The Chrysalids
by John Wyndham

SUMMARY

The Chrysalids is a science fiction story by John Wyndham, a popular twentieth-century British writer. It takes place in the future, many years after a nuclear war has devastated large areas of the world. The society of Waknuk in Labrador has survived, but it is a primitive agrarian society reminiscent of Salem, Massachusetts at the time of the Salem witch hunts. However, in Waknuk it isn't witches but mutants that the people fear. Radiation from Massachusetts at the time of the Salem witch hunts. However, in

After the Second World War, stories and films involving threats to the survival of the world from outside forces became very popular. This may be attributed to the collective trauma experienced by those who had endured the horrors of the war. Reading about and seeing on screen the triumph of ordinary people against mythical monsters had a cathartic effect on people for whom the monsters had been all too human. The war had also brought the world into the nuclear age and there were understandable fears about the effects of the new technology and about where possession of nuclear weapons would lead society. The advent of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union exacerbated these fears.

The Chrysalids takes as its starting point a world which has already been devastated by nuclear war. Although the people of Waknuk have few memories of the time of the Old People, they know that the division of the world into areas such as the Blacklands, the Badlands and the Fringes has come about through a terrible war. The place names give us some idea of what has happened. Waknuk is in Labrador in Canada, which places the Blacklands, the worst affected area and, no doubt, the epicentre of the final nuclear explosion, in the United States. David's Uncle Axel reports that sailors who go too close to land there become sick and die, which suggests a strong concentration of residual radiation. Sealand would seem to be New Zealand, far enough away from the United States and the Soviet Union (perceived to be the likely opponents in a nuclear war) to have survived relatively intact. The concentric nature of the devastation brought about by a nuclear explosion, with the effects of radiation decreasing the further you are from the epicentre, fits with what we know from the real nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan in World War II. In the book, the effects of radiation are still felt in Waknuk, generations after the end of the war, with occasional mutations in crops, animals and humans. This is also something scientists have noted from the world's first experience of nuclear weapons and more recently from the explosion of the nuclear power station at Chernobyl.

The society of Waknuk is dominated by a religion which is obsessed by perfection. Every Sunday, in church, the people recite a creed which declares exactly how many limbs a person must have. Anything which is different from this description is termed a Deviation and the people are told that God hates Deviations and demands their destruction. Before a baby is accepted, it must be examined by an inspector and then given a certificate of perfection. A child that fails the test is killed and a woman who gives birth to three Deviations can be divorced by her husband and cast out.

In describing this rigid and heartless society, Wyndham is attacking the kind of religious or social intolerance that excludes anyone who is in any way different. Uncle Axel tells David of countries beyond...
the Blacklands where the people look very different. Interestingly, they too believe that they look ‘right’, though it is unclear whether they are also intolerant of outsiders. Bigotry, hypocrisy and ignorance are the prevailing characteristics of Waknuk and the story chronicles the escape of David and the others to a world of greater enlightenment.

Wyndham is also highlighting the foolishness of judging by outward appearances. Sophie’s six toes are a small and insignificant feature of her appearance. The telepathic powers of David and the other children pose far more of a threat to the authorities, yet they escape persecution for years because their ‘deviation’ is not visible.

If Wyndham’s bleak vision is a metaphor for twentieth century society, then no one escapes lightly. The bigotry and intolerance of Waknuk are as reminiscent of communism with its imposition of conformity and extermination of dissenters as they are of fundamentalist religions which insist that they possess the one and only truth. The destruction of all that is perceived to be imperfect also has echoes of Hitler’s desire for a perfect Aryan race and his extermination of Jews, homosexuals and the disabled.

The title, The Chrysalids, is somewhat ambiguous. The word chrysalis is derived from chrysalis, the stage which the larvae of moths and butterflies pass through before they become adults. It is a stage in which the insect appears dormant and unmoving, but changes are taking place inside which enable it to emerge from the chrysalis as a more advanced form of life. In the novel the word chrysalids may refer to David and the other telepathic children. They could be seen as the intermediate stage between the people of Waknuk whose fear of the past has led to a stagnant, retrograde society and the people of the free world, Sealand, who have progressed. In their escape to Sealand, the children are like insects leaving behind their crawling caterpillar existence to emerge from their chrysalis as free-flying butterflies.

On the other hand, the whole society of Waknuk could be seen as a chrysalis, a dormant and stagnant intermediate stage between the earlier humans who caused the nuclear destruction and the new enlightened and telepathic humans who live in Sealand.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Michael’s last words to the others as they leave are ‘We’ll meet again.’ In small groups, students write the story of how Michael and Rachel escape from Waknuk and join the others in Sealand.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the Before You Read sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1–4

alien (n) a creature that comes from another world

arrow (n) a thin straight weapon with a point at one end that you shoot from a bow

certificate (n) a document that officially states that something is true

chrysalis (n) a creature that comes from another world

Chapters 5–8

basket (n) a container made from thin pieces of wood woven together

bow (n) a curved wooden weapon with a sharp point, used for shooting arrows

power (n) a special ability to do something

tracks (n) marks on the ground made by an animal, person or vehicle

Chapters 9–11

cave (n) a large hole in the side of a cliff

spray (v) to make liquid come out of a container in a stream of very small drops

stick (v) to join something to something else using a substance such as glue

thread (n) a long thin string

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Tell students that this book is about a society where people are not allowed to be different. They must be perfect.

