

The Great Reading Adventure 2004

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A guide to
**The Day of the
Triffids**

The Great Reading Adventure 2004

*A guide to **The Day of the Triffids***

Melanie Kelly



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Collier's illustration for 'Revolt of the Triffids'

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Introduction

On 6 March 2003, World Book Day, Bristol launched its first Great Reading Adventure with a citywide reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. During the project thousands of copies of the book were distributed free of charge to schools, libraries, the business community and members of the public, and a serialisation was published daily in Bristol's *Evening Post*, illustrated with pictures sent in by local children. Bristol Library Service recorded a substantial increase in loans of *Treasure Island* material; the book was used by reading groups and in literacy initiatives throughout the city; pirate-themed activities took place in schools and colleges, libraries, the Royal Bristol Children's Hospital, local businesses and other sites; and a series of film shows and lectures was held at the University of Bristol and Arncliffe. On launch day itself, actors disguised as marauding pirates sailed into the heart of Bristol where they were greeted by hundreds of local children, who received free books and were entertained by jugglers, sea shanties and cannon fire. All ages, all reading abilities and all social groups took part in what was the first citywide reading project on this scale to be held in the UK.

The Bristol Great Reading Adventure is now an annual event. The 2004 book is *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham. The mission of the project remains the same: to encourage more reading and writing by the widest range of people in Bristol.



Although *The Day of the Triffids* has no direct association with Bristol, it addresses themes that are important to a city that is imbued with a spirit of discovery. The book can be used to encourage learning about Bristol as a place for science and innovation, creativity and green initiatives. It can also promote debate on the future of Bristol and its role as a centre for new technologies. However, it is first and foremost a thrilling and chilling tale of mysterious lights in the night sky, mass blindness, a new world order and the unforgettable triffids, the seven-foot tall carnivorous plants that have been created in a secret biological experiment and are now taking over the planet.

This guide will tell you about the plot and characters of *The Day of the Triffids*, the life of John Wyndham, and the science fiction genre. It also provides an insight into two of the book's central themes: humanity's relationship with nature, and surviving a global catastrophe. It includes information on the different editions of the book and related resource material, and questions to use during group discussions or to think about while you read. An expanded version of the guide, including additional background information, a more extensive bibliography and full references for material quoted in the text, is available on the Great Reading Adventure website at www.bristolreads.com.

So join up for the 2004 Great Reading Adventure. Read the book that all Bristol is talking about and join your family, friends, neighbours and fellow Bristolians in the discussions and events. And beware that rustling in the privet hedge – it could be a triffid!

The Day of the Triffids – Synopsis

When a day that you happen to know is Wednesday starts off by sounding like Sunday, there is something seriously wrong somewhere.

Opening line of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*

Publicity still from *The Day of the Triffids* (1963)



Bill Masen awoke in his hospital bed, his eyes bandaged, with an uneasy feeling that something was wrong. It was unusually quiet and, although it had gone eight, no one had come to his room, despite his frequent ringing of the bell.

He was in the hospital because some poison from a triffid sting had splashed into his eyes. A triffid was a carnivorous plant that grew to around seven feet tall, was able to walk on its three-pronged root and produced a high quality oil. Triffids mainly lived on insects, which were trapped in a sticky substance at the base of their funnel-like cup. However, they also possessed a sting that could lash out ten feet and kill a human. Once they had struck their victim, they settled down until the body began to putrefy, at which time they could remove decaying flesh with their stinging tendril.

As Bill lay waiting for someone to come, he thought back to the previous evening. There had been a fabulous display of brilliant green lights in the sky, which were thought to have been caused by comet debris. As the night passed, they were visible across the world. Bill could not see the lights himself because of his bandages, which were due to be removed that day. As the clocks had struck nine and still no one had come, he decided to risk removing the bandages himself and to find out what had caused the break in the hospital routine.

When he got out of his room he discovered that everyone in the hospital had been struck blind. A mob milled hopelessly in front of the main entrance and Bill witnessed a doctor commit suicide by jumping from his fifth-floor window. Unwilling to fight through the crowd, Bill found a side door and walked out into a street of abandoned vehicles. He went to a bar where a drunken landlord said that everyone who saw the green lights was blind.

Bill decided to walk into central London where he saw newly blind people struggling to cope with the strange situation. Bill rescued a sighted woman who had been captured by a blind man and was being forced to act as his eyes. Her name was Josella Playton. Bill accompanied her home where they discovered that some triffids had killed her father and the family servants.

The couple returned to the city centre, breaking into shops to get clothes and triffid guns, and taking over a luxurious flat in Clerkenwell. During the night they observed a light shining on the tower of London University's Senate House. In the morning they drove to the university, and discovered a crowd of blind people at the locked gates. They were led by a sighted man who berated those inside for failing to help in the search for food. He seemed to think that someone would come to 'clear this bloody mess up' and that in the meantime it was the responsibility of the sighted to make sure as many people survived as possible. The crowd was dispersed by gunfire, and Bill and Josella joined those inside the university building, a group of about 35, of which 28 could see. They were organised by a man named Michael Beadley.

That night, Coker, the man who was arguing at the gates, staged a raid on the university and took away about 20 of the sighted people, including Bill and Josella. He kept them isolated from one another and assigned them to different districts of the city where they were to organise the distribution of food until rescue came. Bill was chained to two blind men to prevent his escape, but it was his sense of guilt that most effectively kept him bound to his group. He lost a few people to triffid stings when they searched for supplies in shops near Hampstead Heath. More devastating, however, around the fifth day, a plague-like disease broke out and the next morning he awoke to find that those still free of the disease had abandoned the base camp. All he was left with were the dead and rapidly dying.



Publicity still from *The Day of the Triffids* (1963)

As there was nothing he could do to help the victims, Bill made his way to Westminster, Josella's district. He learned from a dying blind man that the plague had also taken hold of Josella's group and that she had eventually left. The only place he could think to go to now was the university and he hoped that Josella had thought the same. The place was empty but he found an address – Tynsham Manor, near Devizes – chalked on a wall and decided to head there the next day. While he waited for morning, Coker appeared, admitting he was wrong and saying that he would go with Bill to Tynsham. London was finished.

Bill was disappointed to find that there were only a few remnants of the university group at Tynsham Manor. These were the ones who were shocked by some of Beadley's radical ideas about the need for women to have as many children as possible. They were led by Miss Durrant who intended to run 'a clean, decent community with standards'. The others from the original group, including all the sighted men, had gone away to form their own community elsewhere. No one could tell him if Josella was among them.

Bill decided to continue his search and was told that Beadley was heading for Beaminster in Dorset. Coker said he would leave too as the community at the manor was doomed. Entering Beaminster, they were stopped by a man carrying a rifle. He was part of a group of six holed up in a fortified manor, expecting any day to be faced by armed hordes from the city looking for food. They had not seen Beadley's group but offered to help in the search. They split up so they could cover more ground between them but only found two lone individuals who were brought back to the manor. After a few more days of fruitless searching, Coker said their situation was hopeless and that they should go back to Tynsham and try to organise the community there properly.

