually happens . . .'

Despite the literary manner of an intelligent sixth-former, this is an amusing and accurate assessment of Wellsian science fiction and all its many imitators. It also epitomises what might be regarded as Wyndham's credo: he is always at pains to ensure that the pattern is not the same; that conventional weapons are not only impotent against the invader, but in three of his four 'invasions' they are quite inappropriate, like shooting at hallucinations, as will be seen from the descriptions of the novels that follow. The essential difference is that Wyndham's invaders — with the possible exception of the triffids — are not bent on destroying man as an enemy, but are simply engaged in establishing themselves and ensuring their survival by idiosyncratic means that happen to be inimical to human civilisation. The intelligence beneath the sea in *The Kraken Wakes* melts the polar

ice caps for its own purposes: the consequences of engulfing London are an irrelevant byproduct.

Thus the threats to man's existence invented by John Wyndham may be seen on two levels: as an actual threat by a species having some natural superiority over man, or as a symbolic threat, created from within by man's own evil nature. On either level, man is seen destroying himself by his refusal to acknowledge the potency of the invading power. It is the plight in which Blake's Job found himself: praising God with a life of habitual comfort and prosperity and clinging so tenaciously to the values of that life long after it has changed that his own Satanic nature has to destroy him almost utterly before he will acknowledge its existence.

Wyndham's piece of information about 'The Country of the Blind' nicely illustrates another aspect of his sixth-form manner, a didactic air patching his narratives, as if he were back in the classroom where he once earned his living. Sometimes he is distinctly pedantic, as in the example quoted, or in this rather precious observation:

'They implode — almost as thoroughly as a broken light-bulb implodes,' I told him. (*The Kraken Wakes*)

As 'they' in this context are some weird, jelly-like manifestations of an unknown deep-sea intelligence, the image is not even an appropriate one. On the other hand, he may be idly or facetiously informative:

'Come on. We'd better be shifting. "Tomorrow to fresh fields and pastures new" — if you'd care for a really hackneyed quotation this time.'

'It's more than that, it's inaccurate,' I said. 'It's "woods", not "fields".' (*The Day of the Triffids*)

*The Kraken Wakes* has plenty:

'Well, it says here that over sixty people were drowned when a tsunami struck Roast Beef Island. Where's Roast Beef Island? And what's a tsunami?'

'I don't know where Roast Beef Island is, though I can offer you two Plum Pudding Islands. But tsunami is Japanese for an earthquake-wave.'

Where Wyndham's didacticism is indigenous to his narrative, there is evidence of extensive study and careful authentication. Although *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), the first and best known of these four novels, is more a feat of projected imagination than of specialised knowledge, the author does succeed in conveying an easy familiarity with spearhead researches in biology and the machinations of international cartels, as well as a sound understanding of the sociology of crisis. In his second, *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), much of the narrative depends on the author's authentic knowledge of oceanography. *The Chrysalids* (1955), by far the most profound and thoroughly worked of them all, shows an unusual grasp of the extended meaning of uncontrolled genetic mutation, as well as a thoughtful study of anthropology and folklore. *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), geographically on a smaller scale than the others, has a central idea that seems to have been triggered off by the ideas in the former work, and creates an alarming sense of the mysterious promise of a new generation, an awe comparable only with Richard Hughes' *A High Wind in Jamaica*. Perhaps the prototypes for Wyndham's Children were provided by his experience as a teacher at Bedales, a 'progressive' school where the young, like the Midwich Cuckoos, were probably

also knowledgeable, treating adults as equal but different beings, alarmingly in sympathy with each other, and often terrifying.

Each of the novels is written to roughly the same formula, springing from an initial question in the author's mind: what would happen if . . . ? The question is rather more apparent than in other forms of fiction and drama where, if asked at all, it would be completed by a supposition more plausible than, as in *The Day of the Triffids*, 'What would happen if everybody, except a few lucky ones, were struck blind overnight?' When, for example, Dostoevsky planned *The Idiot*, he asked, in effect, 'What would happen if a human being, as near perfect as I can conceive of one, were put among ordinary people?' Musil, in *The Man Without Qualities*, asked a similar question about a man of integrity who lived out the fullest possible implications of the discovery that all human affairs — everything, in fact — might just as easily have been arranged in any other way.

However, Wyndham's problem is to make the fantastic, the monstrous, the cataclysmic, seem plausible; and the degree to which he succeeds is what makes him, as a science fiction writer, so much better than those who tackle similar problems less plausibly, or with the clichés that Wyndham's Zellaby sees in tales like *The War of the Worlds*. His fantasies have their origins in science or pseudo-science, and the whole idea will then be placed in a familiar human setting that the author allows to change and develop in the light of his knowledge of social behaviour, himself as narrator sniping the while from behind the concealing pillar of the first-person singular. Perhaps the emergence of useful ideas from such an alchemy seems surprising and even accidental; but before the ideas themselves are considered, the novels must be more closely examined.

## II

The answer to the basic 'What would happen if . . . ?' question of *The Day of the Triffids* is that the human race would be reduced to a state more helpless within its environment than any other species, and would in time be exterminated by whatever predatory form of life developed a rudimentary intelligence. Even plants, given the determination, could do it.

How could the primal incident, striking the entire race blind overnight, be accomplished? Wyndham presupposes a not-too-distant future world in which artificial satellites are orbiting in profusion, all controlled by the Great Powers who, by pressing a button, can release on their enemies some form of destruction, such as germ warfare or radioactive dust, that Science has invented but may not be able to control. One night the world witnesses a grand cosmic fireworks display, and all who see it wake up the following morning — blind. It is hinted, but never explicitly stated, that something went wrong up there among the satellites.

A second scientific fantasy is needed to provide the semi-intelligent species by which unseeing mankind is to be exterminated. No existing animal species would serve; none is widespread enough. Therefore it had to be a pant and — perhaps for the sake of poetic justice rather than verisimilitude — a hybrid developed by scientists. The author enjoys sniping at the Russians, so he presents us with a discovery of Russian biologists:

'The world we lived in then was wide, and most of it was open to us, with little trouble. Roads, railways and shipping lanes laced it, ready to carry one thousands of

miles safely and in comfort . . . It must be difficult for young people who never knew it to envisage a world like that. Perhaps it sounds like a golden age — though it wasn't quite that to those who lived in it. Or they may think that an Earth ordered and cultivated almost all over sounds dull — but it wasn't that, either. It was rather an exciting place — for a biologist, anyway. Every year we were pushing the northern limit of growth for food plants a little farther back. New fields were growing quick crops on what had historically been simply tundra or barren land. Every season, too, stretches of desert both old and recent were reclaimed and made to grow grass or food. For food was then our most pressing problem, and the progress of the regeneration schemes and the advance of the cultivation lines on the maps was followed with almost as much attention as an earlier generation had paid to battle-fronts . . .

Russia, who shared with the rest of the world the problem of increasing food supplies, was known to have been intensely concerned with attempts to reclaim deserts, steppes and the northern tundra. In the days when information was still exchanged she had reported some successes. Later, however, a cleavage of methods and views had caused biology there . . . to take a different course. It, too, then succumbed to the endemic secrecy. The lines it had taken were unknown, and thought to be unsound — but it was anybody's guess whether very successful, very silly or very queer things were happening there — if not all three at once.

They were, in fact, secretly cultivating an unknown species of plant for its extraordinarily rich food-oil content. In the course of a typical Iron Curtain escape incident, a box of selected fertile seeds is scattered abroad — probably when the aircraft escaping with them is shot to pieces by pursuing jets in the stratosphere — and soon, as hardy and prolific as weeds, the plants are growing all over the globe, later to be assiduously cultivated in huge plantations. They come to be called 'triffids', and the narrator grows up with a boyish fascination for them so that he chooses work on a plantation as his career. He is in hospital recovering from a triffid sting with his eyes bandaged on the night of the cosmic fireworks. Hence he not only survives the holocaust and witnesses the results, he also writes it all up for the posterity he ultimately helps to create.

And so the narrative is constructed upon these twin improbabilities of blind humanity and — for purposes of hastening and heightening the drama — the purely science-fictional 'horror' subplot of the three-rooted (hence 'triffid') peripatetic predators, growing to gigantic sizes like sea anemones surviving on land and showing signs of being able to intercommunicate. Triffid guns are as much a part of the triffid farmer's kit as masks are that of beekeepers. The triffid sting is fatal, unless long experience from the lesser stings of young triffids has afforded some slight immunity. But it is the spectacle and symbolic power of chaos through blindness, worked out logically and remorselessly, that elevates the tale to the status of a novel of ideas.

Everything stops, except for the groping, hungry humans. There is no transport and no other form of communication, and thus the problem of an international setting is avoided. Though it is assumed that the rest of the world is in the same plight, the action begins in London and does not move outside England. The narrator makes his way from hospital to Piccadilly Circus — a setting that heightens the atmosphere of chaos — and sees in the functionless

streets a gang of drunken marauders led by a sighted joker promising them free drinks at the Cafe Royal, and capturing passing blind girls for his blind flock.

My head was still full of standards and conventions that had ceased to apply. It did not occur to me that if there was to be any to survive anyone adopted by this gang would stand a far better chance than she would on her own. Fired with a mixture of schoolboy heroics and noble sentiments, I waded in. He didn't see me coming until I was quite close, and then I slogged for his jaw. Unfortunately, he was a little quicker . . .

On recovery — and reflection:

I at last began to admit that what I had seen was all real — and decisive. There was no going back — ever. It was finish to all I had known . . . I came face to face with the fact that my existence simply had no focus any longer. My way of life, my plans, ambitions, every expectation I had had, they were all wiped out at a stroke along with the conditions that had formed them . . . There was no particular person dependent on me. And, curiously, what I found that I did feel — with a consciousness that it was against what I ought to be feeling — was release . . .

His existence was soon to find a focus — in a girl who also missed the cosmic fireworks through sleeping off the effects of a party. He finds her being beaten by a blind brute who had tied her hands to use her like a guide dog. She is rescued, and together they go in search of equipment for survival, helping themselves to triffid guns, food, clothing and an empty flat that they find after watching its occupants, a pair of blind lovers, locked in each other's arms, throw themselves out of a top-floor window. They also see three triffids driving a group of blind people, and learn that the blind soon show signs of knowing that a moving car means a sighted driver, that a blind crowd is quieter than a sighted one of equal size, that a light in the night means other sighted people, and that the situation brings the inevitable clash of ideology. They find a sighted group organising themselves into a military operation and defending London University against a blind crowd led by a sighted man dedicated to the defence of the luckless:

'I've been showing them where to get food. I've been doing what I can for them, but Christ, there's only one of me, and there's thousands of them. *You* could be showing 'em where to get food, too — but are you? — hell! What *are* you doing about it?'

But at a conference in the University the universal, long-term significance of the situation is put to them by the Wyndham intellectual, the figure who has this role in each of the novels:

'With the old pattern broken, we have now to find out what mode of life is best suited to the new. We have not simply to start building again: we have to start *thinking* again — which is much more difficult and far more distasteful . . . We can accept and retain only one primary prejudice, and that is that *the race is worth preserving* . . . We must look at all we do with the question in mind, Is this going to help our race survive — or will it hinder us? If it will help, we must do it, whether or not

it conflicts with the ideas in which we were brought up . . .

'The men must work — the women must have babies. Unless you can agree to that there can be no place for you in our community . . . We can afford to support a limited number of women who cannot see, because they will have babies who can see. We cannot afford to support men who cannot see. In our world, then, babies become very much more important than husbands.'

