



Plan for Chaos (Liverpool University Press - Liverpool Science Fiction Texts & Studies)

John Wyndham , David Ketterer (Editor) , Andy Sawyer (Editor)

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Plan for Chaos is a never-before published novel by post-apocalyptic British science fiction writer John Wyndham (1903–69), best known for his “cozy catastrophe” novel about a venomous class of fictional plants, *The Day of the Triffids*. Written simultaneously with that well-known volume, which has been in print continuously since its publication in 1951, *Plan for Chaos* makes a fascinating companion to the author’s most famous work and offers a new angle on a writer often considered the direct descendent of the legendary H.G. Wells and an influence on such innovators as Ray Bradbury and Margaret Atwood.

Plan for Chaos (Liverpool University Press - Liverpool Science Fiction Texts & Studies) Details

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Author : John Wyndham , David Ketterer (Editor) , Andy Sawyer (Editor)

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Sharon says

I love John Wyndham's work, and the description of his books as "cozy science fiction" is perfect, summarizing how he takes middle-class British people, mostly living in the 1950s and 1960s, and turns their worlds upside-down with a sudden catastrophe. His books dwell less on the science of his fiction than on the way his ordinary characters, particularly his practical and principled male narrators, view a world that has suddenly been changed forever. *Plan for Chaos*, only recently published, was set aside by Wyndham, and I think he was wise. It doesn't begin to measure up to his best works, including *Day of the Triffids* and *The Chrysalids*, or even come close to his slighter but still charming works, including *Chocky* and *The Trouble with Lichen*.

One early problem with this book is a confusing narrative voice: Johnny, the narrator, is sort of American and sort of English and sort of Swedish and his narration style shifts throughout the book in a weird way; had the introduction not let the reader know the dated hard-boiled pseudo-Americanisms would decrease as the book progressed, I might not have stuck with it to the end. From a plot perspective, *Plan for Chaos* has a strangely bisected storyline that takes place partly in post-World War II America and partly in a very science-fictional milieu that ends up seeming implausible and even a bit ludicrous, in contrast to the wonderful way Wyndham shows a real world going more credibly wrong in his later books. I also found the attitudes about women and motherhood, as demonstrated by the narrator and other characters, very dated and dismissive, quite different from Wyndham's usually more egalitarian approach to the sexes.

The basic premise of the novel is intriguing, and I wish John Wyndham had returned to this book to give it the polish of his later novels and short stories. I'm glad, as a Wyndham fan, to have read the book, but unlike his other works, I don't expect to re-read this one.

Giles says

I'm not quite sure why there are so many poor, or at least lukewarm, reviews for this title: I found it thoroughly enjoyable. Context first, then: this manuscript lay unpublished for more than half a century and would have been Wyndham's first novel had he not put it down and knocked out *Day of the Triffids* between drafts. Some effort was made to get it into print in the 50s but no one was interested on either side of the Atlantic so it was overlooked until 2009.

As a great many reviewers here and elsewhere have pointed out, the first 50 or so pages read like a hard boiled noir, which is clearly not JW's strength but to dismiss it on those grounds is just plain silly. The plot ticks along perfectly well and it's rather charming - knowing his other work - to read him having a go at something along the lines of Hammett or Spillane. Then, when the book moves beyond the American pavement we get all the elements that we love about Wyndham's other works: grand schemes for conquest; involved debates about philosophy; ridicule of rigid dogma; no nonsense female protagonists; meta deconstruction of the story as it is taking place.

Beyond that there are a couple of great set piece scenes ([[MILD SPOILER]]the Flying saucer ride and the mass rally being two [[/SPOILER ENDS]])) and a typically open, reflective ending. It's a pity it took so long

to get this novel to press but now it's here I for one am very happy.

Bill says

An enjoyable story. This was written at the same times as Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*, but discovered at a later date. I did enjoy it, but not as much as some of his other stories; *Triffids*, *The Chrysalids*, *The Midwich Cuckoos*. It starts off as a mystery, but then moves along into a scifi adventure. It reminds me at times of the serials they used to have at the cinema and some of the early scifi movies. Not my favourite, but if you like John Wyndham a lot, you should read, as it is a fine example of his early writing.