Bill suddenly remembered that Josella had mentioned her friends' farmhouse on the Sussex Downs, which she said would be a good place to aim for when they were making their initial plans to leave London. He said goodbye to Coker and headed for Sussex. En route he picked up a girl called Susan, who was about nine or ten years old.

At last he and Josella were reunited. She was with the owners of the farmhouse, Dennis and Mary Brent, and their friend Joyce Taylor. All three were blind. Bill realised they could not join the others at Tynsham for the moment as Joyce was recovering from a triffid sting to her

CROSSBRED TRIFFID by ME



One of Wyndham's triffid sketches

hand and Mary was about to give birth. After three weeks, Mary's daughter was born and Joyce was much stronger than before so Bill drove to Tynsham. He intended to make arrangements with Coker about moving there. He returned to say that the plague had spread and that the manor had been abandoned by those still able to travel.

Bill now saw that their only option was to stay where they were. He built a double layer fence around the property to keep out triffids and tried to learn the rudiments of agriculture so they might stand a chance of surviving once the processed food ran out. After a year, he risked returning to London for supplies and continued to go back occasionally until the fourth year when it had become too dangerous: the rumble of his vehicle caused the crumbling buildings to collapse around him. In the second year Josella gave birth to a son, David.

The triffids continued to increase in number and to crowd around the fence. By the sixth year the roads and vehicles were deteriorating, and the petrol supplies were running out. One day a helicopter flew overhead and Susan signalled to it. The pilot, Ivan, was part of the original university group. Having failed to create a sustainable community on the mainland because of the constant threat of triffid attack, they had now settled on the Isle of Wight. Ivan had been flying over the mainland to find people who might want to join the island community, but very few were interested. One party who had joined them was Coker's.

Bill and the others planned to move to the island at the end of summer. However, they received an unwelcome visit from a man called Torrence who was accompanied by a number of armed men. He declared himself to be the Chief Executive Officer of the Emergency Council for the South-Eastern Region of Britain, which was based in Brighton. His role was to establish self-sufficient units, living off the land, with one sighted person for every ten blind, plus children. He declared that the farm must support two units. Bill and Josella could stay but Susan would be taken away to Brighton until she was ready to run a unit of her own. Bill disliked this proposed feudal system and thought it would not work, but he pretended to go along with the idea. A meal was served and the guests plied with alcohol. That night, while Torrence and his men slept off the effects of the drink, Bill and his party escaped. Looking back they saw the triffids surge through the gap they had made in the fence.

The book ends on the Isle of Wight, with Bill leading a team conducting biological research, hoping that they can find a selective killer that will destroy the triffids.

Principal Characters

Bill Masen

Bill Masen is the narrator of the book. In the foreword to the original manuscript, he is described as 'an ordinary man of his time, reacting as an ordinary man'. His tone is generally calm and intelligent, but there is an emotional undercurrent as he remembers feeling afraid, depressed and frustrated. On the first day, when he does not fully understand what has happened, he is a little excited about the prospect of living in a new world, saying 'I was emerging as my own master, and no longer a cog'. However, this 'sense of release was tempered with a growing realization of the grimness that might lie ahead' as he became aware of the scale of the disaster. Civilisation is on the point of collapse. He tries to be led by his head rather than his heart, but he occasionally feels a nostalgic melancholy for the life that has been lost and he cannot bear the sense of loneliness that overwhelms him when he is on his own. Although they come from different social circles and it is unlikely their paths would have crossed if life had continued as before, he and Josella seem to form a mutually supportive partnership.

Josella Playton

Looking at Josella while she recovers from her initial scare, Bill characterises her as someone who would not have applied her strength 'to anything more important than hitting balls, dancing, and, probably, restraining horses'. However, she adapts well to the change in circumstance, giving sensible suggestions about where they should go when they leave London, making her own way to Sussex and settling down to the practicalities of subsistence living. Josella is quicker than Bill to realise the implications of what Beadley and the committee have said about women needing to have babies. She appreciates that a whole set of moral assumptions have been called into question by the disaster and has no qualms about sharing Bill with other women in order to increase the number of children born. She sees this as something that will justify the miracle of their being alive and seems to undergo some kind of spiritual awakening, while remaining level-headed about what needs to be done. Professor David Ketterer, who is writing a critical biography of Wyndham, says that the character was based on Wyndham's first cousin, Dorothy Joan Parkes.

Howard Keel as Bill Masen and Nicole Maurey as Miss Durrant, publicity still, *The Day of the Triffids* (1963)



Coker

Bill finds Coker an anomaly. Listening to Coker argue outside the university gates, Bill says: 'His voice was a curious mixture of the rough and the educated so that it was hard to place him – as though neither style seemed quite natural to him, somehow.' In a class-ridden society, accent is a key to social standing. Coker is illegitimate which made him 'kind of sour about things' when he was young. He went to political meetings and was taken along to 'arty-political sorts of parties'. He got tired of being laughed at for the way he spoke so acquired an education and learned to 'talk the kind of lingo they're accustomed to taking seriously'. His idealism leads him to attempt to sabotage the university group's escape plan. However, once he accepts that there is no one coming to sort things out, he proves to be perceptive about what is required to keep the remnants of humanity going. In this, he has a greater sense of urgency than Bill.

Susan

As they drive together to Sussex, Bill at first feels he should shield Susan from the terrible sights they pass but comes to realise that 'children have a different convention of the fearful until they have been taught the proper things to be shocked at'. Having seen her younger brother, Tommy, killed Susan hates the triffids and makes a meticulous study of her enemy as she carries out her regular patrols of the fence. Despite Bill's apparent expertise in the subject, she is the one who first realises that the triffids can hear. She has the good sense of the natural survivor and matures into a responsible teenager.



Janina Faye as Susan, publicity still, *The Day of the Triffids* (1963)

John Wyndham

John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris was born on 10 July 1903 at Knowle in Warwickshire. His father was a barrister from Wales and his mother the daughter of a well-to-do ironmonger. The family lived at Edgbaston in Birmingham. In 1911, after his parents separated, Wyndham moved with his mother and younger brother, Vivian, to a smaller house in Edgbaston and then, from 1915, to a series of hotels.

The boys were happiest during their time at Bedales, a progressive, co-educational boarding school at Steep in Hampshire that Wyndham attended from 1918 to 1921 (the physical description of the character Michael Beadley is thought to be based on Wyndham's headmaster, John Hadon Bradley). Wyndham's first published work was a science fiction tale called 'Vivisection' which appeared in the November 1919 issue of *The Bee*, a journal edited by pupils at the school. It seems to have been based on H G Wells' novel *The Island of Dr Moreau*.