The ensuing discussion provides further opportunity for the display of a viewpoint that heightens the drama and amusement of all the novels: the existentialist attitude to morality that the right action is whatever serves humanity best when all possible ingredients of a total situation have been taken into account. And significantly, it is Josella, the heroine, who suggests to the narrator that if he marries her he must take on two blind girls as well.

The consequences of this idea are interrupted, however, when a *coup* by Coker, the dedicated protector of the luckless, results in all the sighted people at the University being captured and each being forcibly put in charge of a group of foraging blind. The narrator daily watches for an opportunity to escape and go in search of Josella, but daily finds the bonds with his charges strengthening — through pity. Here, though virtually unexplored, is one of the key issues of our time: the strange ties that exist between opposing elements — master and servant, oppressor and oppressed — more potently developed in modern Continental literature, notably with Pozzo and Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. When at last the narrator is free to escape, an eighteen-year-old blind girl offers herself to him on condition that he will stay with them. It is one of Wyndham's rare human episodes. He declines her offer, but stays until the spreading plague kills several of them and drives the rest away from the house where they are squatting. The girl is dying:

'Please, Bill. I'm not very brave. Could you get me something — to finish it?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I can do that for you.'

I was back from the chemist's in ten minutes. I gave her a glass of water, and put the stuff in her other hand. She held it there a little. Then:

'So futile — and it might all have been so different,' she said. 'Goodbye, Bill — and thank you for trying.'

I looked down at her lying there. There was a thing that made it still more futile — I wondered how many would have said, 'Take me with you', where she had said, 'Stay with us.'

Good, clean, stiff-upper-lip stuff, perhaps, with virtue bearing its own reward, for the hero escapes the plague. But whether it stands on the economy of its style or fails through its proximity to the trite and maudlin, it cannot be denied that within its context the episode transcends itself in one respect: by contrasting the squalor with a rare glimpse of qualities that would have averted the holocaust had they been racially more prolific, the author has succeeded in heightening the reader's disgust with the human animal.

In a renewed search for Josella, the narrator re-encounters a disillusioned Coker:

'I reckon you lot did have the right idea from the start — only it didn't look right, and it didn't sound right a

week ago.'

Their inquiries together lead them to a country house in Wiltshire, where they find only a part of the University party has taken refuge. The best, they learn, went elsewhere:

'This is a clean, decent community with standards — Christian standards — and we intend to uphold them. We have no place here for people of loose views. Decadence, immorality and lack of faith were responsible for most of the world's ills. It is the duty of those who have been spared to see that we build a society where that does not happen again. The cynical and the clever-clever will find that they are not wanted here, no matter what brilliant theories they may put forward to disguise their licentiousness and their materialism . . . So long as they keep their influence away from here they may work out their own damnation as they please. And since they choose to consider themselves superior to both the laws of God and civilised custom, I have no doubt that they will.'

Coker discerns in this a plea for help, and the pair remain long enough to organise the community's economy before driving on in their two stolen lorries. There are further complications with triffids and provincials defending their food stocks against marauding gangs — some of them holding out in confident anticipation of American aid — and Bill eventually finds Josella staying with blind friends in a Sussex farmhouse, having left Coker to make a convenient exit by taking a party of survivors to the Christian community in Wiltshire. (Bill is later to find the house deserted after being stricken by plague, with triffids lording it over the grounds.) Josella's friends had survived until her arrival by one of them wearing a helmet and gloves for protection on foraging expeditions to the village, where the rest of the population had been killed off by triffids. He found his way by unravelling a ball of twine and spent his leisure determinedly learning Braille. They remain at the farmhouse for several years, during which Bill and Josella, adopting some of the standards of a 'clean, decent community' after all, consider themselves married and have a baby.

In one passage, strongly reminiscent of Jefferies' *After London*, Bill describes his annual foraging visits to the metropolis:

'The place still contrived to give the impression that a touch of a magic wand would bring it to life again, though many of the vehicles in the streets were beginning to turn rusty. A year later the change was more noticeable. Large patches of plaster detached from housefronts had begun to litter the pavements. Dislodged tiles and chimney-pots would be found in the streets. Grass and weeds had a good hold of the gutters and were choking the drains. Leaves had blocked down spoutings so that more grass, and even small bushes, grew in cracks and in the silt in the roof gutterings . . . Growing things seemed, indeed, to press out everywhere, rooting in the crevices between the paving stones, springing from cracks in concrete, finding lodgements even in the seats of abandoned cars. On all sides they were encroaching to repossess themselves of the arid spaces that man had created. And curiously, as the living things took charge increasingly, the effect of the place became less oppressive. As it passed beyond the scope of any magic wand, most of the ghosts were

going with it, withdrawing slowly into history.

'Once — not that year, nor the next, but later on — I stood in Piccadilly Circus again, looking round at the desolation, and trying to recreate in my mind's eye the crowds that once swarmed there. I could no longer do it . . . They had become as much a backcloth of history as the audiences in the Roman Colosseum or the army of the Assyrians, and somehow, just as far removed. The nostalgia that crept over me sometimes in the quiet hours was able to move me to more regret than the crumbling scene itself. When I was by myself in the country I could recall the pleasantness of the former life: among the scabrous, slowly perishing buildings I seemed able to recall only the muddle, the frustration, the unaimed drive, the all-pervading clangour of empty vessels, and I became uncertain how much we had lost . . .'

In that last sentence is a key to Wyndham's work; but is he expressing the true vision of an artist, or merely indulging in the immense satisfaction of a fantasy of destroying a world that disgusts him? Only time, perhaps, will tell. But whatever the answer, the immense popularity of his books is significant in itself. His warnings are patently prophetic, especially in this dialogue between hero and heroine about the cosmic fireworks:

'You remember what Michael Beadley said about the tightrope we'd all been walking on for years? . . . What happened was that we came off it — and that a few of us just managed to survive the crash.

'Up there,' I went on, 'up there, there were — and maybe there still are — unknown numbers of satellite weapons circling round and round the Earth. Just a lot of dormant menaces, touring around, waiting for someone, or something, to set them off. What was in them? You don't know; I don't know. Top-secret stuff. All we've heard is guesses — fissile materials, radioactive dusts, bacteria, viruses . . . Now suppose that one type happened to have been constructed especially to emit radiations that our eyes would not stand — something that would burn out, or at least damage, the optic nerve . . . ?

Josella gripped my hand.

'Oh no, Bill! No, they couldn't . . . That'd be — diabolical . . . Oh, I can't believe . . . Oh, *no*, Bill!'

From a helicopter pilot they learn that the remains of the University party had fled the plague and eventually had established themselves on the Channel Islands, where Coker, still miraculously surviving, had succeeded in joining them. Reluctantly, the Sussex party decides that it must ultimately settle with them, too. 'Time was on the triffids' side. They had only to go on waiting while we used up our resources.'

One last dramatic hazard must be evaded before their story can end in the new colony. This is the unexpected arrival of an armed group led by Torrence, who describes himself as Chief Executive Officer of the Emergency Council for the South-Eastern Region of Britain, supervising the distribution and allocation of personnel. They are based in a barricaded Brighton, and are engaged in distributing people to live off the land in units of one sighted person to ten blind. Bill and Josella are ordered to accommodate seventeen more blind and their children on the farm in addition to the three who own it.

'Why, it's utterly impossible. We've been wondering whether we shall be able to support ourselves on it.'

'It is perfectly possible. And what I am offering you is the command of the double unit we shall install here. Frankly, if you do not care to take it, we shall put in someone else who will . . . You'll have to lower your standards a bit — we all shall for the next few years, but when the children grow up a bit you'll begin to have labour to expand with. For six or seven years it's going to mean personal hard work for you, I admit — but that can't be helped. From then on, however, you'll gradually be able to relax until you are simply supervising . . . Your way, you'd be worn out and still in harness in another twenty years and all your children would be yokels. Our way, you'll be the head of a clan that's working for you, *and* you'll have an inheritance to hand on to your sons.'

'Am I to understand that you are offering me a kind — feudal seignury?'

But soon the full force of Torrence's position becomes clear. He suggests that they feed on mashed triffids (cattle fodder); that armed forces, controlled by the Executive Council, will be raised by levies on the seigneuries, and may be called on by a seigneur in case of attack or unrest; and that the same army would be required to defend Britain against whichever country gets on its feet first and attempts to restore order in Britain.

'Clearly it is our national duty to get ourselves back on our feet as soon as possible and assume the dominant status so that we can prevent dangerous opposition from organising against us . . .'

'Great God Almighty! We've lived through all this — and now the man proposes to start a *war*!'

Torrence said, shortly: 'I don't seem to have made myself clear. The word "war" is an unjustifiable exaggeration. It will be simply a matter of pacifying and administering tribes that have reverted to primitive lawlessness.'

A nice touch, ruthless and wry, with a dramatic escape on the penultimate page. But it makes the final note of optimism from the Channel Island colony sound like the bedside manner of a physician who has done all he can for the dying patient:

Our hopes all centre there now. It seems unlikely that anything will come of Torrence's neo-feudal plan, though a number of his seigneuries do still exist with their inhabitants leading, so we hear, a life of squalid wretchedness behind their stockades. But there are not so many of them as there were. Every now and then Ivan reports that another has been overrun and that the triffids which surrounded it have dispersed to join other sieges.

So we must regard the task ahead as ours alone. We think now that we can see the way, but there is still a lot of work and research to be done before the day when we, or our children, or their children, will cross the narrow straits on the great crusade to drive the triffids back and back with ceaseless destruction until we have wiped the last one of them from the face of the land that they have usurped.

### III

The title of *The Kraken Wakes* was suggested by Tennyson: 'Far far beneath in the abysmal sea . . . The Kraken sleepeth . . .'

But the deep-sea intelligence that provides the answer to the basic question of this tale is nowhere given a name and, from the opening incident, seems to find its way into the sea in the form of mysterious luminous halations dropping from the sky and meeting the water with a hiss of pink steam. Witnessing one incidence of this widespread phenomenon establishes the narrator's claim to have been acquainted with the holocaust from its origins, and his position as a sound radio documentary script writer ensures his continued interest in it.

The basic question, then, is: what would happen if the polar ice caps melted? But where *The Day of the Triffids* began with its key incident, most of the narrative of *The Kraken Wakes* is occupied with establishing plausibility, and the consequences of melting ice caps are confined to the last fifty pages.

The tale begins tomorrow or the day after; and the author makes a not entirely unconvincing attempt within his ninety thousand words to give it an international setting. It provides a fine opportunity for him to stick pins in his wax image of the Kremlin, which behaves as inscrutably as ever, enduring and dispensing blame for the fireballs. Rockets are still tested at Woomera, government departments are no less circumspect, and Britain has allowed commercial sound broadcasting. The author calls his narrator Watson, and so allows himself to indulge in some idle pedantry about Sherlock Holmes:

'People,' I told him, 'are continually quoting to me things that the illustrious Holmes said to my namesake, but this time I'll do the quoting: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be truth . . .'

Life, in short, is not substantially different.

