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Picturing Nuclear Suffering: Raymond Briggs's *When the Wind Blows*

Content warning: brief discussion and accompanying imagery of racialised propaganda.

The bodily injury caused by nuclear warfare constitutes a massively collective form of modern suffering. However, for many in the West, it also represents a markedly ‘foreign’ pain, inflicted on distant bodies in other lands. The only instances (thus far) of nuclear weapons being deliberately utilised in combat are the US deployment of the “Little Boy” A-bomb in Hiroshima and the “Fat Man” in Nagasaki on the 6th and 9th August 1945 respectively. The 100,000 immediate deaths and ensuing agonies of radiation poisoning were borne primarily by Japanese soldiers and civilians and Korean slave labourers – who were, for many mid-century British and American citizens, unimaginably ‘foreign’ bodies, caricatured and dehumanised in Allied war propaganda throughout the 1940s (see Figure 1). The Japanese *hibakusha* prose literature of the 1940s and 1950s (or *genbaku bungaku*, ‘A-bomb survivor’ literature) offered vivid descriptions of the bombs’ impact, as did later 1960s Japanese nonfiction manga such as Keiji Nakawaza’s ground-breaking *Aru Nichi Totsuzen ni* (*Suddenly One Day*, 1968). However, after initial reports of the US attack on Japan, Allied censorship quickly suppressed much media coverage of the Japanese and Korean victims, as well as *hibakusha* literature itself.¹ In the absence of first-hand Japanese and Korean voices, even the startling impact of US journalist John Hersey’s exposé “Hiroshima” in the *New Yorker* in August 1946 soon faded from the forefront of popular memory. If the abstract threat of nuclear warfare remained intense for British and American citizens in World War II’s long aftermath, the actuality of the bodily suffering involved remained distant and the unfamiliar: only partially imagined and imaginable.

¹ For further detail on Allied media censorship relating to nuclear concerns, see David Seed, *Under the Shadow: The Atomic Bomb and Cold War Narratives* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2013), 28-9, and Yuko Shibata, “Dissociative Entanglement: US-Japan Atomic Bomb Discourses by John Hersey and Nagai Takashi”, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 13.1 (2012): 122-137, 123.



Figure 1: Caricatured Japanese figures in Allied propaganda posters during World War II.

Later modernist and postmodernist Anglophone speculative and science-fiction texts tended to either re-imagine a nuclear strike scripted onto British or American bodies – as in Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* (1959), Walter M. Miller’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) and Alfred Coppel’s *Dark December* (1960), which set nuclear devastation in Florida, Utah and California respectively – or else erased human bodies from the frame altogether, in dystopic representations of complete human annihilation. In Ray Bradbury’s “There Will Come Soft Rains” (1950), for example, an automated voice recording and the charred outlines of a family’s bodies are all that remain of human existence after nuclear attack: “their images burned on wood in one titanic instant [...] the silhouette in paint of a man mowing a lawn [...] a woman bent to pick flowers [...] a girl, hands raised to catch a ball which never came down.”² These texts either attempt to translate nuclear injury onto recognisably ‘domestic’ bodies for their readership, or turn to “alternative, non-human epistemologies” as they grapple with the imaginative “incomprehensibility of a completely lifeless planet”, eliding the specifics of bodily pain from the narrative altogether.³

Nuclear injury exemplifies the epistemological and ethical challenges posed by what Luc Boltanski calls “*la souffrance à distance*” or what Fuyuki Kurasawa terms “distant suffering”: the fact of suffering transmitted across both geographical distance and also across

² Ray Bradbury, “August 2026: There Will Come Soft Rains” in *The Martian Chronicles* (London: HarperVoyager, 2008), 280-289, 282.