The Penguin edition of *The Day of the Triffids*, published in 1954, included Wyndham's tongue in cheek summary of his early attempts to establish a career. He wrote:

Farming – this was the fashion of the day, but found if you really work on a farm you sleep over a book; Law – for a very short time, because this was parentally considered a steady and respectable profession, which it undoubtedly is for those with the bent. Came to London: tried advertising and commercial art, discovered (a) poor standard of self-deception; (b) little talent.



John Wyndham

From 1925, he tried writing for publication, producing a number of Gothic short stories that had, as he later wrote, 'no takers'. He recalled: 'I used to sit up in my flat all night and frighten myself to death with witchcraft and vampires.' In 1929, he came across a copy of the American pulp *Amazing Stories*, which gave him the inspiration to try writing science fiction stories and serials for the magazine market. His first successful story was 'Worlds to Barter', printed in the magazine *Wonder Stories* in 1931. An early science fiction novel *The Secret People* was published in 1935. Wyndham's work of the 1930s appeared under a number of variants on his name, chiefly 'John Beynon' and 'John Beynon Harris' (he did not use the name 'John Wyndham' until 1950). It was typical of its period, featuring what author Christopher Priest has described as 'unlikely scientific developments and incredible beings from other worlds'. He also wrote some crime fiction during this time including *Foul Play Suspected* (1935).



Magazines featuring stories by John Wyndham

Wyndham's writing career was brought to a temporary halt by the outbreak of World War II, when he worked as a censor in the Ministry of Information before being drafted to the Royal Corps of Signals as a lance-corporal cipher operator. The latter posting included what he referred to as an 'interesting free Continental tour ending in Germany'.

On 6 October 1946, Wyndham was released to the Army Reserve list (he was not formally discharged until 1954). With his confidence at low ebb following his wartime experience, Wyndham tried to re-establish himself as a writer, starting with a topical thriller, which he ruefully discovered was 'mistimed'. In more sophisticated post-war science fiction, there was a growing interest in the psychology of characters and in a return to plausibility after the fantastic flights of fancy that had characterised the genre in the 1930s. Wyndham was attracted to this approach as it was akin to the work of H G Wells, a writer he admired. In an article published in 1958, he recalled this period in his career:

So I wrote six stories different in style from the old ones. It felt quite like old times to be sending MSS off across the Atlantic once more. It felt like even older times when they all came back a month later. The agent had died, almost at the moment of receiving them, poor fellow, and the agency had ceased....

There was also a book-length story about some walking vegetables, but I had stopped the typing of that halfway through because I knew I had got the end wrong. It was beginning to look as if I should have to get a respectable job – I could almost feel the Civil Service breathing down my neck.

Although he struggled at first, Wyndham persevered and eventually succeeded in carving out what *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* refers to as 'his own literary niche', bridging the American and British science fiction traditions. As little of what he had written for the magazines had been collected into anthologies and he had, in any case, previously used a variety of different names, many assumed he was a new author when his novel *The Day of the Triffids* was published in 1951 by Michael Joseph.



Cover of *Collier's* featuring first instalment of serialisation

With this book, Wyndham broke through to a mainstream audience. The idea of the triffids came to him, he often recalled, while walking down a country lane in a gale. In an interview in 1968, he said: 'The trees and hedgerows were blowing across the road and I thought "by gosh, those'd be nasty things if they could sting you. Still nastier if they could get at you."'

Before the publication of the novel, the triffids had appeared in an abridged serialisation called 'The Revolt of the Triffids', published in *Collier's*, a more upmarket magazine than the pulps Wyndham had previously written for. In the *Collier's* version, the triffids came from Venus rather than being modified from existing plants on Earth. The novel's basic premise had been first used in the short story 'The Puff-ball Menace', published in 1933.

Other novels he wrote as 'John Wyndham' include *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), *The Chrysalids* (1955) and *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957). Wyndham also continued to write short stories for various magazines. Christopher Priest says that Wyndham's 'fiction was transformed' by the enforced break of wartime service and while his early work had been 'not particularly well executed' he was now producing material that 'was mature, accomplished and extremely popular with a wide audience'.

Much of Wyndham's later fiction is focused on the reactions of ordinary people to extraordinary circumstances. A comfortable, familiar environment becomes strange and threatening, and people must make difficult moral decisions in order to survive. In the introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics' edition of *The Day of the Triffids*, Barry Langford writes that by rooting the disaster in the everyday, Wyndham makes the 'shock of transformation... all the more powerful'. In an article published in 1961, Wyndham is quoted as saying: 'I suppose I want to jog people a little out of their conservatism; we are much too prone to think that nothing changes, and I can't accept the kind of complacency which believes that what has already been established is good for all time.'



Magazine containing Wyndham profile

Writing during the early years of the Cold War, his books are now seen as ‘metaphors, unconscious or otherwise, for the upheavals and concerns of the period’, according to Christopher Priest. There are hints that the triffids, for example, are the result of secret Soviet biological experimentation and that the blindness has been caused, either by accident or design, by orbital satellite armoury created during the arms race. As well as a suspicion of the eastern bloc there is suspicion of the motives of big business. The book, in the words of Langford, ‘reflects its own times through the dark mirror of genre’. However, Wyndham remains relevant 50 years on. Priest writes: ‘John Wyndham’s novels have survived topicality. They are today not merely a fascinating look back at the transitional world, but they remain gripping and imaginatively energetic, deceptively mild in tone, worrying to think about and utterly readable.’ In an article to mark the centenary of Wyndham’s birth in 2003, Robin McKie of *The Observer* wrote:

His plots were certainly lurid, but Wyndham’s detailed depictions of societies assailed by cataclysmic forces have a clarity and sympathy that transcend simple horror fiction and have gripped readers’ imaginations for decades.

In 1963, Wyndham married his companion Grace Wilson when she retired from teaching. They had met in 1931 and the John Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool contains over 350 letters he wrote to her during his wartime service. The couple moved from the Penn Club, where they had had adjoining rooms since 1938, and bought a house at Steep, close to the life-long friends he had made through Bedales. He loved the countryside and was a life member of the National Trust, as well as a devoted fan of *The Archers*.

An interviewer in 1968 described Wyndham as an ‘accommodating, amused man... shy of giving talks’ who had barred the use of his photograph on book jackets. On his instructions, most of his personal papers were destroyed after his death and he had no wish to be the subject of a biography. Reflecting on his life, Wyndham felt that it had ‘been practically devoid of interest to anyone but myself – though I have quite enjoyed it, of course, in those moments when I did not seem to have been sent to occupy a largely lunatic world’. Part of that lunacy was what he saw as the increasing precariousness of the human race. In an interview in 1964, he said:

I used to think we lived in a settled world. Not any more. The unusual and nasty is too close to the surface – the savagery of the Germans and the Japanese in the last war showed that.... Nature, too, is much less tame than people think. Only her obvious hostilities have been tamed.

Wyndham died of a heart attack at his home on 11 March 1969.