As the reports of the mysterious fireballs increase, they are seen to be mainly concentrated in deep-water areas of more than four thousand fathoms. A specially designed 'bathyscope' containing a crew and television camera and built to resist a pressure of two tons to the square inch is sent down a little over a mile to investigate. The screens reveal only an indistinct oval shape moving towards them before the cables are severed. Examination shows them ending in a blob of fused metal. In following up the incident, the US Navy loses a ship, and in succeeding months several ships all over the world sink swiftly and in unaccountable circumstances. When civilised humanity produces its outraged reflex response, in the shape of atomic depth charges, the Wyndham intellectual appears on the scene. This time he is an eminent geographer, Dr Alastair Bocker, and in a closely argued memorandum to the Admiralty he adduces evidence of intelligence at work in the depths, probably evolved on a large planet where the pressure was similar to that of the ocean bed.

His memorandum had concluded with the observation that such an incursion need not necessarily be regarded as hostile. There was such a thing as flight to refuge from conditions that had become intolerable. It seemed to him that the interests of a type of creation which existed at fifteen pounds to the square inch were

unlikely to overlap seriously with those of a form which required several tons per square inch. He advocated, therefore, that the greatest efforts should be made to develop some means of making a sympathetic approach to the new dwellers in our depths with the aim of facilitating an exchange of science, using the word in its widest sense.

It is rejected by the Admiralty, the press, and other instruments of orthodoxy as the ravings of a crank, but as crisis inexorably and ingeniously follows crisis, and Bocker's theory begins to look less fanciful, his liberal voice pleading for sanity sounds more and more pathetic.

An oceanographer reports discolouration of certain ocean currents appearing to result from severe disturbances of deep-sea sediments, but without the corroboration of seismic shocks. He is baffled, but not worried:

There is a great deal of nutritious ooze lying wasted on the sea-bottom. The more of it that comes up, the more the plankton will thrive; and the more the plankton thrives, the more the fish will thrive; consequently the price of fish ought to go down . . .

Bocker cleverly argues that the invading intelligence is colonising its environment by mining for metal; and in confirmation of his hypothesis, the discolourations cease just as unaccountably, unless it is postulated that the mining has cleared away the ooze to start on the more quickly precipitated rock. The repercussions of all these events begin to be felt in other directions:

In . . . three days cancellations of sea-passages had been wholesale, overwhelmed airline companies had been forced to apply priority schedules, the Government had clamped down fast on the sales of oils of all kinds, and was rushing out a rationing system for essential services, the bottom had dropped out of the shipping market, the price of many foodstuffs had doubled, and all kinds of tobacco had vanished under the counters.

Then two isolated islands are reported mysteriously depopulated in circumstances of unpreparedness not unlike those of a submerged Pompeii. At the instigation of one of the sponsors of the narrator's broadcasting company, an expedition is planned under Bocker's leadership to fly to a similar island in the Caribbean to await developments. Bocker's calculations are accurate, and after a series of attacks on other islands, leaving a few survivors, the expedition is at last rewarded with an adventure belonging more to science fiction than the novel of ideas:

Imagine an elongated egg which has been halved down its length and set flat side to the ground, with the pointed end foremost. Consider this egg to be between thirty and thirty-five feet long, of a drab, lustreless leaden colour, and you will have a fair picture of the 'sea-tank' as we saw it pushing into the Square.

The metal tanks disgorge huge organic bladders that detach themselves and 'burst into instantaneous bloom by a vast number of white cilia which rayed out in all directions'. Any animate thing that touches the cilia remains attached to them. Thus captives are taken, drawn back into the bladder, and it all rolls slowly back into the sea from whence it came. Four of the expedition remain to tell the tale and to con-



struct theories. Thus Bocker:

'How are they made to clutch the animate even when it is clothed, and not attach themselves to the inanimate? Also, how is it possible that they can be directed on the route back to the water instead of simply trying to reach it the nearest way? The first of these questions is the more significant. It implies specialised purpose. The things are *used*, you see, but not like weapons in the ordinary sense, not just to destroy, that is. They are more like snares.'

'You mean', said Phyllis, 'the purpose was to catch and collect people, like — well, as if they were sort of — shrimping for us?'

The attacks increase, moving to less remote areas, such as the east coast of Japan. Meanwhile, chaos is spreading:

The national airlift was working now, though on a severe schedule of primary necessities . . . In spite of the rationing system the cost of living had already risen by about two hundred per cent. The aircraft factories were working all around the clock to produce the craft that would bring the overheads down, but the demand was so great that the schedule of priorities was unlikely to be relaxed for a considerable time . . . Harbours were choked with the ships that were idle either because the crews refused to work them, or the owners refused to pay the insurance rate. Docks deprived of work were demonstrating . . . seamen . . . joined them. Airport staff pressed for higher pay . . . Reduced demand for steel (in the shipyards) reduced the demand for coal. It was proposed to close several impoverished pits, whereat the entire industry struck . . .

The petrels of Muscovy, finding the climate bracing, declared through their accustomed London mouthpiece . . . their view that the shipping crisis was largely a put-up job. The West, they declared, had seized upon and magnified a few maritime inconveniences as an excuse to carry out a vastly enlarged programme of air-power . . .

Mr Malenkov, interviewed by telegram, had said that although the intensified programme of air construction in the West was no more than a part of a bourgeois-fascist plan by warmongers that could deceive no one, yet so great was the opposition of the Russian people to

any thought of war that the production of aircraft within the Soviet Union for the Defence of Peace had been tripled.

The narrator and his wife, busy among their broadcasting scripts, begin to think. This is later accounted for by Watson's somnambulistic nightmares following his adventure with the sea-tanks, which keep Phyllis awake at night until she is approaching breakdown.

'Nobody knows where they will come next, and you have to act quickly when they do,' said Phyllis. 'That would mean letting people have arms.'

'Well, then, they should give them arms. Damn it, it isn't a function of the State to deprive its people of the means of self-protection.'

'Doesn't it sometimes strike you as odd that all our governments who loudly claim to rule by the will of the people are willing to run almost any risk rather than let their people have arms? Isn't it almost a principle that people should not be allowed to defend itself, but should be forced to defend its Government? . . .

'What's wrong, Phyl?'

She shrugged. 'Nothing, except that a times I get sick of putting up with all the shams and the humbug, and pretending that the lies aren't lies, and the propaganda isn't propaganda, and the dirt isn't dirt . . . Don't you sometimes wish that you had been born into the Age of Reason, instead of into the Age of the Ostensible Reason? . . .

Then a town on the Spanish coast is attacked, with at least three thousand losses, and Europe is affected at last.

It was immediately clear to the more classically minded citizens that, since the advancing objects were no known form of machine, their origin was likely to be diabolic, and they aroused their priests. The visitants were conjured in Latin to return to their Captain, the Father of Lies, in the Pit whence they had come. The sea-tanks had continued their slow advance, driving the exorcising priests before them. The military, on their arrival, had to force their way through throngs of praying townspeople. In each of several streets patrols came to a similar decision: if this were foreign invasion, it was their duty to repel it; if it were diabolical, the same action, even though ineffective, would put them on the side of Right. They opened fire.

In the commiseria of police a belated and garbled alarm gave the impression that the trouble was due to a revolt by the troops. With this endorsed by the sound of firing in several places, the police went forth to teach the military a lesson. After that, the whole thing had become a chaos of sniping, counter-sniping, partisanship, incomprehension, and exorcism, in the middle of which the sea-tanks had settled down to exude their revolting onelenterates.

By the time of the second attack in Spain, and later attacks in Portugal, Brittany, Ireland, and finally, Cornwall, defences are ready — and effective. The attacks cease, and

there is talk of victory. Then Bocker makes himself unpopular again with another accurate, but untimely, statement:

'We, a maritime people who rose to power upon shipping which plied to the furthest corners of the earth, have lost the freedom of the seas. We have been kicked out of an element that we had made our own . . . We have been forced by a blockade, more effective than any experienced in war, to depend on air transport for the very food by which we live. Even the scientists who are trying to study the sources of our troubles must put to sea in sailing ships to do their work. Is *this* victory? . . .

'It may even have been part of an attempt to conquer the land — an ineffectual and ill-informed attempt but, for all that, rather more successful than our attempts to reach the Deeps. If it was, then its instigators are now better informed than us, and therefore potentially more dangerous . . .

'It may be recalled by some that when we were first made aware of activity in the Deeps I advocated that every effort should be made to establish understanding with them. That was not tried, and very likely it was never a possibility, but there can be no doubt that the situation which I had hoped we could avoid now exists — and is in the process of being resolved. Two intelligent forms of life are finding one another's existence intolerable. I have now come to believe that no attempt at rapprochement could have succeeded. Life in all its forms is strife; the better matched the opponents, the harder the struggle. The most powerful of all weapons is intelligence: a rival form of intelligence must, by its very existence, threaten to dominate, and therefore threaten extinction. Any intelligent form is its own absolute; and there cannot be two absolutes . . .'

Bocker's warning is justified. The xenobaths, defeated on land, pursue a different activity, which becomes apparent after six months, when unusually widespread summer fog, including an unprecedented one persisting for three months in an area of Northern Russia, gives rise to a hostile East-West Exchange of Notes. Then icebergs are reported forming in phenomenal numbers off Greenland, followed by similar reports the following winter from the Antarctic. Bocker finds his way into the columns of a Sunday paper given to 'intellectual sensationalism' and argues that the submarine enemy is engaged in melting the ice caps:

'I have seen "estimates" which suggest that if the polar ice were melted the sea level would rise by one hundred feet. To call that an "estimate" is a shocking imposition. It is no more than a round-figure guess. It may be a good guess, or it may be widely wrong, on either side . . . In this connexion I draw attention to the fact that in January of this year the mean sea-level at Newlyn, where it is customarily measured, was reported to have risen by two and a half inches.'

In private he is still more apocalyptic:

'The only possible thing that I can see for them to do is to organise salvage. To make sure that certain things and people are not lost . . . The rest will have to take their chance — and I'm afraid that for most of us it won't be much of a chance . . .'

In the event, the salvaging is significantly indiscriminate.

It is suggested that warm water is being piped from the tropics or the earth's central heat is being tapped. Bocker has a theory about an atomic reactor driving the mining apparatus and generating a warm current. His advice to his friends is brief: 'Find a nice, self-sufficient hilltop and fortify it.'

California has a cold, wet, foggy summer and the April spring tides overflow the Embankment wall at Westminster. At last the authorities try to do something. Sea defences are strengthened, riverside walls in London are reinforced and stopped with sandbags, and traffic is diverted from the Embankment. But at the next spring tides the rising water breaks through in several places. The respite during the neap tides is used for a program of concrete sea and river defences on the scale of a national emergency. 'I wonder how high they'll go before the futility comes home to them,' says Bocker wryly.

The author takes a last review of the international situation before abandoning it to follow the immediate and identifiable reality of the Watsons' fortunes, who decide to remain in London as long as possible manning the emergency broadcasting station.

In addition to the difficulties that were facing ports and seaboard cities all over the world, there was bad coastline trouble in the south of the United States. It ran almost all the way around the Gulf from Key West to the Mexican border. In Florida, owners of real estate began to suffer once again as the Everglades and the swamps spilt across more and more country . . . The enterprise of Tin Pan Alley considered it an appropriate time to revive the plea: 'River, Stay 'Way from My Door', but the river did not . . .

But it is idle to particularise. All over the world the threat was the same. The chief difference was that in the more developed countries all available earth-shifting machinery worked day and night, while in the more backward it was thousands of sweating men and women who toiled to raise great levees and walls . . .

The Dutch had withdrawn in time from the danger areas, realising that they had lost their centuries-long battle with the sea. The Rhine and the Maas had backed up in flood over square miles of country. A whole population was trekking southward into Belgium or south-east into Germany . . . When the inhabitants of the Ardennes and Westphalia turned in dismay to save themselves by fighting off the hungry, desperate invaders from the north, hard news disappeared in a morass of rumour and chaos . . .

