

Where Even Gifts Are Censored

Introducing John Wyndham's dystopian classic to a new generation of young readers

by Edwin Frank

I am delighted to introduce you to a new (old) book that I think has its place among such dystopian classics currently taught in schools as *Fahrenheit 451*, *A Brave New World*, and *1984*. *The Chrysalids*, by John Wyndham, offers an especially vivid picture of a society ruled by dogmatism, with a special resonance, I think, for your young adult readers.

The book is set in the future, following a nuclear conflict that, even a good hundred years after it took place, has left most of the world a smoldering radioactive heap. David, the narrator and hero of the book, lives in Labrador in a small agrarian community that had the good fortune to be

far enough away from the center of power to survive the disaster. It is a community of religious fundamentalists and biblical literalists, who suppose that the destruction visited upon their forebears was a divine punishment. In particular, they are convinced that their ancestors must have offended God by adopting a tolerant attitude to genetic mutation. Didn't God create the earth and all its inhabitants, assigning each a distinctive form? Didn't He make Adam and Eve in his own image? Any deviation from the divine blueprint, however slight, must be considered an abomination—a heresy; it is to be cursed, extirpated, and atoned for. Inspectors go from farm to farm to make sure that the crops and livestock conform to rule, and blasphemous plants and animals are incinerated to the singing of hymns. Human deviants are publicly and ruthlessly sacrificed. Anyone who has any reason to be thought abnormal lives in dread of exposure. Those who cannot hide flee to the so-called fringes, radioactive badlands where, between banditry and hunting and gathering, they eke out a precarious living.

David is still a child when the story begins, and much of it is devoted to his gradual discovery of the harshness and arbitrariness of his people's protocols. He finds himself increasingly alienated from his punitive father and submissive mother: people who, in the name of righteousness, have emptied themselves of fellow feeling. His situation is complicated further when he discovers something about himself: that he, along with a number of other younger people, has the power of telepathy. It is an invisible attribute (except of course to those who share it) and one of the most powerful sections of the book—crucial to the plot—concerns one maturing girl's agonized inability to accept a difference that will put her forever odds with family, friends, and community.

Wyndham's depiction of dogmatism and its dynamics is brilliantly astute, as is his dramatization of the dawning reflection and growing rebellion in David, while the future he has imagined is one that finds many echoes in the present and past. In the mid-1950s, when the book first appeared, the fanatical ideas of purity and intolerance of difference would have immediately brought to mind both Nazi racism and Communist dogmatism. In the midst of the Cold War, and not long after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the prospect of massive nuclear destruction loomed large in the public psyche. But Wyndham's book transcends its historical moment to speak directly to our time. The threat of nuclear destruction is, after all, only an extreme expression of the general contingency of modern life—in which jobs, communities, ways of life, species, and whole biospheres lie under the threat of destruction; Wyndham was remarkably prescient to have imagined that this shared experience could lead to a revival of religious fundamentalism. *The Chrysalids* is also remarkable for anticipating the role that questions of ecology and biology have come to play in modern politics and life; in the controversies that rage over issues as various as abortion, genetically modified food, cloning, and euthanasia; even that perennial favorite, the teaching of evolution.

The conclusion of *The Chrysalids* finds David and his second-sighted brethren flying towards a new future, where the blind superstition with which they grew up will presumably be transcended. The book, in other words, ends on a straightforward note of faith in progress. It even goes so far as to construe evolution as a process of improvement rather than of adaptation. That this fundamentally misconstrues the scientific understanding of evolution misses the point. What is of greater interest to me here is that this affirmation of Wyndham's is no less an article of faith, and no more open to proof, than David's father's cruel and ruinous strictures. Reason, too, ends in devotion. Then again, perhaps Wyndham is not in fact as sanguine as I suppose. Towards the end of the book it is suggested that the higher form of life the new psychically improved generations now constitute will, inevitably, come into conflict (and presumably destroy) their more blinkered ancestral stock. Simply

put: we are all last year's model in the making—a suitably troubling conclusion to an exciting and rewardingly complex book. ■



About the Writer

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THE CHRYSALIDS

by John Wyndham

The Chrysalids, written in 1955, was John Wyndham's third major novel and his most unusual. This classic story is a perfectly conceived and constructed work from the classic era of science fiction.

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