³ Benjamin Kohlmann, “What Is It Like to Be a Rat? Early Cold War Glimpses of the Post-Human”, *Textual Practice* 28.4 (2014): 655-675, 656.

social, political, or racial divides.⁴ Conceptualising the pain of another is often difficult, but this difficulty is sharpened by the imaginative confrontation with the distant and unfamiliar body, the attempt to imagine pain in “the body of someone whose country may be far away, whose name can barely be pronounced, and whose ordinary life is unknown”.⁵ As Elaine Scarry notes, there are marked political consequences to this dynamic, with less ‘recognisable’ or ‘representable’ pain being correspondingly less likely to elicit attention or aid from others. Following Scarry, cultural and political theorist Judith Butler has explored the urgency of recognising our *shared* human vulnerability to pain and bodily destruction, resisting the modern political working of state violence that elide the humanity (and thus the recognisable suffering) of certain Others. Butler offers the concept of the “frame” of visibility through which “politics – and power – work in part through regulating what can appear, what can be heard” in the public sphere.⁶ This is not simply the working of direct censorship, as in the case of *hibakusha* literature and media coverage of the aftermath of the nuclear strike, but also the manipulation of affective response. The frames of war and of political practice more broadly, Butler observes, work by “selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (xiii), guiding us “to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images” (51).⁷ It is not merely that we are only allowed to see *certain* instances of pain and violence, Butler argues; it is that we are only allowed to see certain instances *as* pain, *as* violence.

In the long aftermath of World War II, with the Japanese and Korean bodies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki still relatively ‘unframed’ in the Western imagination, one very literal ‘framing’ device came to the fore in shaping public perception of nuclear conflict: the comic strip or graphic narrative. The small-frame panels of Anglo-American comics and graphic narratives represented a marked proportion of popular imaginings of atomic violence in the Western public sphere, from fan favourites like Superman, Krazy Kat, and Mickey Mouse confronting nuclear crises, to US civil defence comics like *If an A-Bomb Falls* (1951) and *The H-Bomb and You* (1954) offering advice on how to prepare for and survive a nuclear attack, to underground ‘comix’ publishing anti-nuclear storylines of graphically imagined atomic carnage from the late 1960s onwards. “With circulation figures reaching into the millions, cartoonists played a major role in forging the nation’s atomic awareness” in the long aftermath of World War II,⁸ very literally ‘framing’ the effects of nuclear conflict on the human body in visually imagined form for British and American audiences.

⁴ Luc Boltanski, *La Souffrance à distance* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007); Fuyuki Kurasawa, “In Praise of Ambiguity: On the Visual Economy of Distant Suffering”, in *Suffering, Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Michael Nijhawan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 23-50.

⁵ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9. See also Scarry’s *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing Between Democracy and Doom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014).

⁶ Judith Butler, *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006), 147.

⁷ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016), xiii, 51.

⁸ Ferenc Morton Szasz, *Atomic Comics: Cartoonists Confront the Nuclear War* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press), 2.

It may seem strange to find Raymond Briggs – best known as British author and illustrator of children’s picture-books such as *The Snowman* and *Father Christmas* (see Figure 2) – in a discussion of nuclear warfare and depictions of politicised pain. Yet Briggs’s graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* sits within this longer post-war history of atomic literature that attempted to articulate (or rather, to very literally *frame*) the agonies of nuclear injury to an Anglophone readership.⁹ *When the Wind Blows* figures the pain of nuclear injury in starkly graphic form via the domestic Western body – but elides the originary pained *foreign* body as itself still fundamentally unrepresentable. Laid out in comic-strip panels, the illustrations in *When the Wind Blows* are done in the same cosy style as Briggs’s earlier children’s books, peopled with plump little characters and bright watercolour renditions of a bucolic countryside setting. The visual style suits retired couple Jim and Hilda’s own comfortable, patriotic sense of security. Although they carefully follow the government instructions in the county council leaflets to prepare for a possible strike, to their minds nuclear warfare is really an issue belonging to Japan and Russia, a distinctly ‘foreign’ form of suffering. Yet a massive nuclear strike precipitates Jim and Hilda’s gruesome deaths from fallout, depicted in painstaking visual detail. The colour leaches from the pages, the newly reduced colour palette emphasising the blue-green complexion of radiation sickness, the red blood dripping from Jim’s gums, the purple welts on Hilda’s legs (see Figure 3). Even as they gaze upon their own injuries, however, Jim and Hilda refuse to recognise the reality of the situation. Hilda’s welts are varicose veins, Jim insists, and their bleeding gums are surely only the result of ill-fitting dentures.

⁹ Raymond Briggs, *When the Wind Blows* (London: Penguin), 1983.

