

BIOGRAPHY

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris (1903–69) was born in England and turned to writing for American pulp magazines in 1925. He wrote many novels and stories in the 1930s, drawing on his name's almost endless supply of pseudonyms (John Beynon Harris, John Beynon, one book was billed as a collaboration between John Wyndham and Lucas Parkes); "John Wyndham"'s *The Day of the Triffids* in 1951 was hailed as the work of a new writer. And in a sense it was: WWII had interrupted Wyndham's career—he served as a cipher operator in the Royal Corps of Signals, and participated in the Normandy landings—and after the war Wyndham's writing languished. But the nuclear era and the Cold War brought new seriousness into science fiction, and *The Day of the Triffids*, which reinvented the English disaster novel, was an enormous success. His other most famous book is *The Midwich Cuckoos*, filmed twice as *The Village of the Damned*. Stephen King called Wyndham "perhaps the best writer of science fiction that England has ever produced."

THE CHRYSALIDS

by John Wyndham
Introduction by Christopher Priest

\$14.00/\$16.50 CAN / 978-1-59017-292-6

"It is quite simply a page-turner, maintaining suspense to the very end and vividly conjuring the circumstances of a crippled and menacing world, and of the fear and sense of betrayal that pervade it. The ending...leaves the reader pondering how truly ephemeral our version of civilization is..." —*The Boston Globe*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The Chrysalids (previously titled *Re-Birth* in U.S. editions) is a Cold War classic of science fiction that is as relevant as ever in today's world of genetic engineering, religious intolerance, and global warming.

After a nuclear apocalypse, Labrador in northeastern Canada has a warm climate and is home to a primitive agricultural community. The district is cut off from the rest of the world by hellish Badlands and structured around strict, intolerant religious beliefs: in their world view, "the Tribulation" was a punishment from God for the sins of "the Old People," like Noah's Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and genetic variation and mutation (which is rampant in this new world) must be stamped out because "The Norm is the Image of God." Any deviant plant or animal is burned and killed as an "Offense," while a human being with any mutation, however harmless, is a "Blasphemy" to be executed, or sterilized and banished to the Fringes.

David Storm, a boy when the book opens, is the son of one of the most intolerant villagers. He meets a friend with a sixth toe and begins to understand the nature of fear and oppression; he too has a secret, with far greater potential to corrupt his closed society, and when a younger sister is born with even greater powers, David and a small group of other young people are forced to flee for their lives.

Despite the futuristic setting, *The Chrysalids* has Wyndham's trademark atmospheric realism, strong character development, and fresh, clear writing. It is a timeless novel of childhood and growing up, of young love struggling against a narrow-minded, bigoted environment. It is also a brilliant fable of contemporary society, and the limits of human tolerance, set in a distant future which is also instantly recognizable as the world we all live in.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The great connection in *The Chrysalids* is between post-nuclear (or, today, post-genetic engineering) fear of mutation, religious intolerance, and the fear of outsiders and otherness common to almost every society. Do you believe Wyndham's implicit argument that these fears go together, that they are forms of the same thing? How do they feed off of each other in society today?
2. Like many writers during the Cold War (Orwell, Le Carré, etc.), Wyndham contrasts individualism and collectivism. But the opposition is complicated in *The Chrysalids*, because the outcast heroes are telepathic, in an invisible society of their own—they work together and are united by bonds of love and family. What do you think Wyndham's ultimate stance is about the social collective? Is it necessary (for safety, for defense)? Does it create the problems it tries to defend against?

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

The Inverted World

By Christopher Priest
Afterword by John Clute

The War of the Worlds

By H.G. Wells with illustrations
by Edward Gorey

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*

James Calder, *In a Family Way*

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*

Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*

Andre Norton [Alice Mary Norton], *Star Man's Son a.k.a. Daybreak—2250 A.D.*

John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids*

3. The Fringes is another fascinating complication in the book: the villagers see it as a land of untouchable outcasts and bogeymen, but it becomes more and more sympathetic as the violent intolerance in Waknuk becomes clearer. You might expect the people of the Fringes to turn out to be outlaw-heroes in the book, but the “spider-man” is hardly a positive character, and Sophie is wiped out with the rest of them. Why doesn’t Wyndham make the Fringes people more sympathetic? Why doesn’t he let them live?
4. Wyndham is known for reacting against the “galactic gangsters space opera” style of much science fiction, and *The Chrysalids* is a tale of growing up, a love story, and a family drama as much as a science-fiction book. How do you think the science-fiction elements add to (or detract from) the rest of the novel?
5. David says near the beginning that children learn bits and pieces without the pattern; only later can they fit the parts together. He doesn’t, at first, connect his catechism of the true image to what it means for Sophie. Do you think this is true about children, or in general? What kind of experience does David (or anyone) need in order to learn to see how the social system affects the individuals caught up in it? What makes Uncle Axel, or Aunt Harriet, different from David’s father?
6. Uncle Axel argues that “a lot of people saying that a thing is so doesn’t prove that it’s so . . . nobody, nobody really knows what is the true image.” Later, the Fringes person who captures David, Rosalind, and Petra says the Devil lives in the village, not the Fringes: “Arrogant, they are. Want to be like the Old People. Tribulation hasn’t taught ’em a thing. The Old People thought they were the tops too. . . . God doesn’t have any last word . . . he changes and grows, like everything else that’s alive.” Which argument do you find more compelling, Axel’s skepticism or the Fringes person’s anti-authoritarian certainty? Which side, if either, do you think Wyndham comes down on?
7. Michael feels the most dissatisfied with their life of hiding: “We had a gift, a sense which, Michael complained bitterly, should have been a blessing, but was little better than a curse. The stupidest Norm was happier; he could feel that he belonged.” But at the end, Michael returns to Waknuk to fetch Deborah. How did you feel about Michael’s choice at the end? What do you think will happen to him and Deborah?
8. The web-like weapon at the end of the book leads to imagery of metamorphosis and rebirth (a chrysalis is a pupal caterpillar in the stage before it emerges from the cocoon as a butterfly), even though it suffocates and kills everyone except the heroes. David, Rosalind, and Petra are saved from their enemies, but how are they reborn?
9. “It is not pleasant to kill any creature,” the Zeeland woman argues at the end of the book, “but to pretend that one can live without doing so is self-deception.” Why does Wyndham make her speechify in what David rightly calls an “overwhelming” rhetorical style? Do you agree with her position? Is it any different from the villagers’ arrogance that they alone are on the true path—is the new society going to be any different from the old one?
10. How does the utopian new race of Zeelanders, Petra, David, and Rosalind fit with the rest of the book’s attitudes about tolerance? How does the book—how can anyone—reconcile tolerance of difference and change with the fact that the new world might replace the current one?