The dwellers in the Lea Valley, Westminster, Chelsea, Hammersmith, left their homes for the most part belatedly and reluctantly, but as the water continued to rise and forced them to move, the obvious direction to take was towards the heights of Hampstead and Highgate, and as they approached those parts they began to encounter barricades in the streets and, presently, weapons. Where they were stopped they looted, and searched for weapons of their own. When they had found them they sniped from upper windows and rooftops until they drove the defenders off their barricades and could rush them.

And, inexorably, through the winter and into the following summer the chaos spreads in a picture not dissimilar from that in *The Day of the Triffids*, with armed bands roving in search of food, outbreaks of epidemic disease, and famil-

iar landmarks transformed: a canal down Whitehall, gulls on Landseer's lions, suburban London barricaded into armed city states.

At Hyde Park Corner we hove to a couple of hours, waiting for the tide, and then ran safely up into Oxford Street on the flood.

No one had known, within a wide limit, how much ice there was in the Antarctic. No one was quite sure how much of the northern areas that appeared to be solid land, tundra, was in fact simply a deposit on a foundation of ancient ice; we had just not known enough about it. The only consolation was that Bocker now seemed to think for some reason that it would not rise above one hundred and twenty-five feet — which should leave our eyrie still intact.

Nevertheless, it required fortitude to find reassurance in that thought as one lay in bed at night, listening to the echoing splash of the wavelets that the wind was driving along Oxford Street.

Moving about in a fibre-glass rowing dinghy, the Watsons encounter a drifting motor boat and at last decide to escape from London and their now inactive broadcasting station to their former *pied à terre* in Cornwall. After a month's journey with a small stock of food, finding storage-tank water in the lofts of flooded houses, they arrive at their hilltop cottage to reap the reward of Phyllis's foresight — an ideal Wyndham woman, beautiful, capable, companionable in any adversity, mysterious, and endowed with an apparently prophetic abundance of common sense. Her unexplained bricklaying activities during one of the summers when the ships were being sunk and she was living at the cottage alone, are now revealed as a scheme for walling up a stock of food in the cellar, undiscovered by hungry marauders. During the winter there, Watson writes his report and eventually they learn that a Council for Reconstruction has been formed and is broadcasting for them to return to London. The water seems to have reached its limit, and a weapon has been devised to kill off the xenobaths. The mystery of their identity remains — significantly, as will be seen — only 'a lot of jelly stuff came up, and went bad quickly in the sunlight'. In their last evening at the cottage, watching the sunset, human optimism again prevails:

'What is it?' I asked.

'I was just thinking . . . Nothing is really new, is it, Mike? Once upon a time there was a great plain, covered with forests and full of wild animals. I expect our ancestors hunted there. Then one day the water came and drowned it all — and there was a North Sea . . . I think we've been here before, Mike . . . And we got through last time . . .'

#### IV

*The Day of the Triffids* and *The Kraken Wakes* have been popular partly because of their symbols of mystery. The triffids and xenobaths echo a stage in the evolution of literature: the fairy tales and legends in which psychological truth is communicated by means of symbols with a subconscious appeal. *The Chrysalids* is a departure from this form, in that there is no such mystery. The novel has been significantly less popular. Yet its basic question is realistic and topical: what would happen if there were a nuclear war? Common sense suggests that humanity would not be entirely destroyed, for the war

would cease after the centres of civilisation has been razed. Small, isolated pockets of humanity, struggling with the problems of genetic mutation, would probably survive in primitive agricultural or food-gathering groups. Give them ten generations to stabilise a culture and forget the holocaust, and then what? *The Chrysalids* provides a fascinating answer.

Such mystery as there is lies in the gradual revelation of this situation through the awakening awareness of his world by a boy of ten: the narrator recalling his childhood. These opening chapters contain some of Wyndham's best writing: both in the observations of an intelligent ten-year-old and in their sustained strangeness. It is possible, in fact, to read the whole book (without the giveaway blurbs of the Penguin edition) and not catch on to its meaning.

The narrator begins with a recurrent boyhood dream of a coastal city he could never have seen, where there were carts without horses and shiny fish-shaped things in the sky. His sister warns him not to tell anyone else; he is seeing the world that the Old People had lived in before God sent Tribulation.

People in our district had a very sharp eye for the odd, or the unusual, so that even my lefthandedness causes slight disapproval.

He has a secret friendship with Sophie, a girl of his own age who never takes off her shoes. In an accident at play her shoe is removed and he sees that she has six toes. Her parents bind him to secrecy.

The commandments and precepts one learns as a child can be remembered by rote, but they mean little until there is an example — and, even then, the example needs to be recognised.

Thus, I was able to sit patiently and watch the hurt foot being washed and bound up, and perceive no connexion between it and the affirmation which I had heard almost every Sunday of my life.

'And God created man in His own image. And God decreed that man should have one body, one head, two arms and two legs: that each arm should be jointed in two places and end in one hand: that each hand should have four fingers and one thumb: that each finger should bear a flat finger-nail . . .'

And so on until: 'Then God created woman also, and in the same image, but with these differences, according to her nature: her voice should be of higher pitch than man's; she should grow no beard; she should have two breasts . . .'

On the way home, he makes the connexion:

The Definition of Man recited itself in my head: ' . . . and each leg shall be jointed twice and have one foot, and each foot five toes, and each toe shall end with a flat nail . . .' And so on, until finally: 'And any creature that shall seem to be human, but is not formed thus, is not human. It is neither man nor woman. It is a blasphemy against the true image of God, and hateful in the sight of God.'

The boy is a member of the family of the local preacher and principal landowner, a fierce Puritan whose house is decorated with texts from Nicholson's *Repentance*, the only book to have come down from the ages of barbarism as the

Bible was the only book to have survived from the times of the Old People. These two works are the basis of their religion:

'The only image of God is man.'  
'Keep pure the stock of the Lord.'  
'Blessed is the norm.'  
'Accursed is the mutant.'  
'The Devil is the father of deviation.' . . .

An Offence was sometimes quite an impressive occasion. Usually the first sign that one had happened was that my father came into the house in a bad temper. Then, in the evening, he would call us all together, including everyone who worked on the farm. We would all kneel while he proclaimed our repentance and led prayers for forgiveness. The next morning we would all be up before daylight and gather in the yard. As the sun rose we would sing a hymn while my father ceremonially slaughtered the two-headed calf, four-legged chicken, or whatever other kind of Offence it happened to be. Sometimes it would be a much queerer thing than those . . .

Nor were Offences limited to the livestock. Sometimes there would be some stalks of corn, or some vegetables, that my father produced and cast on the kitchen table in anger and shame . . .

An Offence among people is called a Blasphemy, and the offender is deported to the Fringes:

Ours was no longer a frontier region. Hard work and sacrifice had produced a stability of stock and crops which could be envied even by some communities to the east of us. You could now go some thirty miles to the south or south-west before you came to Wild Country — that is to say, parts where the chance of breeding true was less than fifty per cent. After that, everything grew more erratic across the belt, which was ten miles wide in some places and up to twenty in others, until you came to the mysterious Fringes where nothing was dependable, and where, to quote my father, 'the Devil struts his wide estates, and the laws of God are mocked'. Fringe country, too, was said to be variable in depth, and beyond it lay the Badlands about which nobody knew anything. Usually anybody who went into the Badlands died there, and the one or two men who had come back from them did not last long.

There are echoes of the sufferings of Ernest Pontifex in *The Way of All Flesh* when the narrator is punished for idly wishing he had an extra hand to bandage an injured one; and his father's character is further revealed as a second Theodore Pontifex when he condemns his half-brother for farming with 'great-horses', an Office of simple giantism approved by the Government because they are profitable — a nicely observed piece of compromise. Every new birth, animal or human, and every field of crops, has to be approved by a government inspector, who issues a Normalcy Certificate. Even the birth of a child is kept secret until the inspector has examined it and the receipt of the certificate can be celebrated. Sophie's family, guilty of a concealment, have to leave the district when their crime is discovered, and David is severely punished by his father for abetting them.

Then David realises that he, too, is a mutant. For some time he has been able to confide to his only ally, Uncle Axel,

that he and seven other local children can hold telepathic conversations with each other. They are not all known personally to each other, but they send 'thought-shares' agreeing to a silent conspiracy. Then, as David's newborn sister, Petra, grows up, they discover that she is one of them, too, but uncontrolledly, and with a difference:

' . . . Something like us, but not one of us. None of us could *command* like that. She's something much more than we are.'

When Uncle Axel is told, David learns more of his philosophy, and here again, though in homespun garb, the Wyndham intellectual is revealed:

' . . . Tribulation wasn't just tempests, hurricanes, floods and fires like the things they had in the Bible. It was like all of them together — and something a lot worse, too. It made the Black Coasts, and the ruins that glow there at night, and the Badlands. Maybe there's a precedent for that in Sodom and Gomorrah, only this'd be kind of bigger . . . What can it have been — this terrible thing that must have happened? And why? I can almost understand that God, made angry, might destroy all living things, or the world itself; but I don't understand this instability, this mess of deviations — it makes no sense.

'We've got to believe that God is sane, Davie boy. We'd be lost indeed if we didn't do that. But whatever happened out there' — he waved his hand round the horizon at large — 'what happened there was *not* sane. It was something vast, yet something beneath the wisdom of God . . . It'd do the preachers good to see it for themselves. They'd not understand, but they might begin to think. They might begin to ask themselves: "What are we doing? What are we preaching? What were the Old People really like? What was it they did to bring this frightful disaster down upon themselves and all the world?" And after a bit they might begin to say: "Are we right? Tribulation has made the world a different place; can we, therefore, ever hope to built it up again into the kind of world the Old People lost? Should we try to? What would be gained if we were to built it up again so exactly that it culminated in another Tribulation?" For it is clear, boy, that however wonderful the Old People were, they were not too wonderful to make mistakes . . .'

'But Uncle, if we don't try to be like the Old People and rebuild the things that have been lost, what *can* we do?'

'Well, we might try being ourselves, and build for the world that is, instead of the one that's gone,' he suggested.

He talks of what little he knows about evolution, and suggests that 'some way or another you and Rosalind and the others have got a new quality of mind'. He warns of the dangers, but says that they must face them and keep themselves safe.

Two more quotations from the exciting first half of *The Chrysalids* will serve to place, in time and space, the setting of the adventures in the second half.

For a long time it had been disputed whether any parts of the world other than Labrador and the big island of Newf were populated at all. They were thought to be all

Badlands which had suffered the full weight of Tribulation, but it had been found that there some stretches of Fringes country in other places . . . Altogether, not much seemed to be known about the world, but at least it was a more interesting subject than Ethics which an old man taught to a class of us on Sunday afternoons . . . According to Ethics, mankind — that was us, in civilised parts — was in the process of climbing back into grace; we were following a faint and difficult trail which led up to the peaks from which we had fallen . . .

Farther south still, you begin to find patches where only coastal plants grow, and poorly at that, and soon you come to stretches of coast and land behind it, twenty, thirty, forty miles long, maybe, where nothing grows — nothing at all. The whole seaboard is empty — black and harsh and empty. The land behind looks like a huge desert of charcoal . . . There are no fish in the sea there, no weed either, not even slime, and when a ship had sailed there the barnacles and the fouling on her bottom drop off, and leave her hull clean . . . There was one ship whose captain was foolish enough to sail close inshore. Her crew were able to make out great stone ruins . . . But nobody knows any more about them. Most of the men in that ship wasted away and died, and the rest were never the same afterwards, so no other ship has risked keeping close in . . . They came back saying that they thought it must go on like that to the ends of the earth.