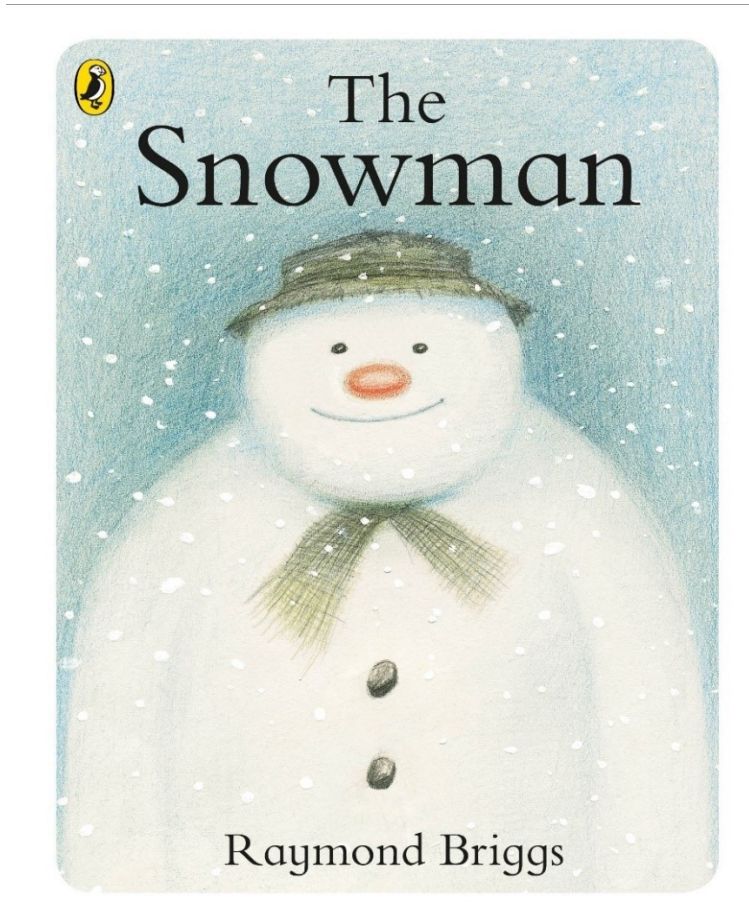


Figure 2: *The Snowman*, Raymond Briggs (1978)



Figure 3: Jim and Hilda's fallout sickness symptoms develop.

In the face of Jim and Hilda's heartbreakingly hapless attempts to comprehend the reality of nuclear suffering – that of others or their own – *When the Wind Blows* is carefully framed as a revelatory representation of nuclear suffering that is explicitly political in intention. The text was sent to every Member of Parliament, and the first page of the subsequent published editions is littered with quoted responses from various MPs, testifying to the narrative's expressive impact. "Horribly realistic. Such a war must be deterred", Lord Home of the Hirsel writes; John Garrett's February 1982 motion in the House of Commons, welcoming the book as "a powerful contribution to the growing opposition to nuclear armament", is also quoted. Briggs's visual framing of imagined nuclear suffering is overtly structured as a politically focused representation, anticipating Butler's concept of the "politically saturated" frame which brings various realms of existence into affectively engaging visibility within the public sphere. In *When the Wind Blows*, the pain that seems too foreign to threaten the loyal British subject is made starkly, shockingly immediate – literally 'visible' to the Anglophone reader, in vivid graphic detail. As Hillary Chute observes, graphic narratives can:

intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking what I think of as the risk of representation. Specifically, in comics produced after World War II, [...] we see that trauma does not always have to be disappearance; it can be plenitude, and excess of signification.¹⁰

In this vein, the unrelenting primary focus of *When the Wind Blows* is on Jim and Hilda's suffering bodies. With four notable exceptions, every panel in the narrative features Jim and Hilda's bodies, usually in close focus filling the small frame, tracing their visual detail of their slow succumbing to radiation poisoning, until the final panels fade mercifully to black. Even the four exceptions to this close focus on Jim and Hilda's bodies call attention to a narrative dynamic of 'distance brought close'. There are four full-page images in the text which feature no visible human bodies at all. The first three are shadowy, near-monochrome pictures of a vast nuclear missile "on a distant plain", fighter planes "in a distant sky" and a submarine "in a distant ocean". The reader is reminded at strategic intervals of the looming "distant" but approaching reality of the nuclear threat that Jim and Hilda struggle to conceptualise, rendered suddenly palpable here via the stark simplicity of the single-object, single-sentence pages. The fourth full-page image shows the actual moment of the missile strike, an entirely white double page tinged with pinkish-red at the corners, aligning the depiction of the white-hot flash of the nuclear explosion with an aesthetic of unrepresentability that recurs in many late modernist literary texts grappling with the depiction of nuclear threat and suffering, as for example in Bradbury's "There Will Come Soft Rains" discussed earlier.¹¹ However, the frames judder back into position on the next page, drawing Jim and Hilda's bodies directly back into the realm of nuclear injury