Another triffid design by Wyndham

Wyndham and the Science Fiction Genre



Publicity images from top:

The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951)
Earth Vs the Flying Saucers (1956)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

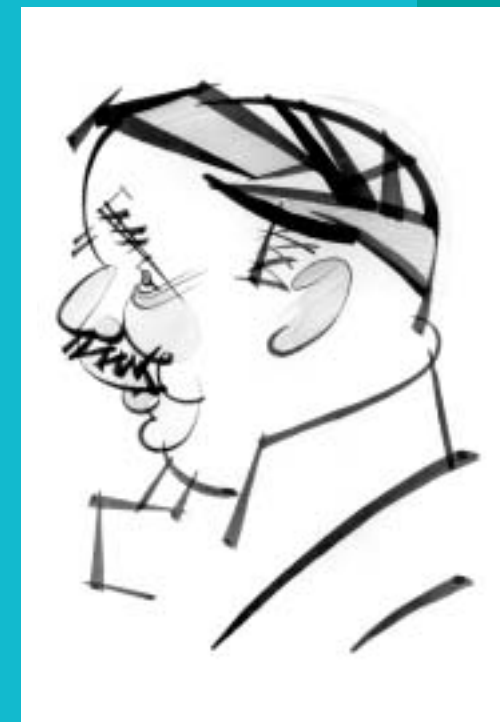
While still employing some of the conventions of the genre in his later work, Wyndham chose to distance himself as far as possible from science fiction. He preferred to describe his mature fiction as 'logical fantasy' or 'reasoned fantasy' for he believed he was now writing for a different kind of audience. However, although he may have disliked the term, it is as science fiction that Wyndham's books are usually categorised.

According to the *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 'No one has defined science fiction to everyone's satisfaction'. Some definitions found in literary guides include:

- Work that 'deals with the possible, and is based... on scientific knowledge obeying the laws of nature in the universe'. (*Who Else Writes Like...?*)
- 'Stories which are set in the future or in which the contemporary setting is disrupted by an imaginary device such as a new invention or the introduction of an alien.' (*The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*)
- '... that branch of literature which deals with the response of human beings to advances in science and technology.' (*Dictionary of World Literary Terms*)

The term 'scientifiction' was first used in 1927 in the publication *Amazing Stories* edited by Hugo Gernsback, after whom the annual Hugo science fiction award is named. It came into common usage as 'science fiction' in the 1930s and 1940s.

Herbert George Wells by Robert Stewart Sherriffs (1934)



Some see antecedents of science fiction in Lucian of Samosata's *True History* (c. AD 150), a tale that includes a visit to the moon and interplanetary warfare, or Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), with its vision of an imagined world. However, the book most frequently cited as the first true science fiction novel is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). The story shows the terrifying consequence of taking scientific discovery to extremes and marks one of the earliest appearances of the irresponsible scientist. Other literary figures who used science fiction themes included Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, George Chesney and Jules Verne.

A major influence upon Wyndham was H G Wells, the innovative author of *The Time Machine* (1895), *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896), *The Invisible Man* (1897) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). These works were termed at the time 'scientific romance'. As well as writing various types of novels and short stories, often with a satirical element, Wells was a journalist, sociologist and historian. In *The Day of the Triffids*, Bill refers to Wells' story 'The Country of the Blind' which disproves the adage that in the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

In a guide to twentieth-century science fiction writers, Julian Kagarlitsky writes that Wyndham 'is justifiably considered to be the truest disciple of H G Wells in English literature'. Like Wells, Wyndham was 'usually concerned with some catastrophe, cosmic or social, which results in the discovery of hitherto hidden dangers in daily life'. He 'loved to write about perfectly familiar things, some everyday occurrence, and let the fantastic element help him uncover unprecedented and unforeseen possibilities in that daily routine'. In a newspaper article from 1966, Wyndham writes: 'Wells usually started from an impossible concept and went on to write, with a scientist's care for detail, a fantasy about it.' He characterised Wells' fiction as 'the reasoned fantasy' which was based on the premise 'what would happen if...?'. Reasoned fantasies, according to Wyndham, are akin to detective novels in that their authors must play fair with their readers and not expect them to believe things that insult their intelligence.



Assorted science fiction magazines

During the 1930s, Wyndham earned a living writing mainly for American science fiction magazines, mimicking their brash idiom, love of gadgetry and dramatic clichés. According to *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, British science fiction of this period was marked by images of the devastation of civilisation (reminiscent of the carnage of The Great War of 1914-1918) and the sense that 'man was living on the brink of catastrophe'. At the cinema this approach was reflected in the 1936 film *Things to Come*, based on Wells' meditation on the price of progress. By contrast, the USA was producing futuristic tales and interplanetary fiction that generally lacked the British anxieties and 'embodied a buoyant self-confidence that was current in America at the time'. In 1961, novelist Kingsley Amis, a self-confessed devotee of science fiction, recalled discovering the 'Yank' magazine *Interesting Reading* in his local Woolworth's when he was a boy. He wrote:



Those stories of twenty-five years ago, of course, with their exploitation of violence and horror, were... far below the level of contemporary science fiction... but the first coverful of many-eyed and -tentacled monsters was enough assurance for me, as it must have been for thousands of others, that this was the right kind of stuff.

Amis describes the work in these magazines for the most part as 'vulgarisations of the early Wells... setting up a pseudo-scientific base for a tale of wonder and terror'. The first British magazine of this type was *Tales of Wonder*, which began publishing in 1937. At this time, science fiction also proved popular in comic strips and Saturday serials with heroes like Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers and Superman. Orson Welles' radio adaptation of Wells' *The War of the Worlds* caused panic in the streets of America on the evening of 30 October 1938. Some listeners thought it was a live news broadcast of an alien invasion.

Publicity still from
Things to Come (1936)



During the 1940s, John W Campbell, editor of *Astounding Stories*, encouraged authors to return to the principles of scientific romance and to aim at plausibility in their tales. The *Dictionary of World Literary Terms* points out that 'Because the authors... tried to view the world realistically, it is not surprising that in many ways they foresaw what actually came to pass'. Responding to the changing market, *The Day of the Triffids* marked Wyndham's arrival as an author who, according to *The Cambridge Guide*, could combine 'the serious and anxious concerns of scientific romance with the greater imaginative scope and creative playfulness of science fiction'. On the cover of the first Penguin edition of *The Day of the Triffids*, the book was described as 'fantastic, frightening, but entirely plausible; for John Wyndham combines an extraordinary inventive imagination with the technical skill of a first class writer'. Echoing this, a critic from *The Spectator* reviewing Wyndham's book *The Midwich Cuckoos* wrote: 'He provides just the right amount of semi-realistic data... to soothe his readers into a mood of acceptance, and his poker-faced attitude towards the strange and improbable events which he records is also exactly calculated.'