But evidence of other populated parts accumulates slowly. One ship returns with spices, giving rise to more 'theological' argument. Petra, as a more powerful telepathic transmitter and receiver than any of them, gets messages from someone abroad, a land spelt out with thought-pictures as 'Zealand'. But this is not before Petra's uncontrolled broadcasting has got all of them fleeing for their lives. One of their number has committed suicide, and two more are caught and tortured. One, still unsuspected, joins the search party and is able to keep contact with the quarry, guiding them to safety.

Petra's description of 'Sealand', as they interpret it, reminds David of his boyhood dreams. She adds:

' . . . Everybody there can make think-pictures — well, nearly everybody — and nobody wants to hurt anybody for doing it . . . They aren't all of them very good at it — most of them are more like you and David . . . But *she's* much better at it than most of them, and she's got two babies and she thinks they will be good at it, only they're too little yet. But she doesn't think they'll be as good at it as me. She says I can make stronger think-pictures than anybody at all,' she concluded complacently.

The Sealanders, flying to the rescue, are able to give the fugitives more advice as they come within ordinary thought-range. The take reaches its climax in the Fringes, where Sophie reappears, embittered but able to protect her childhood friend. During a battle between the Fringes people and the hunters, in which Sophie is killed, the Sealanders' helicopter arrives, emitting a substance that conveniently disposes of the combatants by arresting all movement. The 'chrysalids' are released from the binding of this strange weapon's sticky plastic threads and the rest of the battlefield is left slowly petrifying.

' . . . They're all dead. The plastic threads contract as they dry. A man who struggles and entangles himself soon becomes unconscious. It is more merciful than your arrows and spears . . . It is not pleasant to kill any creature,' she agreed, 'but to pretend that one can live without doing so is self-deception . . . Sometime there will be a day when we ourselves shall have to give way to a new thing. Very certainly we shall struggle against the inevitable just as these remnants of the Old People do . . . Your minds are confused by your ties and your upbringing: you are still half thinking of them as the same kind as yourselves. That is why you are shocked. And that is why they have you at a disadvantage, for *they* are not confused. They are alert, corporately aware of danger to their species. They can see quite well that if it is to survive they have not only to preserve it from deterioration, but they must protect it from the even more serious threat of the superior variant . . .

'For ours *is* a superior variant, and we are only just beginning. We are able to think-together and understand one another as they never could; we are beginning to understand how to assemble and apply the composite team-mind to a problem — and where may that not take us one day? . . .'

And the 'Sealand woman' rejoices in finding Petra:

'It is worthwhile . . . At her age and untrained — yet she can throw a thought halfway round the world! . . . She has still a great deal to learn, but we will give her the best teachers, and then, one day, she will be teaching them.'

At last, at the end of some of Wyndham's best writing, both for its emotional appeal and the strength of characterisation, there sounds the familiar note of hope: David realises his childhood dream, but with something new, too:

I was aware of the engineer in our machine communicating with someone below, but behind that, as a background to it, there was something new and unknown to me. In terms of sound it could be not unlike the buzzing of a hive of bees; in terms of light, a suffused glow.

'What is it?' I said, puzzled.

'Can't you guess, David? It's people. Lots and lots of our kind of people.'

## V

Although *The Midwich Cuckoos* is, in many ways, the least of the four novels, its theme shows an authentic development out of its predecessors; and there is a sense in which the author, by being parochial in a more familiar sense than he is in *The Chrysalids*, is also at his most universal. Here 'the even more serious threat of the superior variant' is ruthlessly exterminated in the English village where it appears, leaving a final sense of relief among the villagers, but not, significantly, the note of hope. By an act that prevents the race from becoming more human the village ends in being less human, and the author's incipient sympathy with the intruders and his disgust with mankind is seen at its least equivocal. It is noteworthy, too, that the destructive act is committed, suicidally, by the Wyndham intellectual.

The theme of the superior mutant is blended with that of the mysterious invader in a form that does not quite synthesise the symbolic themes of *The Kraken Wakes* and *The*

*Chrysalids*, but leaves a tantalising pointer to the next novel in the genre.

Midwich is an ordinary English village and the narrator one of its residents (middle-class detached), this time escaping the disaster by being out of the village with his wife celebrating his birthday. 'One of the luckiest accidents in my wife's life', the story begins, 'is that she happened to marry a man who was born on the 26th of September'. On their return to Midwich they find out that anyone who tries to approach it within a certain distance falls instantly and harmlessly asleep. The situation gives rise to the usual English responses to crisis and provides the author with more grist for his dark satiric mills. Investigations suggest that the invisible force has settled like a dome on the village, but its identity is never discovered because twenty-four hours after its arrival there is no sign of it and the villagers wake up from their 'day-out' as if nothing had happened. Only about three months later is it gradually discovered that all its women are pregnant. An echo of the 'shrimping' assaults in *The Kraken Wakes* may be heard in the outburst of one of the Midwich women during the developing crisis:

'... It's all very well for a man. He doesn't have to go through this sort of thing, and he knows he never will have to. How *can* he understand? He may *mean* as well as a saint, but he's always on the outside. He can never *know* what it's like, even in a normal way — so what sort of an idea can he have of *this*? — Of how it feels to lie awake at night with the humiliating knowledge that one is simply being used? — As if one were not a person at all, but just a kind of mechanism, a sort of incubator . . . .'

Ten chapters of nicely sustained anxiety about what the women will produce culminate in a delightful anticlimax: the babies are all quite normal, except for the minor detail of having golden eyes. The village doctor, in one of his reports, notes that the more educated of the women accept the thesis that they are host-mothers, adding that he knows of no reason why xenogenesis should not be possible among humans. He tries to discount as hysterical the women's claims that the children exert a powerful compulsion over their mothers, forcing them to feed them and to bring them back to Midwich if they are taken away. The most extraordinary thing, he suggests, is that there are thirty-one males and thirty females so alike that their ostensible mothers cannot tell them apart. It is Zellaby, the squire, who first makes the comparison with cuckoos, hints that the sensible course would be to treat the visitants as people treat unwanted kittens, and ridicules the doctor's theory about hysteria:

'... If you were wishful to challenge the supremacy of a society that was fairly stable, and quite well weaponed, what would you do? Would you meet it on its own terms by launching a probably costly, and certainly destructive, assault? Or, if time were of no great importance, would you prefer to employ a version of a more subtle tactic? Would you, in fact, try somehow to introduce a fifth column, to attack it from within?'

By the time the children are a year old, they look like well-developed two-year-olds, and when one of them learns something, the other twenty-nine or thirty of the same sex know it too:

'... It certainly does not mean normal abilities to the

power of thirty, thank heaven — that would be beyond any comprehension. It does appear to mean multiplication of intelligence in some degree . . . . What seems to me of more immediate importance is the degree of will-power that has been produced — the potentialities of that strike me as very serious indeed. One has no idea of how these compulsions are exerted, but I fancy that if it can be explored we might find that when a certain degree of will is . . . concentrated in one vessel a Hegelian change takes place — that is, that in more than critical quantity it begins to display a new quality. In this case, a power of direct imposition . . . .

'A spirit is a living force, therefore it is not static, therefore it is something which must either evolve, or atrophy. Evolution of a spirit assumes the eventual development of a greater spirit. Suppose, then, that this greater spirit, this super spirit, is attempting to make its appearance on the scene. Where is it to dwell? The ordinary man is not constructed to contain it; the superman does not exist to house it. Might it not, then, for lack of a suitable single vehicle, inform a group — rather like an encyclopedia grown too large for one volume?'

At two they can all read, and a little later, all ride bicycles and swim. They are sent to 'a kind of school-cum-welfare-centre-cum-social-observatory' and eventually all take up permanent residence there. It is soon discovered that any lesson can be attended by only one boy and one girl and six couples can be taught different subjects simultaneously. At the age of nine they look sixteen.

Then a village youth is killed in a motor accident and, although the inquest was formal, Zellaby has a different view. He saw four of the Children walking strung out across the road just before the accident:

The car, a small, open two-seater, was not travelling fast, but it happened that just round the corner, and shielded from sight by it, the Children had stopped . . . . The car's driver did his best. He pulled hard over to the right in an attempt to avoid them, and all but succeeded. Another two inches, and he would have missed them entirely. But he could not make the extra inches. The tip of his left wing caught the outermost boy in the hip, and flung him across the road against the fence of a cottage garden . . . .

Whether the car actually came to a stop Zellaby could never be sure; if it did it was for the barest instant, the engine roared. The car sprang forward. The driver changed up, and put his foot down again, keeping straight ahead. He made no attempt whatever to take the corner to the left. The car was still accelerating when it hit the churchyard wall.

'They did it', says Zellaby later, 'just as surely as they *made* their mothers bring them back here.' And when the village comes to know of it, the dead man's brother takes his revenge by shooting one of the boys:

The standing boy turned, and looked at us. His golden eyes were hard, and bright. I felt as if a sudden gust of confusion and weakness were seeping through me . . . . Then the boy's eyes left ours, and his head turned further. From behind the hedge opposite, came the sound of a second explosion . . . .

The avenger had turned his second barrel on himself. In a discussion about the incident, Zellaby answers the vicar's claim that the brother was administering the justice that the law had denied him:

'The one thing it certainly was not, was justice,' Zellaby said firmly. 'It was feuding. He attempted to kill one of the Children, chosen at random, for an act they had committed collectively. What these incidents really make clear . . . is that the laws evolved by one particular species, for the convenience of that species are, by their nature, concerned only with the capacities of that species — against a species with different capacities they simply became inapplicable.'

Then the villagers march in a mob to burn down the school, but their intentions are thwarted by a riot unaccountably breaking out among them, causing death and injury. By the time the police arrive to investigate, all the inhabitants of Midwich are found to be going about their business normally except that they are incapable of leaving the village, not even to visit their relatives in hospital.

Zellaby fumbles his way further into the logical labyrinth of his own humanism: understanding the Children (he is the only person they trust) yet knowing he has no precedents by which to justify treating them humanely.

'Physically we are poor weak creatures compared with many animals, but we overcome them because we have better brains. The only thing that can beat us is something with a still better brain. That has scarcely seemed a threat: for one thing, its occurrence appeared to be improbable and, for another, it seemed even more improbable that we should allow it to survive to become a menace. Yet here it is — another little gimmick out of Pandora's infinite evolutionary box: the contesserate mind . . .'

The Wyndham intellectual has evolved from the progressive brave-new-world builder of *The Day of the Triffids*, through the blindly certain and demonstrably wrong campaigner of *The Kraken Wakes* and the stoic realist of *The Chrysalids* to this point of disorientation of uncertainty that is just as ineffectual as the attitude of the wooden-headed Chief Constable who supplies the penultimate dramatic incident in an interview with one of the Children. One can almost feel the author's delight in creating it. The boy has calmly explained that the Children caused the rioters to fight one another:

' . . . If there is any attempt to interfere with us or molest us, by anybody, we shall defend ourselves. We have shown that we can, and we hope that that will be warning enough to prevent further trouble.'

Sir John stared at the boy speechlessly while his knuckles whitened and his face empurpled. He half rose from his chair as if he meant to attack the boy, and then sank, back, thinking better of it . . . Presently, in a half-choked voice, he addressed the boy who was watching him with a kind of critically detached interest.