Brian Hoskin says

Started off really well and I liked the idea. Just seemed to get a bit confused and fade away towards the end

Lee says

I've liked the other John Wyndham novels I've read not least because of the very scientific and very English style of narration. So it was a tad disconcerting when this book's introduction warned me that the style of narration herein is badly-done-American-noir-esque, and moreover that the novel is worth reading predominantly because it represents the point when Wyndham shifted from his earlier pulp style to his more famous later style that we all know and love. Indeed, *Plan for Chaos* was written while he was figuring out how to perfect *The Day of the Triffids*, the first of his "later" novels.

As it turns out, I must beg to differ with the introduction. Sure, the narration starts off sounding like an Englishman trying to do a restrained Raymond Chandler, but fairly soon our protagonist finds his own voice (which sounds fairly English if not overly scientific). And the plot is quite the ripping yarn.

The story is in two parts, the first is a bit of a mystery (in the genre sense, not "it's hard to quantify") with some 1950s B-movie shenanigans thrown in for good measure. The second part is much more thinky and philosophises about the role of science in our lives. It's almost a microcosm for Wyndham's writing style itself over the course of his life, but that's perhaps reading a little too much into it. Whatever the case, the two halves complement one another nicely and I heartily recommend the book they form.

Helen says

Plan for Chaos starts off like an American hardboiled detective story, but it doesn't quite hit the mark.
Speaking as an English person that has never been to America, the Americanisms don't feel right and the language is confusing. I had to read some paragraphs a few times before I could make sense of them.

When it moves from America it settles down into a decent story, with some interesting sci-fi inventions, a lot of them that are actually around today. Though the idea of clones is so common these days that it was hard for me not to want to shout at Johnny Farthing for not realising straight away.

From there it slows down into a lot of philosophising about war and the base instincts of the human race. While this is interesting, and a lot of it is scarily relevant today, it is quite slow. I also felt a bit like I was missing something because I don't know much about 1950's politics, and the book doesn't talk much about the world political atmosphere.

The ending is anticlimactic. There is more action towards the end, but Johnny always seems to be a bit out of it. He hears about things afterwards or watches other people doing things. It's frustrating to read and makes what could be an interesting story into a dull one.

John Wyndham's attitude towards women in this book is dated, yet progressive for its time. He shows over and again that women can be intelligent. Johnny Farthing spends most of the book not knowing what is going on, and with no idea of what he should do next. When he does attempt action, his efforts are misguided and cause more problems than they solve.

In contrast, Johnny's fiancee Freda seems very intelligent, she understands their situation and spends a lot of her time explaining things to Johnny that he just can't see. A lot of the other women in the book are also shown to be intelligent, and to be capable leaders.

This is nice to read, but at the same time, he also portrays women as all having the shared goal of settling down with a stable family and as many children as possible. This is one of the main themes in the book and is repeated all the way through. The men in the book have no interest in children or family at all. It's irritating, but it was written in the 1950's and it does better than most books from that time.

If you're new to John Wyndham I wouldn't recommend you start with this. It has a dodgy start and sketchy pacing and it's not one of his best. If you are already a fan it is worth reading as there are some interesting ideas in there that are still relevant today.

Carolynlee says

Interesting concept, definitely not his best. This makes sense when considering it was written at the same time as Day of the Triffids, and not published immediately. I enjoyed the analysis of society at the time, but the story itself was a bit loose.

Derek Collett says

A real oddity this one. Written shortly after he had finished The Day of the Triffids, Plan for Chaos is another sci-fi cum catastrophe novel by John Wyndham but one that starts out very differently to his magnum opus. In the edition I read, there is a very good introduction by Christopher Priest explaining the book's genesis and gently deflating the reader's expectations by pointing out the book's deficiencies, although it's a little disconcerting to then read the book and tick off those deficiencies one by one!

The book starts with Johnny Farthing, a newspaper photographer, realizing that women who look exactly like his girlfriend Freda are being bumped off one by one. He investigates, narrowly avoids being done in himself and, helped by a case of mistaken identity, escapes. He is then whisked off by flying saucer (yes really) to a hidden base in the jungle where he discovers that one of his relatives, Aunt Marta, a woman in

thrall to Hitler, is trying to repopulate the world with clones of Johnny and Freda in order to re-establish German supremacy. You really couldn't make it up, could you? A power struggle breaks out between different factions at 'Headquarters', The Mother (i.e. Aunt Marta) is toppled and our heroes manage to escape by flying saucer and return home. The Nazi menace is quashed and everyone lives happily ever after.