Publicity still from *Village of the Damned* (1960)Publicity still from *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961)

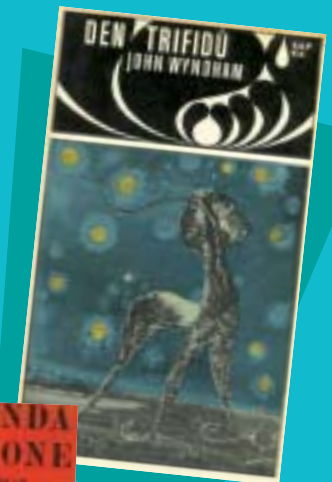
Other major science fiction authors writing in the 1950s included James Blish, Ray Bradbury, John Christopher, Arthur C Clarke, Frederik Pohl and Robert Silverberg. Like Wyndham, these had found a way of successfully combining plausibility with flights of imagination. It was during this period that cinemas were showing films concerning cosmic invaders (benevolent or hostile), global ruin and genetic mutation like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *When Worlds Collide* (1951), *Them* (1954), *Earth Vs the Flying Saucers* (1956), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957) and *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961). These are now regarded as classics that express the anxieties of an age living in the shadow of "The Bomb" and with the fear of Soviet attack. Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* was released as a film in 1963 starring Howard Keel. It is fun to watch and has helped make 'triffid' a household word, but lacks the more meditative qualities of the book, and plays free and loose with the original plot and characters (the BBC serialisation first broadcast in 1981 was more faithful). *The Midwich Cuckoos* was filmed under its American title, *Village of the Damned*, in 1960 and starred the urbane George Sanders.

Publicity still from *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957)

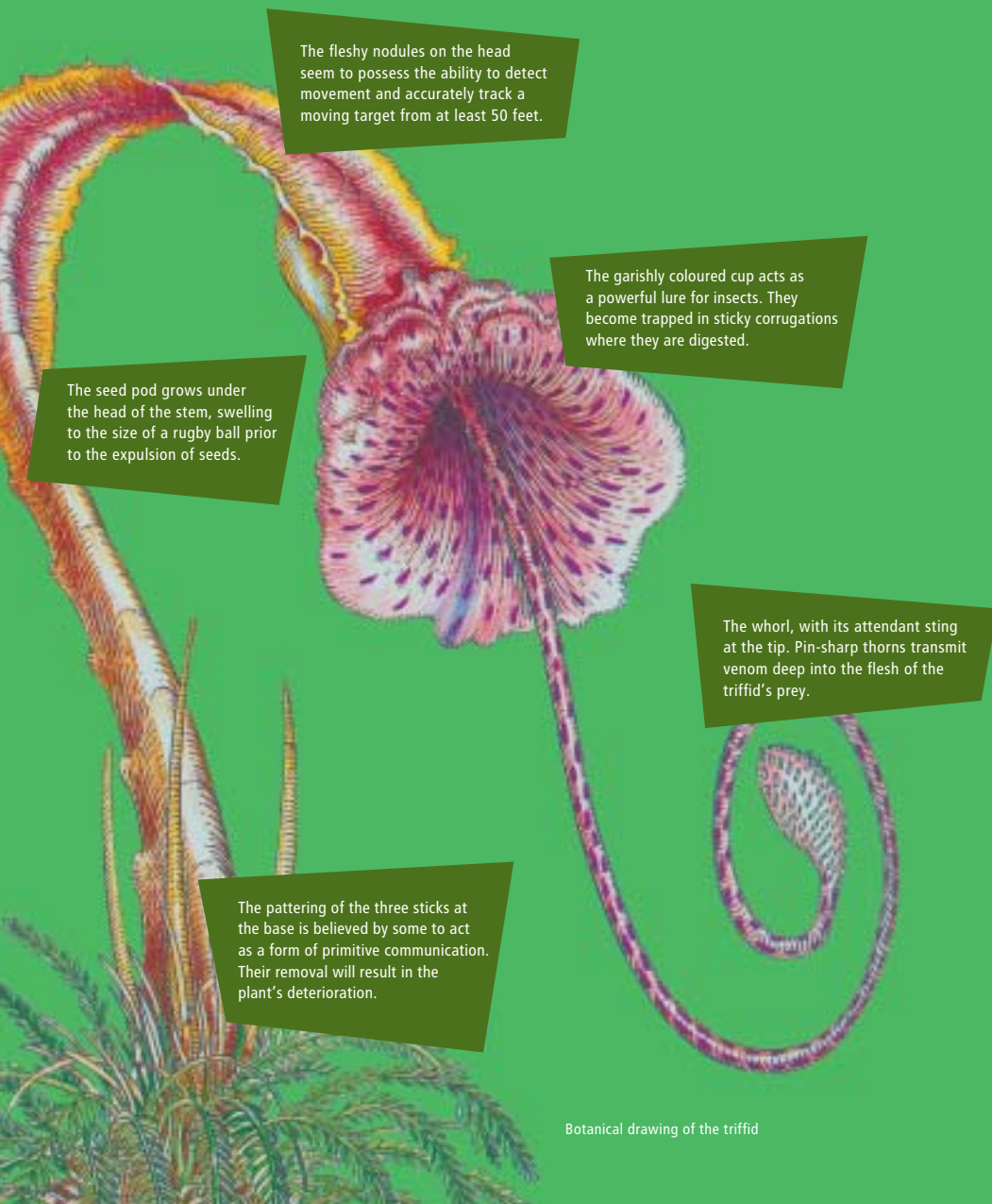
During the 1960s in Britain, Michael Moorcock promoted a new wave of experimental science fiction writers in *New Worlds* magazine such as Harlan Ellison, Roger Zelazny and Samuel R Delany. Brian Aldiss and J G Ballard, who had started writing in the 1950s but first flourished in the 1960s, were also closely associated with *New Worlds*, as was Thomas M Disch. Towards the end of the decade, American academics began taking the genre more seriously, championing authors like Kurt Vonnegut, Philip K Dick and Ursula Le Guin, although Vonnegut, for one, rejected the science fiction label. Wyndham continued to write and his classic novels continued to sell well (Penguin was selling 3,000 copies a month of *The Day of the Triffids* in 1968, for example), but he did not achieve the same level of literary success as he had in the 1950s. The only novels published during this decade were *Trouble With Lichen* (1960) and *Chocky* (1968) which, though enjoyable, seem lightweight compared with his previous work. His last novel, *Web*, was rejected and rewritten on a number of occasions, and only published posthumously.

With the popularity of television and film series like *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* in the 1970s and 1980s, and Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*, science fiction entered the mass market. William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) sparked the cyberpunk movement, which focused on computers and cyberspace rather than spaceships and the galaxies. In recent years, the writing of new wave authors like Christopher Priest and M John Harrison has become stronger than ever, and writers like China Mieville and Mary Gentle are blending genres and styles into interesting new forms.

Today, elements of science fiction can be found in mainstream work and there are overlaps with the fantasy, horror and techno-thriller genres, among others. *The Cambridge Guide* says that science fiction 'imagery has now diffused throughout contemporary culture to become familiar in some measure to everyone'. However, despite the breadth of work and the range of styles, it has never entirely thrown off the 'absurdly gaudy species of pulp fiction'.

