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## **The New Elizabethans**

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## **The New Elizabethans: John Christopher, Nigel Kneale and 1950s British SF**

Jon Dear, Nicole Devarenne and Derek Johnston

The following is an edited transcript of the SFF's AGM panel which was held online on 26 June 2022. The panellists were Jon Dear, co-host of the Nigel Kneale podcast *Bergcast* and organizer of Kneale's centenary celebration at the Crouch End Picturehouse in April 2022; Nicole Devarenne, Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Dundee and an Arthur C. Clarke Award judge; and Derek Johnston, Lecturer in English at Queen's University Belfast. In the chair was Paul March-Russell.

**Paul March-Russell:** I'd like to start with our two centenarians, John Christopher and Nigel Kneale. Christopher, the pseudonym of Samuel Youd, wrote several novels both for adults and children, but is perhaps best-known now for two adult novels, *The Death of Grass* (1956) and *The World in Winter* (1962). How far do you think Christopher's writing is typical of this period?

**Nicole Devarenne:** That's an interesting question. In my research, I focus particularly on decolonisation and representations of Africa in British science fiction of the 1950s, and in that respect, Christopher is fairly typical of attitudes towards Africa and Africans. There is interesting reflection in his work on current events in Africa at the time, which you can also see in the later work of Brian Aldiss, such as his short story 'The Moment of Eclipse' (1969), and in J.G. Ballard. Ballard's perceptions of Africa are very rich and derived, in some respects, from Christopher's worldview, even though the two of them are often pitted against each other as examples of different types of science fiction. In terms of the way in which *The World in Winter* talks about Africa, there's a kind of precedent that begins in the early 1950s that Christopher is following through on.

**Derek Johnston:** When I read *The Death of Grass*, I found a lot of similarities with John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951). There's that same post-apocalyptic journey element but I felt that Wyndham was using it more to explore different ways in which society works. Whereas Christopher was using it to see how society breaks. Christopher has a repeated interest with society reverting to medievalism, and this seems to fit in with wider concerns about post-war society which, as Susan Sontag mentioned, is living in the shadow of the Bomb. At any moment we could be wiped out, everything could change in an instant. How can this continue? How will it continue? What might happen? What might fall apart? Those tensions are seen in Christopher and in Wyndham and in Nigel Kneale with different levels of intensity. And this is seen in a lot of the science fiction that's around at the time.

**Jon Dear:** I haven't read *The Death of Grass* but I have seen Cornel Wilde's film adaptation, *No Blade of Grass* (1970). As Derek said, Wyndham takes his time to study the after-effects, but when Christopher's characters get to the valley, the farm, the alternative lifestyle where Christopher ends the story, the question becomes 'what do we do now?' You've beaten off your immediate danger, you've survived the apocalypse to reach your goal, but now what? That's more like an '80s question, when Christopher's Tripods novels (1967-8) were being adapted to TV. If you think the apocalypse is quite likely to happen in the next ten years, then surviving the blast isn't quite enough. Which is why *Triffids* was right for the 1980s, because it had similar themes to Barry Hines's *Threads* (1984). So, the thing that strikes me most about *No Blade of Grass* is it's very much about what we need to do immediately, it's about the story, not necessarily the wider consequences of society.

**ND:** I was just thinking about the cosy catastrophe. Aldiss, in *Billion Year Spree* (1973), writes that Christopher's works are less cosy than other writers. The cosy catastrophe as a sub-genre of apocalyptic fiction speaks very well to the concerns of the white British public in the post-Windrush era. There's a sort of lager mentality that it expresses whilst at the same

time a desire to have access to luxury and the material benefits of colonialism and the extraction of resources.

**DJ:** That reminded me that one of the reasons, it's been said, for Wyndham's success is that he hit that cosiness and was able to subversively introduce these ideas. There's clearly in the writing of this period this combination of escape and disaster, it's there also in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5), and we can easily relate that to the post-war experience.

**PMR:** Let's bring in our other centenarian. What do you think were the reasons that made Kneale's *The Quatermass Experiment* such a success in 1953?