¹⁰ Hillary Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

¹¹ For further discussion of the aesthetic of unrepresentability as it appears in much late modernist and postmodern Anglo-American literature, see Jonathan Najarian, "Pressing the Wrong Button: Pynchon's

Briggs's depiction of the couple's nuclear-inflicted pain is located within a cosily domestic familiarity and associated affect. The couple's graphically abject suffering, as they vomit, leak blood and lose hair, is counterposed with the engaging familiarity of the domestic setting and story-book style, and the anatomical depiction of Jim and Hilda themselves. These are intensely 'cute' bodies, round faces simultaneously suggestive of retired contentment and a childish innocence, evoking the vulnerability or helplessness that Sianne Ngai identifies as associated affects of "cuteness", helping to call forth a protectionist impulse in the reader.¹² The first image we see of Jim, sketched below the title on the first leaf, shows his pudgy, diminutive figure straining to read the disproportionately large newspapers available in the public library, sharply juxtaposing his bodily vulnerability against the larger machinations of the political sphere (see Figure 4). Pain is rendered visible to the Anglo-American reader by being translated onto recognisable, and intensely sympathetic, bodies. Briggs's contemporary critic Peter Schwenger commented that these works "do not dictate a response to the nuclear threat so much as they make a response possible", countering the "numbness" of our imaginative capabilities with a graspable affective reality: "Our task now is, in Martin Buber's phrase, to imagine the real".¹³ *When the Wind Blows* presents a space of domestic intimacy, in which the familiarity of Jim and Hilda's bodies frames an affectively engaging, more immediately empathic depiction of nuclear suffering for the Anglo-American reader.

Postmodernism and the Threat of Nuclear War in *The Crying of Lot 49*", *Critique* 59.1 (2018): 41-56, and David Seed, *Under the Shadow: The Atomic Bomb and Cold War Narratives* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2013).

¹² Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

¹³ Peter Schwenger, "Writing the Unthinkable", *Critical Inquiry* 13.1 (1986): 33-48, 48.

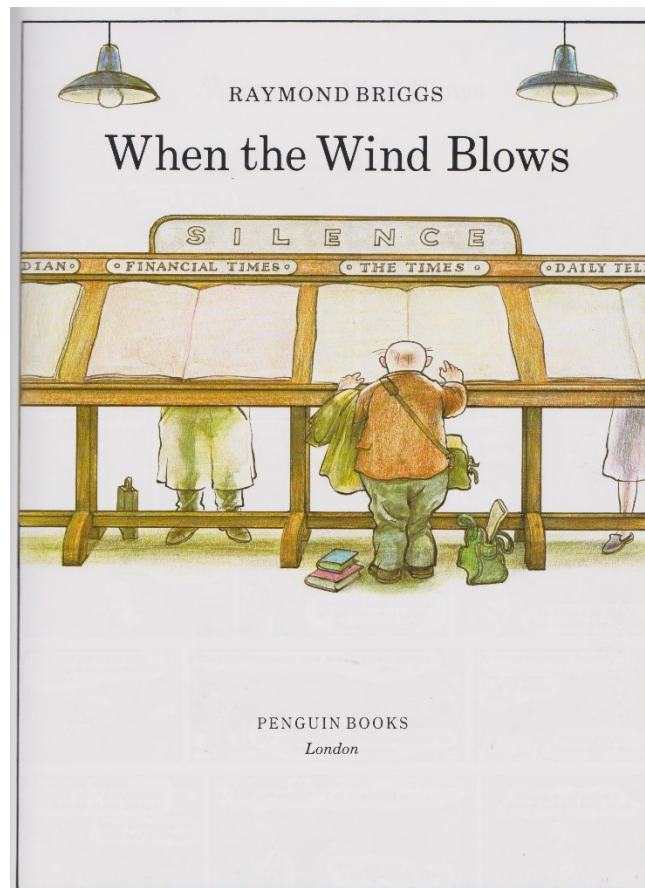


Figure 4: Jim's appearance on the title page of *When the Wind Blows*.