Foreign language editions of *The Day of the Triffids*

Humanity and Nature



The fleshy nodules on the head seem to possess the ability to detect movement and accurately track a moving target from at least 50 feet.

The garishly coloured cup acts as a powerful lure for insects. They become trapped in sticky corrugations where they are digested.

The seed pod grows under the head of the stem, swelling to the size of a rugby ball prior to the expulsion of seeds.

The whorl, with its attendant sting at the tip. Pin-sharp thorns transmit venom deep into the flesh of the triffid's prey.

The pattering of the three sticks at the base is believed by some to act as a form of primitive communication. Their removal will result in the plant's deterioration.

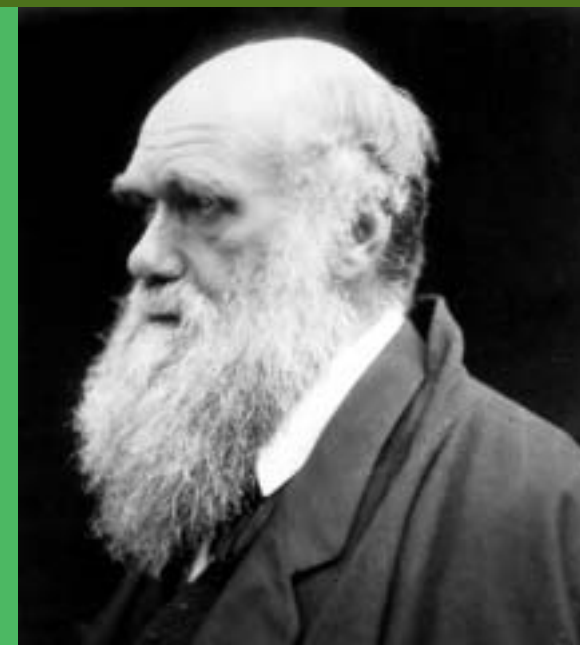
Botanical drawing of the triffid

The triffids are, according to Barry Langford, 'quite simply the ultimate evolutionary opportunists'. A number of Wyndham's mature books make reference to evolution and ask whether the time has come for another species to dominate the planet. In *The Day of the Triffids*, Wyndham provides an imaginative take on Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection by which those species best suited to the surrounding environment can survive and thrive. Prior to the disaster, Bill's colleague at the oil company, Walter, has observed signs of intelligence in the triffids and thinks it is significant that a high proportion of triffid victims have been stung across the eyes. He says:

Granted that they do have intelligence; then that would leave us with only one important superiority – sight. We can see, and they can't. Take away our vision, and the superiority is gone. Worse than that – our position becomes inferior to theirs because they are adapted to a sightless existence, and we are not.

After the night of the green lights, people do not have time to adapt to their blindness because the triffid, whose needs are less complex than those of humans and who is now free to roam and eat at will, has the advantage. In the overall scheme of things, Bill believes that 'it's an unnatural thought that one type of creature should dominate perpetually' and that 'life has to be dynamic and not static'. However, he will not let humanity go the way of the dinosaur without a fight.

Portrait of Charles Robert Darwin by Julia Margaret Cameron (1868)



Bill became curious about triffids in his childhood when he was stung by an immature plant growing in his father's garden. It is only when he sees the plants waiting in the farmyard for 'the dead stock to attain the right stage of putrescence' that he comes to view them with disgust. He calls them 'Horrible alien things which some of us had somehow created and which the rest of us in our careless greed had cultured all over the world'. He speculates that the triffids were developed as a means of coping with food shortages in the Soviet Union following a series of disastrous harvests and a population increase. They possibly have some genetic traces of the oil-producing sunflower combined with the feeding habits of an insect eating pitcher plant. Although there are no known records of plants pulling up their roots to walk, there are plants that possess deadly poisons. One is the upas tree of Java beneath which it is said that nothing can grow. It is part of the mulberry family and was used by natives to make poisoned arrows. Legend has it that the tree can lure people to within reach of its deadly vapours, with fatal results.

When their seeds were accidentally dispersed worldwide and people realised the value of the oils that could be extracted from the plant, 'triffids moved into the realm of big business overnight'. Consequently, although there are some who are aware of the risks involved in growing them, there is 'a vested interest' in keeping this quiet. Walter says: 'It wouldn't pay anyone to put out disturbing thoughts about it.' This has contemporary resonance in the debates on the development of genetic crops. Changing the genetic makeup of a food plant can increase yields by, for example, producing crops that are resistant to insects or drought, immune to disease or tolerant of chemical weed killers. This is seen by some scientists as a way of overcoming world hunger. However, there are those who criticise this method of production and it has given rise not only to the latest food scare but also to concerns over genetic contamination of other crops, the evolution of super weeds, increased use of weed killers and the harming of wildlife. Some argue that world hunger should be solved by concentrating on the problems of distribution and cost instead.

Links can also be made between events in the book and current concerns over invasive alien plant species: plants transferred to another environment that then run wild. An example of this is Japanese knotweed, which was first imported into Britain in 1825 as an ornamental garden plant and has since become a threat to native plants as it spreads easily, thriving in a wide range of soils. In North Asia, it competes with other co-evolving species and this contains its growth; elsewhere, it has no such competitors. Another potentially destructive plant that was transplanted in the nineteenth century is the water hyacinth, a native of the Amazon that is now widespread in the tropics and subtropics. It grows rapidly, smothering the surfaces of rivers and lakes, blocking out sunlight, hampering the passage of boats, preventing swimming and fishing, and reducing biodiversity. Animal species can also be a destructive alien presence when transplanted from their natural environment. In Britain, these species include the grey squirrel, American bull frog, mink, ruddy duck and the hedgehogs of North Uist. There is an on-going debate on whether or not these animals should now be culled in order to restore the natural order.



Botanical drawings of insect eating plants



Botanical drawing of water hyacinth

In *The Day of the Triffids* “true” nature – as opposed to the artificially modified triffids – is also resurgent, erasing the former traces of human occupation. In the early days of the disaster, Bill thinks of the ancient, forgotten civilisations now lying ‘buried in deserts, and obliterated by the jungles of Asia’ and of how ‘unless there should be some miracle’, London, New York, San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Bombay and all the other cities of the world will go the same way. Returning to London when the threat of plague has gone, Bill sees wildernesses ‘creeping out across the bordering streets’ from the parks and squares, repossessing ‘the arid spaces that man had created’. The overgrown crumbling ruin is a popular Romantic image, evocative of the changes wrought by time, the mysteries of the past, the ephemeral nature of human achievement and the folly of human pride. Coker quotes from Shelley’s poem ‘Ozymandias’, which ends with the lines:

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

‘My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,

Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!’

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.