'You damned young blackguard! You insufferable little prig! How dare you speak to me like that! . . . Talking to your elders like that, you swollen-headed little upstart! So you're not to be "molested"; you'll defend yourselves, will you! Where do you think you are? You've got a lot to learn, m'lad, a whole —' . . .

The Chief Constable's mouth went slack, his jaws fell

a little, his eyes widened, and seemed to go on widening. His hair rose slightly. Sweat burst out on his forehead, at his temples, and came trickling down from his mouth. Tears ran down the sides of his nose. He began to tremble, but seemed unable to move. Then, after long, rigid seconds, he did move. He lifted hands that fluttered, and fumbled them to his face. Behind them, he gave queer, thin screams. He slid out of the chair to his knees on the floor, and fell forward. He lay there grovelling, and trembling, making high whinnying sounds as he clawed at the carpet, trying to dig himself into it. Suddenly he vomited.

The boy looked up. To Dr Torrance he said, as if answering a question: 'He is not hurt. He wanted to frighten us, so we have shown him what it means to be frightened. He'll understand better now. He will be all right when his glands are in balance again.'

And somebody observes afterwards: 'They've broken that man, for the rest of his life.'

It is learned that there were three other incidents of a 'Day-out' in different parts of the world, close to the date of the Midwich one. In an Eskimo settlement the babies were exposed at birth and none survived. In Outer Mongolia it was assumed that the women had been lying with devils, and all perished, including the children. The third village, in Eastern Siberia, was allowed to rear its Children to the age of those in Midwich. Then a new atomic cannon is tested, and 'Gizhinsk' no longer exists. The Midwich Children know of this and begin to take the initiative in defending themselves against destruction sooner or later. One of them explains:

' . . . You cannot afford *not* to kill us, for if you don't, you are finished. In Russia . . . it is the duty of the community to protect itself from traitors whether they are individuals or groups. In this case, biological duty and political duty coincided . . . But for you the issue is less clear. Not only has your will to survive been much more deeply submerged by convention, but you have the inconvenience here of the idea that the State exists to serve the individuals who compose it . . . Your more liberal . . . and religious people will be greatly troubled over the ethical position . . . As a securely dominant species you could afford to lose touch with reality, and amuse yourself with abstractions . . . You will think of artillery, as the Russians did, or of guided missiles whose electronics we cannot affect. But if you send them, you won't be able to kill only us, you will have to kill all the people in the village as well — it would take you a long time even to contemplate such an action, and if it *were* carried out, what government in this country could survive such a massacre of innocents on the grounds of expediency? . . . Neither you, nor we, have wishes that count in the matter — or should one say that we both have been given the same wish — to survive? We are all, you see, toys of the life-force. It made you numerically strong, but mentally undeveloped; it made us mentally strong, but physically weak: now it has set us at one another to see what will happen. A cruel sport, perhaps, from both our points of view, but a very, very old one. Cruelty is as old as life itself. There is some improvement: humour and compassion are the most important of human inventions; but they are not very firmly established yet, though promising well.'

Zellaby eventually finds the only solution. The Children are still children enough to enjoy a film show, and he arranges one for them all in their school. His extra heavy load of projection equipment is on this occasion loaded with time bombs. The conclusion is thus the familiar spectacle — this time less overt — of humanity starting all over again from a point some way back. 'If you want to keep alive in the jungle', says Zellaby's last letter, 'you must live as the jungle does.'

## VI

The popularity of the Wyndham novels depends, of course, more on their status as science fiction romance than on their inherent ideas. The appeal of scarification is as old as childhood. *The Day of the Triffids*, in which the horror is at its most tangible, is by far the most popular; and *The Chrysalids*, in which the science is at its least fictional and the ideas most prominent, appears to be liked the least. But all good monsters exist in more than one dimension, and Wyndham's are no exception. Their real importance lies in their symbolic meanings, and in the forms of the ideas in which they are clad.

Philosophically, they are all a play upon the *reductio ad absurdum* of elemental questions about nature and nurture: extrinsically concerned with modern hubris. Civilised man, Wyndham is saying, is so smugly confident in his scientific humanism that he is failing to examine the precious foundations on which his civilisation stands. It may be argued that there cannot be much wrong with the foundations if the only way they can be undermined (apart from a nuclear war, which everyone knows about) is by an accident as unlikely as the beginning of life itself — universal blindness or the mutation of a contesserate mind. Yet this is just where one of the symbolic interpretations of these disasters is relevant. Any detached observer can see that underlying the superficial contemporary mood of brazen self-confidence (the potential omniscience of science; the potential omnipotence of Man) is a profound lack of confidence; an uncertainty of which, indeed, the arrogance is itself a symptom, like whistling in the dark. And the impending disasters are the more real, the more catastrophic, because their approach is unacknowledged. That is why a nuclear war is the least likely holocaust. Whatever the 'something' is that Beckett and others know 'is taking its course' may not turn out to be as fantastic as an actual deep-sea intelligence, but its arrival will be socially no less confounding.

At another level of interpretation, Wyndham's picture of civilised mankind is that they *are* groping blindly towards chaos; that they must (but will not) follow Bocker's advice to establish friendly relations with the power beneath the mean sea level of their consciousness, and that it can only take its course by inundating the 'arid spaces' of the citadels of reason. Wyndham knows that all this force, though destructive, is also a sign of unquenchable vitality, and that human life will survive the holocaust to become richer than before; but he knows, too, that this cannot happen within the Midwich scale of three generations. The destructive power is so great that any creative upward urge appearing before the something has taken its course will be destroyed before it can gain a hold by the very people who nowadays affect the changes in the climate of ideas, and who will destroy themselves in the process: the rationalist intelligentsia.

There remains the question of how far Wyndham under-

stands his own symbols. Serially, in the four novels, he brings closer and closer together, towards the point of their conception in the human mind — the periphery of the familiar — the always ambivalent elements of matter and mystery (in the metaphysical sense). At first the two illusions are externalised: a rather worthless material world is lost through the impact of something not too mysterious to be, ultimately, indestructible (the triffids), and then by something a little more mysterious (the xenobaths), the destruction of which is unconvincing and uncertain. In each case, there is a remnant of the fittest who survive with a stiff upper lip and a trembling lower one. In the third instance, the mystery is internalised and dominant, reorganising the now formless matter into a new and improved quality of being and calmly destroying the residue. But last, both matter and mystery become stabilised at equal strength in a present-day setting. In their interaction the rational consciousness, for all its learning and detachment, can find no place.

Explicitly, the law of the jungle prevails throughout, immediately something happens to sever the slender restraints of civilisation. Whichever way the author turns, he cannot escape it, and as long as he is dealing with modern man, he implies, he never will. Only a new kind of superman can really hope to transcend the beast, and then by taking defensive measures that are not less jungly by virtue of the fully conscious deliberation that motivates them. It is a long and courageous journey from the 'primary prejudice' of 'The race is worth preserving' in *The Day of the Triffids* to 'We are all toys of the life-force' in *The Midwich Cuckoos*. The comparison with *Back to Methuselah* is obvious, though Wyndham reveals a deeper disgust than Shaw, for all his caecal, sexless ancients. It would be difficult to imagine a superseded species of Wyndham being provided with the gentle death from discouragement of Shaw's elderly gentlemen. Perhaps this is because humanity is more unequivocally disgusting than it was forty years ago.

And with it all goes the Wyndham intellectual, the one consistently developing character. It is he who explains, for the reader's benefit, what can only be the workings of the author's intellect before the fable takes shape. The narrator is his 'feed'; he asks the questions that the reader is asking and so emphasises the identification of reader with narrator, the one person who will always be assumed to survive the disaster. *Reductio ad absurdum*, and the end result is an impasse resolvable only by an actual or symbolic intellectual death — by a means, incidentally, that in the circumstances is an act of questionable heroism, as double-edged as Wyndham sees all the cornerstones of a culture that has elevated relative values to absolutes. Intellectually, the author can see no way of fusing these two forces of matter and mystery, so he finds them always in conflict, mutually exclusive. 'There cannot be two absolutes,' says Bocker. But Western thought juggles with several. Thus a hatred of humanity as it is — though not as it could be — is the inevitable concomitant of Wyndham's apocalyptic vision.

That is why there remain two exciting and terrifying unanswered questions about the novels of John Wyndham. What will be the themes of the next one? Or can there never be another one now?

— © Literary Estate of Owen Webster 1975

— 'About Owen Webster' and 'John Wyndham as Novelist of Ideas', *SF Commentary*, No. 44/45, pp. 39–58

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# Last things

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It's been a shit of a year. Listen to the splat of shit hitting the fan (not just me or Elaine; almost *any* fan). The events of 11 September seemed like an alarum announcing Last Things. All sorts of things seem to be finishing, including my brilliant career.

In the final third of the year, Australia fell on its sword. A scummy bunch of knaves known as the Liberal-NP (conservative) Government manufactured a news event known as the '*Tampa Crisis*' in order to win what was considered an unwinnable election. The disgrace was not that the incident was created, but that enough people fell for it for us to be deprived of a badly needed change of government. I had to face the fact that maybe, just maybe, a majority of my fellow citizens really are paranoid pookyheads. I'm not sure I want to go out the door to ask them.

Elaine and I and many other fans around the world were shaken when, in late September, John Foyster, at the age of sixty, was stricken by a seemingly undiagnosable medical condition. John's story of his illness can be found in the most recent issues of his email fanzine, *eFNAC*.

We were shaken by the recent death of Terry Hughes at the age of fifty. It seems that many American fans had known of his condition for some time. News of his incurable brain cancer had not travelled to Australia, so Elaine and I felt keenly the loss of one of the finest people we have ever met. We remember the night that we, Terry and Art Widner spent at the home of Sally Yeoland and John Bangsund just after the end of Aussiecon II in September 1985. That night, Terry introduced John and Sally to the delights of Garrison Keillor's program, which was then being broadcast in Australia, and in turn we became addicts. Terry was a great fan writer, editor of *Mota*, one of the very best fanzines of the last thirty years, and co-founder editor of *Fuck the Tories*.

Given the above news, it seems almost perverse to say that nothing has caused us more pain than the loss of a small ginger cat named Theodore. A cat of very little brain, Theodore, during his sixteen years of life, cost us more in vet's bills and anxiety than all the other cats put together. Until a few years ago, he was allowed to roam beyond the borders of our garden, and did. He enjoyed mousing and fighting, but usually lost his fights. In 1989, an assailant put a claw right across the centre of one of Theodore's eyes. Hauled off to a small-animal ophthalmologist half way across Melbourne, he spent the next week with the eye completely stitched shut and the pupil immobilised, and a plastic bucket over his head to stop him scratching at the stitches. Oscar, his best friend, was confused. One end of Theodore smelt like Theodore, while the other end smelt of vet.