**JD:** The quickest answer to that is that there simply wasn't anything like it up until that point. And that's as much thanks to Rudolph Cartier, the producer and director. Television, when Kneale entered the medium in 1951, was largely children's stories, news, classical adaptations. When Cartier came to the BBC, it was slightly staid, conservative, worthy, very Reithian. TV hadn't been back long after being off during the Second World War. The appeal of the Queen's Coronation in 1953 meant that a lot of people were getting access to television for the first time. Before then, audiences were very concentrated in certain small areas – if you could see from Alexandra Palace, where programmes were being broadcast from, that would potentially be 90% of your audience if they'd got an aerial. But in August 1953 there was a gap in the schedules, and there were only two staff writers, and one was on holiday, so Kneale was asked to come up with something. He'd worked with Cartier briefly before on *Sunday Night Drama*, so he devised what you and anyone else now would call a science fiction serial. But Kneale wouldn't, and by the way, he'd be absolutely disgusted at being discussed at an SFF event! He hated science fiction because he had a massively narrow view of what science fiction was. But the fact is, he wrote seminal science fiction, and at the time it was like nothing else. It's 1953 – we haven't yet had Yuri Gagarin's first space mission – so for the viewing public, the idea of a play about three men who go into space, only one of

whom comes back, and he's infected with an alien parasite, was simply nothing you would have seen in weekly instalments on BBC television at that time. While it's now seen as sf, then it was like *Line of Duty* – it was the first gripping event television. It revolutionised what people thought British TV could be.

**PMR:** I want to pick up on that point about how *The Quatermass Experiment* wasn't necessarily viewed as science fiction. Derek, you've written about the anxiety that the BBC had about broadcasting anything that might be seen as sf.

**DJ:** One of the things I discovered was that science fiction, and genre terms in general, were not being used very much at the BBC at this time. There is one use of the term 'science fiction' in the *Radio Times* in the period from 1936 to 1955, and that's not even in the listings, it's in a note to a reader's letter. Nothing gets called 'science fiction'. They use 'scientific romance', it's got that European connection, it's not American. They'll use emotional genre terms like 'thriller', so *The Quatermass Experiment* is 'a thriller in six parts'. And 'thriller' was about as popular as they might get. 'Variety show' maybe. But the BBC is showing filmed Westerns from the '40s – in fact, they show some pre-War. The famous story – I can't remember if it's true or not – is that TV shuts down in 1939 halfway through a Mickey Mouse cartoon. So that narrative that the BBC was very well-spoken people in dinner jackets, talking very politely, is not exactly right. Cartier certainly knew about science fiction. He wrote to the Air Ministry to ask if he could borrow some pressure suits and said 'I am making a "science fiction" programme and would like to differentiate it from the magazine stories and comics'. Now that's the other thing – the way in which science fiction is building in the culture. We're beginning to get US films that are labelled science fiction. *Amazing*, *Astounding* and others were coming across as ballast through the '30s onwards, and that's how people like Amis, Aldiss and Clarke were introduced to these magazines, finding them in Woolworth's. I still like Amis's description of seeing a basket of them: 'Yank magazines –

interesting reading'. And you're seeing more comics being brought over and, of course, the cheap paperbacks with the American troops during the War, and so this building is happening, and that leads to this concern about what labels can be used. Is it American science fiction or is it British and European scientific romance? Or is it just fantasy?

**PMR:** On the other hand, John Christopher saw himself as a science fiction writer, although he wrote in other genres as well. Was he happy being seen as a science fiction writer or did he want to develop the genre beyond its American connotations?

**ND:** As a writer, he seems to have been quite comfortable in a social realist mode that strained some of the more familiar genre markers of science fiction. In a way, that marks some similarities with the struggles that writers like Ballard were going through, where they were wanting to write science fiction but were also very interested in psychology and other aspects of human experience beyond technology. Also, as Jon and Derek have been saying, the perceived value of science fiction was an issue for these writers, and the lack of prestige that comes along with being a science fiction writer. I'm also wondering if that's a problem in the scholarship that surrounds some of these authors, in the sense that scholars invest quite a lot of time in making a case for them as science fiction writers, which means that they then can't fully explore some of the more problematic aspects of the ideology, and that's because the primary impulse is to defend science fiction as something with potentially high cultural value.