Overgrown ruins in South Front of Tintern Abbey, 1808, C Carter

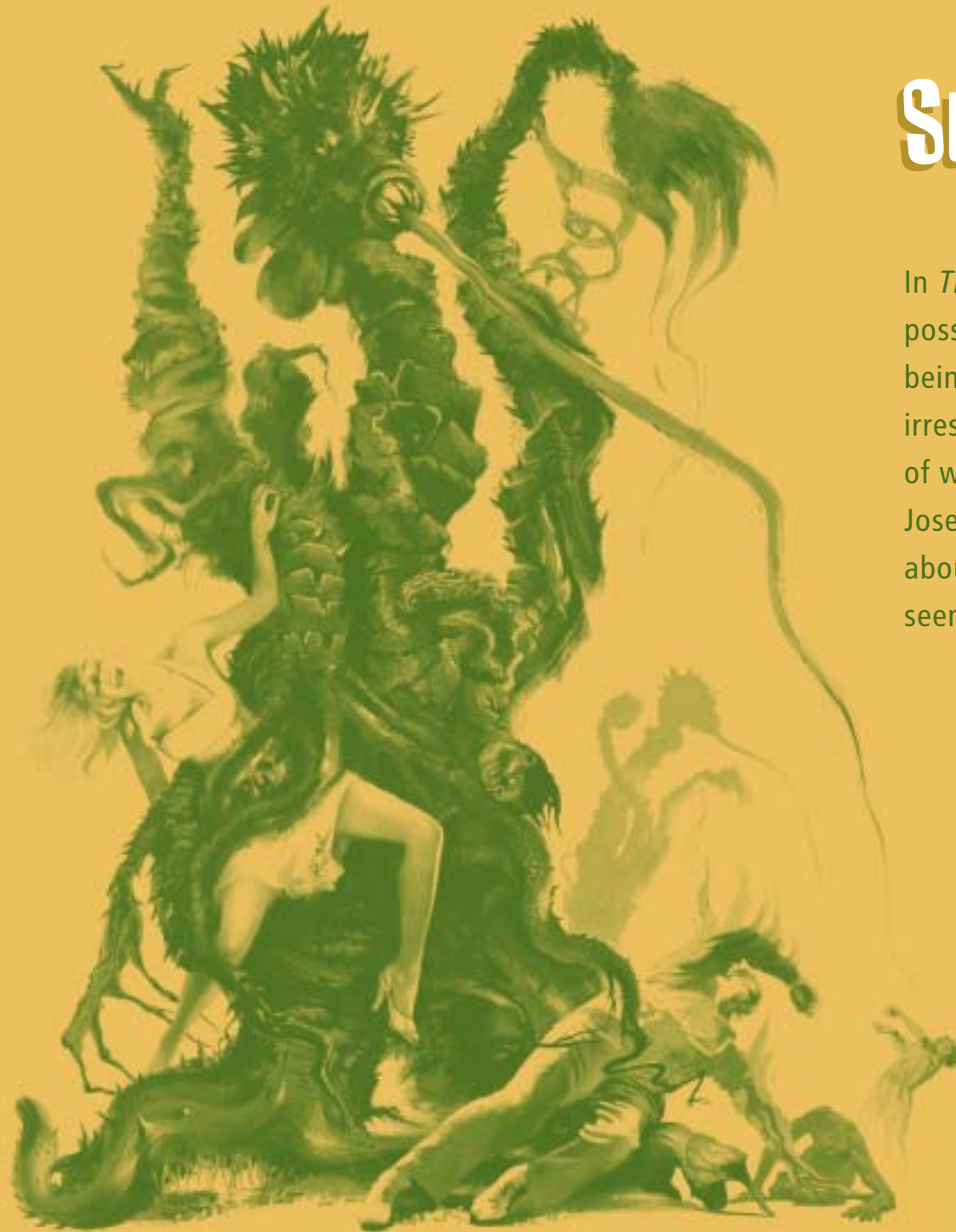
Surviving the Disaster

In *The Day of the Triffids*, the downfall of the latest – and possibly last – version of human civilisation is depicted as being largely self-inflicted through a fatal combination of irresponsible biological experimentation, the development of weapons of mass destruction and general complacency. Josella reflects: 'You know, one of the most shocking things about it is to realize how *easily* we have lost a world that seemed so safe and certain.'

The calamity of sudden mass blindness, heightened by the unchecked spread of the triffids, forces Bill and the other characters to face up to difficult moral decisions. They must also explore alternative models for the new society that will follow in the wake of the disaster.

An early dilemma is whether to abandon the established rules of law and order. Describing his experiences in London on the first day, looking at the unguarded shops with food in the window, Bill says:

Absurd it undoubtedly was, but I had a very strong sense that the moment I stove-in one of those sheets of plate-glass I should leave the old order behind me for ever: I should become a looter, a sacker, a low scavenger upon the dead body of the system that had nourished me. Such a foolish niceness of sensibility in a stricken world!



Original design for triffid from publicity still for *The Day of the Triffids* (1963)



Mervyn Johns as Coker with
Howard Keel as Masen. Publicity still,
The Day of the Triffids (1963)

A more morally challenging dilemma is whether the sighted should stay and help those who are newly blind get to the food that is still available. When they listen to Coker arguing with those inside the university, Bill tells Josella: 'Either we can set out to save what can be saved from the wreck – and that has to include ourselves: or we can devote ourselves to stretching the lives of these people a little longer.' When she replies that although he is right about looking out for themselves she does not like it, he says: 'Our likes and dislikes as decisive factors have now pretty well disappeared.'

Near the beginning of the book, when Bill is trying to adjust to the changes around him, he reflects that 'the amount we did not know and did not care to know about our daily lives is not only astonishing, but somehow a bit shocking'. It was always left to someone else to provide electricity and gas, a fresh water supply, food and clothing, shelter, and the other necessities of life. This explains why so many of the survivors assume that someone 'must have it in hand' and are prepared to wait and do nothing, confident that things will be sorted out and put back to normal in due course. Rather than facing a full-scale destruction of the planet from atomic explosion, humanity is going to have to cope with 'the long, slow, inevitable course of decay and collapse' unless people learn to support themselves again, without relying on outside intervention.

Michael Beadley's well-organised group at the university seems to have the best solution in the circumstances. Everyone must work for the good of the collective and those who cannot agree to the group's principles for survival must find another community to live in. Strength comes from unity of purpose. Coker's original idea of staying in London and feeding those who cannot see would have been morally correct before the disaster but is now impractical. However, it is hard to shake off the sense of moral obligation and that is why Bill remains with his group of blind people even though he realises the situation is hopeless. He only leaves when the plague takes hold. At the community in Tynsham, Miss Durrant's primary concern is to maintain traditional standards by resisting those like Beadley who exhibit 'loose views'. Privately, she knows she needs practical help from those who do not share her religious faith, but she dare not let herself admit it in public, as her moral code would be broken. Miss Durrant's good intentions, like teaching the blind men basket-making and weaving, are irrelevant now.