As Priest points out, the first few chapters of this book, set in a sort of pseudo-New York, are very unconvincing. Wyndham apparently thought that his book would have no success in the American market without an American narrator but he failed to nail the authentic American voice and so this opening section reads like a very shaky noir detective thriller. The trip in the flying saucer (very well described this) and the account of Farthing's first few days at Headquarters are intriguing and well written, albeit far from gripping, and constituted the book's only real high spot for me. The first meeting between Johnny and The Mother is interesting but thereafter the pace of the story is crippled by long speeches about political ambition, etc. given by the main protagonists. Farthing himself is a bit of a doormat - he thinks about escaping but makes no concerted attempt to do so (something along these lines would have enlivened the latter part of the book considerably). One good thing is that, as Priest observes, Wyndham drops most of the Americanisms as the book goes on so that the writing has a much less jarring quality as the story approaches its climax.

Plan for Chaos is full of interesting ideas but ideas don't always make for great novels, as is the case here. I feel this is one for Wyndham fans and sci-fi buffs but not perhaps for the general reader. However, it has made me to want to read The Day of the Triffids for what I think will be the first time, so that is at least something to be said in its favour.

Daniel says

This book never really began. I have an idea of what he meant for it to be; and with this in mind from near the beginning, I was left disappointed at the turn of every page, until the last. I feel as though the story was just a means of commenting on gender roles and eugenics, and though the story was certainly intriguing in its abstract, it was by no means strong enough to provide cover for such blatant social commentary. As a result, the book reads for the most part very clumsily, as though the author were constantly taking breaks from the events to drop an overt opinion that he lacked either the skill or the patience to show through the story. Yet, I know Wyndham does not lack the skill to achieve covert social commentary through his novels, as I've discovered in reading The Chrysalids and The Midwich Cuckoos. This knowledge of Wyndham's authorial prowess, instead of consoling and uplifting me, only added to the heaviness of my boots as I trudged through the (seemingly) endless swamps of immature commentary.

On a more practical note –inasmuch as the fabula is practical versus the narrative impractical, which I'm not sure is altogether the best way of saying what I mean to say– I fear Wyndham rather underestimated his audience in the writing of Plan for Chaos. The protagonist comes to his realizations and conclusions long after they should have occurred to the reader. Of course, it has occurred to me that perhaps the male protagonist has been made intentionally slow-minded, as a further means of social commentary; however, I don't think, if this is the case (which I somewhat doubt), that such commentary should interfere so strongly with the reader's enjoyment of a novel, as it unfortunately has in my case.

Not that I could have done better. I'm just saying, he could, and he should have.

Apes says

Slow but chilling disturbing thriller/sci-fi of the what-if variety. Another one of those post world war two Nazi conspiracy books. Honestly, this isn't Wyndham at his best, and I wouldn't suggest starting off with this book if you're new to Wyndham. Part of me feels a bit naughty reading this, because I'm not sure that any of us ought to be. From what I've read about the book itself, Wyndham wrote this at the same time he was writing the absolutely marvellous *Day of the Triffids*. *Triffids* was published, we love it etc etc... whereas *Plan for Chaos* was essentially put away in a cupboard. He did write and publish other books. For some reason, this wasn't published. It's only 40 years after his death that it is published and we get to read it. I just wonder what Wyndham would have thought about that.

In this book the evil dudes are the Swedes though! Johnny Farthing (not a very Swedish name, I know) and cousin Freda are living in an American metropolis. They are cousins who want to get married but are waiting until her disapproving father dies. Johnny is a photographer and through his work he discovers a connection between a number of recent "suicides" - all the women looked identical. Not similiar, but that they could be twins. More worrying for him however, is the fact that they all also look like his lady love, Freda. Worse, Freda is attacked, then disappears. He has no clues or idea what is going on, although witnesses seem to think they saw him hanging about.