However, this recognition of Briggs's representational tactic of 'translating pain' for his expected audience draws us into the politics of communal familiarity. By presenting nuclear suffering via the more familiar, more immediately recognisable 'British' domestic body for its anticipated readership, *When the Wind Blows* erases (or continues the broader erasure of) the foreign body's suffering. Boltanski identifies the paradox of local versus global recognition that stalks the attempted representation of distant suffering, in which "singularity must be projected in such a way that suffering is made concrete [...] as if one could touch their wounds and hear their cries. But going into details always runs the risk of collapsing the demonstration into the local".¹⁴ Similarly, in her theorising of the frames that make selected experiences visible in the public sphere, Butler emphasises that "affect depends upon social supports for feeling [...], on social structure of perception", and within this social structure the politics of "likeness" or communal familiarity plays a key role in shaping individual response.¹⁵ Clinical pain studies corroborate Butler's theorising of the politics of "likeness", having demonstrated the link between victim familiarity and onlooker empathy, and the associated reduction in empathy when victim and onlooker are of different

¹⁴ Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*, trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 12.

¹⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 50, 36.

racial identities.¹⁶ Here, Jim and Hilda are recognisably, near-caricaturedly ‘British’ in representation, referring to each other as “ducks” and “dear”, eating treacle tart and bread-and-butter pudding, and facing the nuclear threat with an agonisingly outdated “Blitz spirit”. Calling up memories of World War II to try to comprehend the new military threat that faces them: “Well, if the worst comes to the worst, we’ll just have to roll up our sleeves, tighten our belts and put on our tin hats until it’s VE Day again”, Hilda reassures Jim. In the visual renditions of Jim and Hilda’s rose-tinted wartime memories, we see no suffering, ‘foreign’ or otherwise. In contrast to the detailed graphic suffering of the domestic English bodies of Jim and Hilda, then, there is no visual delineation of the pain suffered by any foreign body throughout *When the Wind Blows* – even though the Japanese and Korean bodies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are technically the only reference point available to either Jim and Hilda or to the reader for what post-nuclear suffering might look like.

In fact, there is only one reference to Japan and the nuclear strike in *When the Wind Blows*, and it reiterates the sense of a radical gulf of identificatory feeling between British and foreign bodies, between domestic and distant pain. Searching for his new white shirt, Jim muses, “They say it’s the correct thing to wear white. People in Hiroshima with patterned clothes got burned where the pattern was, and not so much on the white bits – even the buttons showed up.” Hilda responds, “Yes, but they were Japanese.” The foreign body is imagined as utterly distinct from the British body, so absolutely distant that Hilda cannot fathom that her and Jim’s skin might respond to nuclear radiation in the same way. As we watch the slow and gruesome effects of the nuclear strike consume Jim and Hilda’s bodies over the ensuing pages, this biopolitical failure of imagination is made agonisingly clear. In pragmatic terms, in order to appeal forcefully to a British readership as to the necessity of halting to nuclear arms race, Briggs needs to fit his suffering bodies within the affective framework of what ‘counts’ most vividly as suffering for his readership: the racially recognisable domestic body of their own nation. In doing so, however, he must continue the late modernist literary tradition in which the ‘foreign’ pain of the actual Japanese (and still more elided Korean) bodily suffering of the Allied nuclear strikes is distanced from view – both literally and affectively. In critiquing the misguided isolationism of this conception of the nuclear threat, *When the Wind Blows* underlines the challenge of acknowledging the pain of the distant Other in the politics of global suffering.

¹⁶ See, for example, Ruben T. Azevedo et al., “Their Pain is Not our Pain: Brain and Autonomic Correlates of Empathic Resonance with the Pain of Same and Different Race Individuals”, *Human Brain Mapping* 34.12 (2013): 3168-3181.