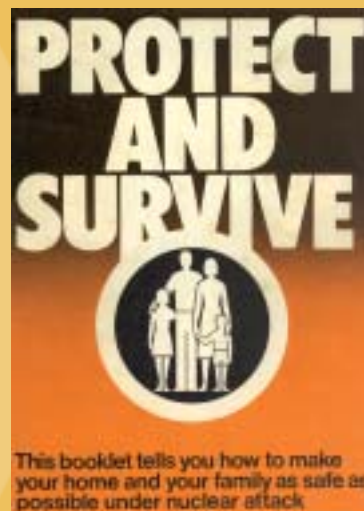
The neo-feudalist state devised by Torrence and his associates brings out some of the worst human traits: intolerance, exploitation and violence. The system is seen to fail as most of the feudal plots are overrun by triffids, and the inhabitants of those that remain lead 'a life of squalid wretchedness behind their stockades'. There is no sense of community spirit or commitment. In the meantime, for those who prefer to remain in their self-contained tribes rather than agreeing to any form of organisation, there seems only the prospect of degeneration and savagery.

Bill and the others have to teach themselves how to live off the land. Today, self-sufficiency is of increasing interest, particularly in response to food scares and shortages. This may entail people getting involved in organic gardening, small-scale poultry or farm animal keeping, and home-based crafts, perhaps giving up their previous employment to devote themselves full-time to independent living. Some people form co-operatives where they can barter with surplus goods, skills or services. Further up the scale, eco-villages, like the Findhorn community in Scotland, have developed. These place a high priority on ecological building, renewable energy systems, local organic food production, sustainable economies, and social and family support.



Illustrations taken from *Protect and Survive*

In 1980, when there was increased fear of nuclear war, the British government distributed the information brochure *Protect and Survive* which gave advice on how to cope in the event of nuclear attack. Although some found this risible, others took the suggested survival measures seriously and lived in a state of preparedness. More recently, anxieties over the potential global collapse of computer-linked technology in the year 2000 caused some to adopt a survivalist approach. Survivalists stockpile essential supplies (water, canned goods, tools, fuel, for example), prepare shelters and escape routes, and make emergency plans so that they can hold out against natural or man-made disaster. There have been cases, particularly in the backwoods of the USA, where this is taken to extremes, and survivalists can sometimes be associated with gun violence and supremacist politics.



Publicity still from *The Day of the Triffids* (1963)



Discussion Topics

- 1 Many critics believe that Wyndham succeeded in making the improbable entirely plausible. Do you agree with this assessment? Why?
- 2 How does Wyndham create a sense of menace and unease? What is the most frightening aspect of the story?
- 3 What do you think about the pacing of the book? Do the philosophical discussions hold up the plot or are they integral to it?
- 4 Is the overall tone of the book pessimistic or optimistic about humanity's chance of survival? Are Bill's hopes of finding a solution to the triffid problem convincing in the light of what has taken place before?
- 5 The blind man Alf declares that 't'weren't a bad ole life while it lasted'. Although Wyndham reveals much that was wrong with the former way of life, what are the good qualities he suggests are worth remembering and preserving? What is needed if the new society is to be better than the old one?



Foreign language editions of *The Day of the Triffids*



- 6 On the first day, Bill meets a man who is 'so to speak, normally blind' and who says: 'They'll be needing all their damned patronage for themselves now.' How are the newly blind depicted in the book? Does their blindness have a symbolic value as well as a dramatic one?
- 7 Bill Masen is an ordinary man caught up in extraordinary circumstances. How do his attitudes and outlook change after the initial disaster? Does he act like a traditional hero?
- 8 Is Coker's view that women play on their supposed helplessness borne out by the actions of Josella and the other female characters? Overall, does Wyndham present a positive image of women?
- 9 In *The Day of the Triffids*, does Wyndham create believable, fully realised characters or are they primarily mouthpieces for different viewpoints?
- 10 Is it useful to think of *The Day of the Triffids* as being part of a particular genre? Do you think the science fiction label may be misleading? How would you describe the book to someone who had never heard of it?
- 11 Events in *The Day of the Triffids* take place in the near future (the original typescript suggests 1965 although no date is given in the published text). However, what is it about the book (the plot, tone, characterisation, themes) that roots it in the early 1950s post-war period? Do the moral issues and dilemmas have the same resonance today?

Bibliography and Resources

A detailed bibliography and resource guide, including background information on the making of the film version of *The Day of the Triffids* and suggested books relating to the key themes, is on the Great Reading Adventure website at www.bristolreads.com.

Editions of *The Day of the Triffids*

The Day of the Triffids is published in paperback by Penguin and Ballantine, and in hardback by Gollancz and Buccaneer Books Ltd. A simplified version for children at Keystage 2 and 3 is published in the Evans Fast Track Classic series. BBC Audiobooks has an edition narrated by Samuel West who also narrates the unabridged Chivers Audio Book edition.

The 1963 film version is available on DVD and video. There was also a television adaptation starring John Duttine, first broadcast in 1981: this is not available at present.

A sequel, *The Night of the Triffids* by Simon Clark, is published in paperback by Hodder and Stoughton.

Other Books by John Wyndham

Those interested in reading more by John Wyndham may like to try the following novels, which are published in paperback by Penguin.

The Kraken Wakes (1953)

The Chrysalids (1955)

The Midwich Cuckoos (1957)

Trouble With Lichen (1960)

Chocky (1968)



Publicity material for *Village of the Damned* (1960)

In addition, Penguin publish *Consider Her Ways and Others*, a collection of Wyndham's short stories. Wyndham's stories also appear in various science fiction anthologies.

Phil Stephenson-Payne has compiled a working bibliography of Wyndham's work, now in its third revised edition, and available from Galactic Central Publications. His website is at www.philsp.cwc.net.

The University of Liverpool Library holds the John Wyndham Archive. The website is at www.liv.ac.uk/~asawyer/wyndham.html and this has links to other related sites.

Nicole Maurey and Howard Keel reading *The Day of the Triffids*



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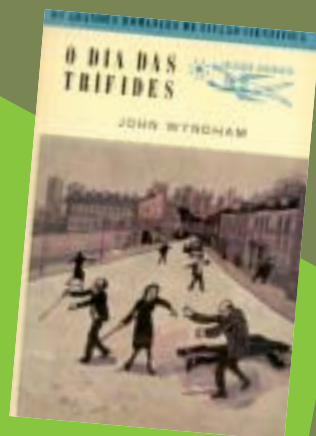
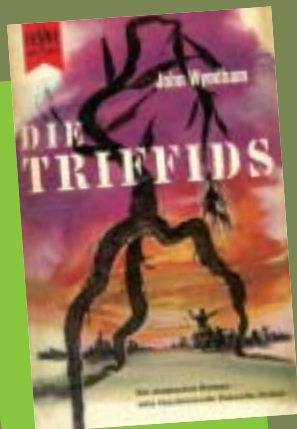
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Collier's illustration of the escape from the farm



"Granted that they do have intelligence; then that would leave us with only one important superiority – sight. We can see, and they can't. Take away our vision, and the superiority is gone. Worse than that – our position becomes inferior to theirs because they are adapted to a sightless existence, and we are not."