*****SPOILERS NOW*****

So enter clone wars and a Nazi comeback plan that isn't really a plan for chaos as a plan for world order and domination. The mother, a black-sheep of the family who ran off and joined the Nazi's in her youth, has spawned hundreds of children through biological engineering - all twins of one another. In recalling their agents back to base camp, there is confusion as Freda and Johnny also look like them. The unwitting cousins are also shipped back to what it possibly the oddest family reunion I've read in a long time. They find out about their aunt's evil plan. They talk a lot about it, analyse it (I said this book was a bit slow), and Freda doesn't worry too much, because basically all women get hysterical and desperate to have babies (nice bit of lovely sexist stereotyping there), so all the sisters are going to throw their spanners into the works at some point. Right... naturally though, as with all best laid plans, not everything happens as planned. Just as two siblings can squabble and disagree, just imagine what hundreds of siblings stuck together in one building might do.

Chris says

Here is a curiosity: a novel by the author of *The Day of the Triffids*, written around the same time (1948 to 1951) but abandoned, only to see the light of day around sixty years later when it's finally published. It's not difficult to see why Wyndham gave up on it -- its compound of different genres, disparate themes and mangled speech patterns make for awkward reading -- and yet it's an interesting experiment which, given radical tweaking, could have been made to work.

The basic set-up is that supporters of the Nazi cause have survived into the 1970s, somewhere in South America we deduce, where they have built a secret underground complex. Here their clandestine wartime experiments for perpetuating a master race have resulted in the successful breeding of human clones; all that is required is to fool the superpowers into annihilating each other with atomic bombs -- the chaos of the novel's title -- after which the new Germans will re-populate the earth. Their technicians have also developed flying saucer technology and cloaking devices, causing international consternation and confusion in a world unaware of their existence.

Into this massive conspiracy stumbles Johnny Farthing, an American magazine photographer with a mixed

British and Swedish background. He discovers that a number of women who've died in suspicious circumstances all appear to have similar facial features and, most worryingly of all, they all resemble his cousin Freda, who is also his fiancée. (The cover of the Penguin edition alludes to this coincidence with its illustration of a blonde seen full-face, her profile shown twice over in her hair-do's contours rather like the reverse of a Rubin Vase optical illusion.) As he investigates further he finds that he too is being mistaken for somebody else; and then Freda herself disappears. So far this reads like a plot for a detective thriller, but at the point when Johnny himself is taken prisoner *Plan for Chaos* enters science fiction territory.

There are many ideas milling around, a lot of them typical of the postwar period but also with some relevance now. Cloning of course was a feature of Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), here adapted to Nazi ideologies and examined for some of its practical implications. As for UFOs, the fact that the Nazis had really been developing new aircraft technology, combined with the worldwide explosion of 'sightings' of saucer-shaped flying objects after Kenneth Arnold reported his own observations in June 1947 -- the year before Wyndham began this novel -- soon generated postwar speculation that the two were somehow linked, speculation that continues even to this day.

It also mayn't be a coincidence that Wyndham began his dystopian novel about the planned resurgence of a rightwing tyranny in the same year in which that archetypal modern satire, Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, was published. The description of the Big Brother party -- uninterested in the good of others but interested solely in power for its own sake -- applies equally to the group that Farthing encounters hidden in the South American jungle; but instead of Big Brother we encounter The Mother. As the narrator soon observes, she is a human equivalent -- with all that this implies -- of the hive's queen bee or the queen in an underground termite mound, surrounded and serviced by myriads of workers and soldiers.

The editors' note and the introduction by novelist Christopher Priest give the background to this novel's gestation and stillbirth, making clear the difficulties the author had, especially with tone -- the Englishman wrote it with the American market in mind, and tried unsuccessfully to jump through several hoops to get his hero's phraseology right. Too often the novel even takes on the guise of a polemical tract before shying away with a wisecrack from the narrator.

The anticlimactic ending (the last chapter is headed "Finality?" with a question mark) to me reinforces the ambivalent feelings he had about the novel's conclusion. Wyndham's chapter headings and epigraphs are mostly from Shakespeare -- perhaps a nod to *Brave New World*, which used Miranda's words in *The Tempest* for its title besides citing other Shakespeare plays -- but the way the plot fizzles out seems to suggest to me that this use of quotations was no substitute for a convincing structure. Still, as a portrait of mischief on a grand scale -- Hamlet's 'miching mallecho' -- it does its job well.