In early 1992, Theodore crawled out from under the house after disappearing for near twenty-four hours. He was very very ill. It was a weekend. Elaine took Theodore to our vet, who in turn sent him to the only emergency veterinary hospital that was open. In the taxi, Theodore was convulsing, barely breathing, and growing cold. He was only a few minutes from death. At the hospital, he was put on life support, and survived. He returned to our vet, then came home. He was recovering, but was unable to pee. We took him back to our local vet, who discovered that at the



Theodore: the portrait. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)



Theodore embattled: fitted with a plastic radar dish with cardboard extensions, 1992. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)



Extreme cuteness pose: Theodore (left) and his very good friend Oscar (right) when both were very young. (Photo: Elaine Cochrane.)

emergency hospital a faulty catheter had been inserted in Theodore's urethra. It had nicked the inside of the urethra, which as a result had become partially blocked. The vet put in another catheter and kept him there. When I visited, Theodore had not eaten for three days and looked completely miserable. I cried like a loon and asked what I could do. The vet told us about a company that hired out very large cages for convalescing pets. We hired one, put blankets in it, and brought Theodore home. For several weeks, he stayed mainly in the cage, with no control over his peeing, with a bucket over his head to stop him removing the catheter. (He succeeded several times.) General misery for all. The vet removed the catheter, and put Theodore on valium as a muscle relaxant, but his urethra was still blocked. The valium made Theodore into a happy cat. Elaine was still working a regular job, so for several months I was taking care of Theodore and giving him all his pills. Therefore he was the only one of our cats who ever became attached to me rather than Elaine. After several months, we realised that the valium treatment was not working. Theodore still could not pee properly, so he was given a gender reassignment operation (his urethra was shortened, and other obstructing bits removed).

He still liked fighting and mousing, but his only other major adventure was becoming stuck in a factory nearly two blocks away. We knew he was there because he bellowed back to Elaine when she called through the window. He would not emerge during the day because the sound of the machines was deafening. Elaine asked the foreman if she could leave some food for Theodore. We called him at the end of each day, but he stayed hidden. After four days, we discovered where he was hiding. After the machines stopped, the last of the staff had two minutes to leave the building before the doors were locked. On the fourth day, during that two minutes, I reached as far as I could behind a stack of pallets, just managed to grasp Theodore by the scruff of the neck, dragged him out, and put him into the cat box.

Theodore was very glad to be home, but we knew that, given half a chance, he would do it all again. That's when Elaine worked out how to secure all the fences so that the cats could not go over or under them.

Over the years, Theodore failed so often in his efforts at self-destruction that we thought he must be immortal. In August this year, the vet pointed out that he was losing weight steadily, and almost certainly had cancer. When, on a Sunday morning, Theodore began bleeding from the mouth, we thought that his last day had come, so we took him to an emergency veterinary clinic to be 'put down'. That vet found that Theodore's remaining tooth had abscessed badly, so he was bleeding into the mouth. Tooth removed, and rehydration preparation pumped into him, Theodore seemed to have staged yet another miraculous resurrection. He still wouldn't eat. Our local vet changed his antibiotic, and for a few days Theodore ate normally. Then he stopped. He didn't look particularly miserable, but he couldn't eat. He was now so thin that our vet could feel a lump in his belly. During his last two days, he did look very miserable, and on his last morning he could not even drink. When we took him on his final ride to see the vet, Theodore did not even protest. After he had given the final injection, the vet had us feel a huge lump in Theodore's belly, a very fast-growing cancer that had been the basis of his health problems for the previous two months.

Theodore was a bit of a dill, even by cat standards, but he was beautiful and sweet, and the only one who was ever *my* cat. But he was also a friend to Oscar and Polly. The house seems empty without him.

For the first time in several years, I've run out of work altogether. I'm told that many other freelance editors are also having great trouble finding work. I tell you this in case you fret because you don't receive another Gillespie fanzine for some time after *SFC 77* and *SET 2*.

2001 has been a shit of a year. 2002 can't be worse. Can it?

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# BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

## Books read since 3 September 2001

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### Ratings

\*\* Books recommended highly.

\* Books recommended.

👉 Books about which I have severe doubts.

\*\* **EARTH IS BUT A STAR: EXCURSIONS THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION TO THE FAR FUTURE**  
edited by Damien Broderick (2001; University of Western Australia Press 1-876268-54-9; 466 pp.)

*Earth Is But a Star* is a collection of fiction set in the far future, plus essays about authors or subject matter in the area. In this volume, Broderick's 'far future' occupies a territory somewhere between the underpopulated romantic landscapes of Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* series and that of the end of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. This 'dying earth' landscape is empty of people but rich in small inventions, and its inhabitants are not too worried about future possibilities. At least, that's the general impression I get from John Brunner's 'Earth Is But a Star', a very early Brunner novella from which the collection derives its name. The tone and landscape is Vancean, but the animation is that of the young and bright-eyed Brunner. I was anticipating a wide variety of far future possibilities, but there is no story from Cordwainer Smith, whose far future is the most cognitively estranged of them all. However, the highlight of the volume for me is Alice Turner's 'The Crimes and Glories of Cordwainer Smith', which deftly describes the Smithian mood and tone. The most inventive story in the book is Robert Silverberg's 'Dancers in the Time Flux'. The essays cover a wider territory than do the stories: those I particularly enjoy include Brian Stableford's 'Far Futures', Claire Briailey's 'Visions of the Far Future World' and Stanislaw Lem's 'On Stapledon's *The Star Maker*'. Rosaleen Love's 'Star Drover', which is both fiction and essay, completes the book.

\*\* **OMEGATROPIC**  
by Stephen Baxter (2001; British Science Fiction Association 0-9540788-0-2; 160 pp.)

Stephen Baxter gives lots of speeches. He seems to be generous in providing articles for fanzines, especially those published by the BSFA. This collection of essays makes entertaining reading, although most of the ideas outlined become more interesting when converted into Baxter fiction. Many of the essays offer tips about the way Baxter works as well as the ideas that grip him. The essay 'America's Moon' summarises many of the notions that went into his fiction about the near-future possibilities of space travel. One essay title, 'Rusting Gantries and Lawn Ornaments', has echoes for those who've read Baxter's *Titan*. The only two pieces of fiction are 'On the Side of a Hill' and 'Omeगतropic'.

\*\* **PHILIP K. DICK**  
by Andrew M. Butler  
(2000; Pocket Essentials 1-903047-29-3; 93 pp.)

\*\* **CYBERPUNK**  
by Andrew M. Butler  
(2000; Pocket Essentials 1-903047-28-5; 95 pp.)

Andy Butler gave me copies of these books when he was Australia, so I'm prejudiced towards them. I don't much like the very limited format within which Andy is forced to write. The exam cram-guide structure forces him to be careful with his words, but he gives the impression of wanting to say much more about each *Philip K. Dick* book than he is allowed to write here. Despite the format, Andy shows why reading Philip K. Dick is a necessary addiction.

I enjoyed *Cyberpunk* more than *Philip K. Dick* because I've read almost none of the books discussed. I feel free to avoid Bruce Sterling's wooden style altogether, because, thanks to Andrew Butler, I now know something of what he's writing about. Some writers mentioned, such as Justina Robson and Gwyneth Jones, I was going to read anyway — someday. Thanks to *Cyberpunk*, I can advance the day a bit. The real value of the 'Pocket Essentials' series, then, is for people who've never read the books (or, for most of the series, seen the films). Sales of books by Dick, Sterling, Gibson, Egan, etc. should rise dramatically throughout Britain.

\*\* **PASSAGE**  
by Connie Willis  
(2001; HarperCollins Voyager 0-00-711825-2; 594 pp.)

Paul Kincaid reviewed this book so comprehensively (given he did not want to commit spoilers) in a recent Acnestis mailing that there is little I can add — at least, not until everybody has read the book. As Paul tries to avoid explaining, the author lands a huge punch on the reader's snoot 150 pages from the end of this overlong book, but keeps the reader hurtling along anyway. Some reviewers complain about the level of repetition of seemingly minor events in this book, but don't ask themselves whether or not this is deliberate. The events of *Passage* take place on two main stage sets: if one of them is a metaphor (as explained in the text), why shouldn't the other be also a metaphor for the same aspect of existence?

\* **ADAM AND EVE AND PINCH ME**  
by Ruth Rendell  
(2001; Hutchinson 0-09-179414-5; 375 pp.)

To judge from her recent novels, Ruth Rendell is losing her grip. This book, like *A Sight for Sore Eyes*, features malign characters, and a malign view of them. This is not unusual for Rendell, but in the past she has always been able to organise her material so that she allows some piercing humanity that shine through the dark.

In *Adam and Even and Pinch Me* the characters have real substance, but the relationship between the three concurrent main characters and their stories is allowed to fall flat in the middle. I don't think it's merely that she's writing too much too quickly — in fact, she's slowed down quite abruptly in recent years — but that the bright scalpel gleam in the centre of her mind has begun to dull.

\*\* **PERCY GRAINGER**

by **John Bird (1976; Macmillan 0-333-22929-0; 317 pp.)**

Elaine put me off reading this book by saying it is written dully. However, Percy Grainger was so flamboyant a musician and composer that his life cannot be made dull. Bird's real literary failing is over-succinctness. The book has an abrupt, choppy quality — because probably the publisher's editor made the author chop much material from what was, I suspect, a much longer manuscript. Missing is some vital connecting link between the myriad of characters, all called 'Percy Grainger', who star in this book. Each Grainger is entertaining; some are infuriating, others are endearing, but all are incomprehensible. It's never clear how so highly talented an individual as Percy Grainger could have come to so many zany, inconsistent conclusions about music, life and the world. Yet, in making wrong conclusions, he often did startlingly useful things, such as crazily generous donations to up-and-coming musicians, and his early twentieth-century recordings of English folk music. *Percy Grainger* is filled with great yarns; perhaps Bird's recently revised version will fill in the story that should be here.

☞ **ICE: THE WINTERING, BOOK 1**

by **Stephen Bowkett**

(2001; Orion 1-85881-873-7; 232 pp.)

To judge from the first two pages of *Ice*, it should be an intense, rich book about people surviving in harsh snowy country. However, within the first ten pages the narrative is drowned in a forest of Capitalisations and clichés. The characters live in a town in a valley cut off from the rest of the world, and almost every aspect of the town and the main characters' lives is ruled by rigid rules and Mysterious Authorities. We know from the start that the main characters will break out of the valley, and on the last page of this volume I will discover something that will transform their view of the world. Read all about it if you manage to get past page 10.

\*\* **THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER AND CLAY**

by **Michael Chabon**

(2000; Picador USA 0-312-28299-0; 639 pp.)

The Novel of the Year, which tells its tale with such bravado and joy and delight in life's surprises that I was disappointed to run slam bang into the last page. It tells the story of two young blokes who become illustrators and writers of comics during the 1930s in New York. It could just as easily have been the story of the SF writers of the period — *Kavalier and Clay*'s tale of constant imminent poverty, dusty offices in rundown buildings and cheapskate publishers could easily have been drawn from Damon Knight's *The Futurians* or Fred Pohl's *The Way the Future Was*. *Kavalier and Clay* eulogises the comic strip, New York, the American immigrant experience, and art and love and the whole damn thing. It preaches the need for escapism, yet never escapes from looking at the difficulties of life during the late 1930s and 1940s. This is funny epic writing, an

antidote for all the dullness and thuggery in the world.

\*\* **MAGIC HOUR**

by **Jack Cardiff**

(1996; Faber & Faber 0-571-19274-2; 258 pp.)

I've given this two stars because it's very entertaining. However, it tells us almost nothing about Jack Cardiff. Cardiff tells a lot of stories — about film-making and film stars and directors and crazy adventures — that are so apocryphal they must be true. For instance, Cardiff tells the full story of the *African Queen* shoot in Africa, during which the film-makers and stars came closer to death than their fictional counterparts. Only Huston and Bogart were trouble-free, because they drank whiskey and never water. Cardiff tells a few of the printable Errol Flynn stories. He admits to falling in love with Sophia Loren, but draws the curtain over most other personal matters. Cardiff shows complete enthusiasm about the process of making films. He provides the only clear description I've ever seen of the three-strip Technicolor method that was still used until the mid 1950s. The process is much more ingenious than I'd guessed. *Magic Hour* is a necessary book for the film buff, but I would trade it for the warts-and-all book Cardiff should have written.