**PMR:** I wonder how much of this anxiety around culture and value was also foregrounded by the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth? Although the phrase 'New Elizabethans' had been coined by the historian A.L. Rowse in 1942, it caught on in and around the time of the Coronation. It suggests a period of renewal, of restoration perhaps. Did science fiction help to contribute to this sense of a new Elizabethan age?

**DJ:** I definitely think so. I think what's interesting is where we have in this period this idea of science fiction as offering modernism, technology, the bright, shiny, commercialized future with endless possibilities, and yet the two writers we're focusing on are both saying, wait a moment! As I said, a recurring idea in John Christopher is of where technology breaks, and society reverts to a medieval kind of world –

**PMR:** Pre-Elizabethan.

**DJ:** Yes, exactly, and having to reinvent itself. Kneale likes, to a large extent, progress and technology but he is also constantly saying, that's good but do you really want it? That's good but what could go wrong? Whereas people like Richard Hoggart, in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), are writing about science fiction as representing the shiny future and don't accept the critical elements to be found in writers like Kneale, Christopher and Wyndham. So yes, I think that tension is there.

**JD:** Kneale's very positive about the possibilities of technology that have come in since the War, but he's largely misanthropic and thinks that humans will screw it up. Great line in *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958): 'What do you think humans would do if they knew the world was going to be destroyed in the next few decades?' 'Nothing, they'd just sit around and bicker about it'. Nevertheless, when Kneale starts writing for TV, the world is opening up scientifically, in a different way from before. You've got the Shipton footprint in 1951, which feeds into *The Creature* (1955), and which later becomes *The Abominable Snowman* (1957). You've got DNA research which is central to the premise of *The Quatermass Experiment*. Kneale's not afraid to steal themes from people who've influenced him – Orwell, Wells – but, in terms of content, he borrows from this expanding scientific world of which he's fascinated, because it's ripe for humans to screw up.

**PMR:** On the other hand, the modernity that Derek and Jon have been referring to also seems like a very white, European modernity. But when we think of 'New Elizabethans', well, there

really were – the Windrush Generation who'd come from the Caribbean to the UK in the late 1940s and early 1950s. So, is there another side to this story of modernity that we need to be thinking about in terms of Empire and decolonization?

**ND:** That's interesting. Certainly, writers like Christopher expressing fear at nuclear conflict in their work were also expressing a fear of how the world will change as it modernizes. And decolonization is part of that process. You see a significant amount of writing from the 1950s onwards that are really concerned with the effects of migration and the decline of the British Empire, and then using these fears and turning them into science fiction tropes, which express a fear of otherness and change. I often think of the moment, which is not often noted in the scholarship, in Ballard's *The Crystal World* (1966) where there's an echo satellite which is traversing the skies above Cameroon but the main character is instead interested in this jungle which is crystallizing and becoming static. So, it's an archetypal move which you see in Ballard where he is turning away from technology – the excitement of the new – towards primitivism and this psychological, almost fugal state. But it's also a problem because of the way in which Africa is harnessed in the text to represent the primitive.

**JD:** I'm not going to try and whitewash Kneale, but he grew up on the Isle of Man, he's aware of coming to the mainland as an outsider. And the essential theme of *Quatermass and the Pit* is racism. In the script for the first episode, Kneale specifies that the radio is talking about race riots in Birmingham. He specifies that one of the workmen must be black. He's not making any grand political statements but he's conscious of presenting the world that you, the viewer, are in. And then, in the penultimate episode, he reveals that racism doesn't exist in human nature but that it's been implanted by Martians – it's literally alien to being human. That is, it makes no sense. I don't want to make too much out of it, but Kneale was probably more progressive than other TV writers at the time.



**PMR:** On that point, I need to say thank you to our panellists for coming together at short notice and who have all been amazing. Thank you for being here.