Plan for Chaos is clearly no masterpiece, flawed or otherwise, but just occasionally there are inklings of what it could have become, given time and a lot of redrafting. Sometimes the action pushes along at a fair lick, and one may imagine that its filmic qualities and possibilities could encourage some enlightened producer to adapt it for the screen, a process that would curtail its longeurs and maybe even turn its narrator into a halfway convincing protagonist. As it now stands though it's imperfect, however pregnant with possibilities.

Laura Malkin says

Love John wyndham, do NOT like this book. Felt too long and exacerbated by the blathering of the central

character. I was more interested in his gf. However it got better in part two, sped up and more action and just less... faff!!

Peter Kebbell says

Considering that John Wyndham abandoned publication of this novel in favour of *Day of The Triffids*, it shouldn't come as a surprise that this isn't quite up to the standard you expect from the master of mid 20th century sci-fi. Even so, it's still a thoroughly enjoyable read with a disturbingly plausible plot which, as with many of Wyndham's works, gives a good insight into the world of 1950s politics, while engaging and entertaining the reader.

As long as you aren't expecting this to be as good as Wyndham's best, you shouldn't be disappointed.

John Adams says

Plan For Chaos by John Wyndham

Plan For Chaos was written around the same time as Wyndham's signature novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1950-51), but that's where the resemblance ends. *Triffids* went on to be adapted for film and TV and by the time the author died it was firmly established as a national treasure. *Plan For Chaos* ended up languishing unread and unpublished in Wyndham's papers, in what is now the John Wyndham Archive, which has been held by the University of Liverpool since 1998.

Johnny Farthing is a photographer in post-WW2 New York. He's engaged to his cousin Freda. Their family is originally Swedish. Johnny's parents made their way to America via England. Their mutual Aunt Marta sounds like something out of Wagner - blonde and Nordic - so it was no surprise to anyone when she became an enthusiastic supporter of Hitler. Johnny and Freda are understandably keen to put that all behind them and concentrate on bringing Freda's father around to the idea of their marrying.

Johnny is unnerved by multiple stories of violent deaths of young women. As a photographer on *Choice* magazine, he's plenty used to snapping crime scenes and corpses but this is different. Not only are there so many of them but all of them bear a striking resemblance to his fiancee. Even worse, he discovers Freda in her apartment with her head inside the gas oven. Then she disappears completely after she's been stretchered out of the building:

"The police at home were stalled. They'd found the ambulance. It had been hired. The stretcher with Freda on it had been off-loaded at Grand Central, and the men paid. After that nothing - except one recap seemed to remember a stretcher being loaded into a black van."

Johnny tracks down one of Freda's doubles who is still alive. If it's unnerving enough to encounter a clone of your future wife, double that when she's nothing like her in personality:

"It was then that I began to notice more of the things about her that were not Freda. She was with an older man who looked like a Senator would like to look, and knew it: Leonine-orator type. The technique she was using on him - well, of course, to judge these things with a properly evaluating eye you have to be in the

racket of being a woman yourself."

Johnny then discovers that not only are there multiple Fredas but worse still also multiple Johnnys running around. Posing as one of his doubles, he's able to infiltrate the shadowy organisation who have facilitated the cloning process. Everyone speaks German and they are determined to ship him off to deep in the South American jungle:

"The first weirdness of looking from one similar face to another, and another, did begin to blunt a little in time. And as it did, I began to perceive a new quality about the place: an oppressive something in the atmosphere."

I loved this book. The publication of a fresh John Wyndham novel forty years after his death was an unexpected treat and it didn't disappoint.

Enjoy!

Rebecca says

I'm always excited to read John Wyndham's novels but this one took me such a long time to read. I started this book in March 2018 and got into the first few chapters but eventually, I felt like putting the book down for a bit because it just read like a typical noir and that's not really something I typically enjoy. Fast-forward to December 2018 and I finally pick the book back up. It took me to about 90 pages into this book before I started to actually get into the story. There were a few parts of this book that I found to be quite predictable but once I got past those parts I was quite enjoying reading through to see where the story would end. I always enjoy the endings to John Wyndham's books as they're quite thought-provoking, this one was no exception. I would say that this is not my favourite of John Wyndham's books but it is to be expected given that this one was rejected by publishers initially and was only published 40 years after John Wyndham's death.