☞ **THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS**

by **Richard Cowper**

(1974; VGSF 0-575-04693-7; 255 pp.)

I read this in the 1980 Gollancz revival paperback edition, and I see somewhere that Gollancz will revive it again in the SF Masterworks series. Why, fghodsake? This is one of the all-time stinkers of British SF. It starts okay, with a reasonably entertaining take on several John Wyndham themes rolled into one (future cold world; apocalyptic sky fires; Midwich-cuckooey children). Instead of Wyndham's rather dour realism, however, Cowper gives us the most cloying and ludicrous wish-fulfilment, starring super-beings of which the main character is surprised and delighted to find he is the superest! Too bad that vast numbers of people have been killed during the world transformation. The ending is also silly.

\*\* **RED DRAGON**

\*\* **THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS**

by **Thomas Harris (1982; 1988 (1992);**

**Treasure Press 1- 850520231-6; 534 pp.)**

I'm not sure these novels aren't as much fantasy as a crappy book like *The Twilight of Briareus*, but Thomas Harris's fantasy works because he believes he is plunging his scalpel into a deep vein of reality — and so do we while we're reading the books. These events couldn't happen to us, of course. But, Harris says, they *could* happen to us. I, the author, can imagine how the serial killers think, and I know how the police officers react, and I can tell you how you, the reader, would react if you were one of the victims. This is powerful magic, with every move and prop meticulously planned and revealed. Hannibal Lector, who has a bit part in the first novel, *Red Dragon*, and hasn't yet been revealed as a cannibal, is an inspired creation, but so are Harris's serial killer and haunted hunter. *Red Dragon* was made into a great movie, Michael Mann's *Manhunter*, but for some reason the film leaves out the best scene in the book, its last.

Jonathan Demme, in his film of *The Silence of the Lambs*, caught everything that's brilliant in the book. His casting decisions are inspired, as is his film craft.

What no film-maker can achieve is Harris's triumphant Peeping Tom effect, by which we enter completely into the experience of every character, good, bad and creepy. These novels are not works of realism, but they're a lot more memorable than most realistic fiction.

\*\* **THE COMPLETE RODERICK**

by John Sladek (1980; 1983 (2001);

Gollancz SF Masterworks 1- 85798-340-8; 611 pp.)

I read *Roderick* when it first appeared, and enjoyed it greatly. I bought *Roderick at Random* when it was published some years later, but never read it. I did not discover until recently that the two are in fact one book, broken up for odd reasons for American publication, and never reunited until now. However, they do not add up to one satisfying novel. *Roderick* almost succeeds on its own. The *Roderick at Random* section fails as a structure, and adds little to the original premise. Yet to read the whole book is to be flung into a tumble-dryer of an America that was in Sladek's future when he wrote the book, but now reads as documentary. Roderick, as you probably know, is the little lost robot who, like the main character of *AI*, is designed to be a boy with human emotions, but who is perpetually pitched from one group of people to another. Some of these people want to destroy Roderick, but he has a Gladstone Gander-like ability to deflect disaster onto his pursuers. Sladek preaches against a world dependent on machines, but his sermon is a manic dialogue between a vast cast of insane people who are perpetually bumping into each other or bumping each other off. The plot is a perpetual-motion machine, not an epic. But it's all so amazingly accurate that I found myself chortling, page after page, and unable to put the book down. I'm not sure that what I was reading can be called a novel.

\*\* **MUNGO: THE MAN WHO LAUGHS**

by Mungo MacCallum

(2001; Duffy & Snellgrove 1-876631-14-7; 392 pp.)

I don't read many books about Australian politics, as most books about Australian politics are much less interesting than their subject matter. As many writers have discovered over the years, if you tell the hilarious truth about Australian politicians, you get hit by million-dollar libel writs. This possibility appears not to have worried Mungo MacCallum, the most amusing and ferocious Australian political reporter I've read. Part sketch-map autobiography, part sweeping-perspective history, *Mungo: The Man Who Laughs* tells of a man blessed with a long pedigree, though not a lot of money; with enough chutzpah to take on the world, but enough generosity of spirit to turn class traitor and support the Labor Party during its most colourful years. After a university career that rarely involved attending lectures or tutorials, Mungo fell into the newspaper business, trying every sort of reporting until in the 1960s he landed the job of Canberra correspondent for *The Australian*, for a brief period a radical newspaper until Rupert Murdoch fired the editor; then *Nation Review*, the most radical newspaper Australian has had since the 1880s. Mungo liked being at the centre of national politics, especially as his team, the Labor Party, was undergoing reform, nearly won power in 1969, and after the Liberal Party shook itself apart, triumphed in 1972. Upon gaining power, Whitlam's Labor Party also went into self-destruction mode. Mungo was at his best when yapping at the heels of the Liberal-Country Party,

and admits that Whitlam's win in 1972 left him and *Nation Review* in a quandary. Should its pundits continue to tell the unholy truth about the party in power, although that party was Labor? Or should it pull in its horns, defending Whitlam against his many enemies? This quandary was never resolved. By the time Whitlam was sacked by the Governor-General, on 11 November 1975, *Nation Review's* circulation was on the skids, and Mungo MacCallum lost much of his taste for political reporting. He moved to *The Age* in 1977, and more or less retired a few years later. A pity. We desperately needed a Mungo MacCallum to cover the 2001 election, so that his humour might keep up from weeping.

☞ **ANGEL OF RUIN**

by Kim Wilkins

(2001; HarperCollins 0-7322-6789-7; 518 pp.)

Kim Wilkins has gained quite a reputation as a storyteller for her recent supernatural thrillers. Unfortunately, *Angel of Ruin*, her latest very thick novel, is not interesting. The first chapter (and other framing chapters) has real energy. The modern character, skint in London, and needing a subject for a book, begins to interview a ragged old woman about her life's story, although her local coven (her group of friends) warn her that she will suffer a curse from listening to the woman's story. The story itself occupies most of the novel. It's set in the seventeenth century. The main characters are William Blake's daughters. The telling does not convince me, because it has none of the tone of the speech of the period. I became so bored by the endless goings-on that I gave up after 150 pages. Perhaps you will read *Angel of Ruin* to the end.

\*\* **ONE FINE DAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT**

by Christopher Brookmyre

(1999; Warner 0-7515-3183-9; 392 pp.)

\* **BOILING A FROG**

by Christopher Brookmyre

(2000; Little, Brown 0-316-85190-6; 390 pp.)

Elizabeth and Paul Billinger put me onto Christopher Brookmyre's work, and Andy Butler presented me with *Boiling a Frog* when he visited Australia recently. But Brookmyre does not write for the fans. He tries to change approach and subject matter in each book. For instance, some of the strengths of his first novel became weaknesses in his second. *One Fine Day in the Middle of the Night*, his fourth, is an almost perfect mixture of humour, crime, interpersonal relationships, and conspiracy, but *Boiling a Frog* is so badly organised that Brookmyre almost destroys his own work.

*One Fine Day* begins with a gang of bloodthirsty, incompetent crooks about to carry out their One Last Job. It moves to a policeman who, on the day he retires, is suddenly hit on the head by an airborne severed arm. The main characters, however, are a varied group of average Scottish young adults who have been invited, by a former student they've all forgotten, to a school reunion on an oil rig converted into a luxury hotel. Things go crazy during the reunion when the crooks invade the oil rig. The ending is brilliant.

In *Boiling the Frog*, we meet Parlabane (the main character of Brookmyre's first two novels) at the moment when he is about to be flung into jail. The descriptions of life in jail are the best I've seen in fiction. Unfortunately the story moves — or slows to a stop — as we are introduced to a sanctimonious MP, several crooked Catholic clerics, and many pages of

description of Scottish Labour politics. Brookmyre's continuing structural weakness is that he wants to tell his story from both viewpoints — from that of both the conspirators and the victims. He makes it difficult to write a suspense novel. Brookmyre's method succeeds in *One Fine Day*, but fails in *Boiling the Frog*. He really should have saved the baddies until the end. Still, it's difficult to think of any current genre novelist who writes funnier dialogue than Brookmyre's.

\*\* **THE CONSUL'S FILE**

by Paul Theroux

(1977; Houghton Mifflin 0-395-25399-3; 209 pp.)

I'd been told that Theroux's reputation is as a writer with an ungenerous attitude to his fellow human beings. That's why I've stored *The Consul's File* on the 'Doubtfuls' bookshelf for many years, and didn't expect to enjoy it. I was wrong. *The Consul's File* is a series of short stories that add up to a fractured novel. An American consul in Malaysia, the fictional writer of these pieces, tries to make himself as inconspicuous as possible in the small provincial centre to which he's been sent. He expects to find a lot of Somerset Maugham characters, but instead finds a lot of eccentrics who would like to be thought of as Somerset Maugham characters. They're all somehow at odds with themselves and the country in which they've chosen to live. Even the Chinese and Malaysians are ill at ease in Malaysia. Only the true natives, who live in the densest forest, have some claim to the country. In this book, people often go mad or go missing. The consul scribbles away at his desk, capturing their stories. We still know little about him at the end of the book. The best of these stories are succinct, deftly plotted, and often

feature ghosts of one kind or another. The most powerful stories are only a few pages long. *The Consul's File* is no longer a 'doubtful'; it goes back on the 'keep' shelf.

\*\* **ST PATRICK'S BED**

by Terence M. Green

(Forge 0-765-30043-5; 2001; 220 pp.)

It's always a challenge when an author sends you his or her book to review, especially if the author is Terry Green, long-time correspondent to Gillespie fanzines. I've really enjoyed his most recent two books, *Shadow of Ashland* and *A Witness to Life*. What if I didn't like the new one? Well, I do, but not because it fulfils expectations raised by reading the earlier books. *Ashland* and *Witness* each have a strong supernatural elements as well as filling in bits of the story of the Radey-Nolan family. *St Patrick's Bed* tells of the same family, and has a natty ghost story hidden in it, but at heart it's an ambitious book about the most interesting subject of all: how best can we live, given the limited choices offered to most of us? Leo Nolan, the narrator, seems to be simple chap, with simple tastes and options, living in Toronto. In fact, his rich imagination and clear memories entrap him within a mind web of complex family relationships. Life becomes a set of ambiguous possibilities, especially as his 'son' is not his, but the son of his second wife. Green writes in simple, short sentences. The temptation is to read this as a simple book, but its multiple echoes and possibilities give it an epic scope. At 220 pages, *St Patrick's Bed* is one of few recent novels that has the right length.

— Bruce Gillespie, 21 December 2001



**And now a toast to all of you from all of us:** Monthly Film Night at Iola and Race's, July 2001 (left to right): Bill Wright, Bruce Gillespie, Merv Binns, Race Mathews (hidden), Bruno Kautzner, Yvonne Rousseau, John Foyster, Dick Jenssen, Clare Coney, Peter Nicholls, Lee Harding, Andrew Gerrand, Madeleine Harding, Sean McMullen, Catherine McMullen, Rob Gerrand, Carey Handfield, Trish McMullen, Iola Mathews. Seated: Justin Ackroyd. (Photo: Helena Binns.)