People who have something wrong with their bodies have to live in a horrible place where there isn’t enough food and babies which are born different are killed.

1. Put students into small groups and ask them to imagine that they live in this society. How would they feel? What would they do if they, or a member of their family, had a baby with six toes? What would they do if they suspected there was something wrong with one of their neighbours? Groups then report back to the class.

2. In small groups, students discuss how our society treats people who are different.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Part One

CHAPTERS 1–4

1. In bed after his father beat him, David told Rosalind and the others about Sophie and what happened to her. Ask students to work in pairs and to role-play the conversation between David and Rosalind.

2. Put students in small groups and tell them to imagine that Aunt Harriet left a letter for her sister before she killed herself. In this letter she explained why she was going to kill herself and her baby, how she felt about the people of Waknuk and how she felt when her sister wouldn’t help her. Ask them to write the letter.

CHAPTERS 5–8

1. Ask students to discuss who is the worst character in the story: David’s father, his mother, the inspector or Alan. Why do they think this?

2. Ask students to discuss whether Uncle Axel was right to kill Alan.

CHAPTERS 9–11

In small groups, students tell the story of the escape into the Fringes and the rescue by the woman from Sealand from the point of view of one of the following characters. As they tell the story to the class, each member of the group takes a turn to say a sentence.

(a) Rosalind, (b) Michael, (c) Sophie
The Chrysalids

CHAPTERS 1–4

Chapter 1
1. Close your book. Choose the right ending for these sentences.
   (a) Sophie was different from other children because...
      (i) she had strange dreams about a city by the sea.
      (ii) her dress didn’t have a cross on the front.
      (iii) she had six toes on each foot.
   (b) In David’s dream...
      (i) his father killed Sophie because she was a Deviation.
      (ii) his father killed a pig because it was a Deviation.
      (iii) his father killed Sophie and a pig because they were Deviations.

2. Why do the people of Waknuk kill Deviations?
3. Look at these names.
   Sophie   Mary   Rosalind
   Who is David’s (a) sister? (b) friend? (c) cousin?

Chapter 2
1. How did Uncle Axel find out that David and Rosalind could talk by thought-shapes? How is Uncle Axel different from David’s father?

2. Are these sentences right or wrong? Correct the wrong ones.
   (a) The people of the Fringes look like the people from Waknuk.
   (b) The man with long thin arms and legs looked like David’s father.
   (c) David thought Sophie’s feet were terrible.
   (d) Alan looked at Sophie’s footprint and saw that she had six toes.

Chapter 3
1. Put the correct word into these sentences. Then put the sentences in the right order.
   (a) The inspector said that only animal Deviations are .................................., not people.
   (b) David’s father hit him with a ...................................
   (c) The inspector asked David lots of .................................. about Sophie.
   (d) Sophie and her parents .................................. their house that evening.
   (e) David told Rosalind and the .................................. about Sophie.
   (f) David .................................. at Sophie’s house all night.
   (g) David .................................. at Sophie’s house all night.

2. Draw a map to show the position of Waknuk, the Blacklands, the Badlands and the Fringes.

Chapter 4
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why didn’t anyone talk about the new baby before the inspector came?
   (b) What could David’s father do if his wife had three babies which were Deviations?
   (c) What did Aunt Harriet want David’s mother to do?
   (d) What happened to Aunt Harriet?
2. Which of the words below describe the people in the story?
   different cold lovely angry sad
   David’s father:
   Aunt Harriet:
   Petra:
   David’s mother:
   Aunt Harriet’s baby:
CHAPTERS 5–8

Chapter 5
1. Join these beginnings and ends of sentences.
   (a) David asked God to make him ____________________________
   (b) David and his friends found out new things ____________________________
   (c) There were eight children ____________________________
   (d) They found out about Petra’s special power ____________________________
   (e) They couldn’t explain the danger to Petra ____________________________
   (f) The men from the fields were unsure of David’s story ____________________________
   (i) who could talk in thought-shapes.
   (ii) because they didn’t hear Petra shouting.
   (iii) because she sent out strong messages when she fell in the river.
   (iv) because she was young and couldn’t understand.
   (v) the same as other people.
   (vi) because Michael told them what he learnt at school.

2. Why do you think David describes the news that Anne is getting married as ‘a new worry’?

Chapter 6
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why didn’t David and the others want Anne to marry Alan?
   (b) Why do you think Anne stopped sending thought-shapes to the others?
   (c) Who do you think killed Alan?

2. Write the letter that Anne left before she killed herself.

Chapter 7
1. This chapter is called Messages. Which people get messages in this chapter and what are the messages?
2. Are these sentences right or wrong? Correct the wrong ones.
   (a) Jerome Skinner didn’t believe that Sally and Katherine heard Petra’s cries.
   (b) Uncle Axel knew about Petra because David told him.
   (c) Petra could only receive messages from people close to her.
   (d) Uncle Axel killed Alan because Alan knew about David and his friends.
   (e) All David’s friends got away before the inspector arrived.

Chapter 8
Match the names of the people with the endings to make correct sentences.
   (a) David ____________________________
   (b) Rosalind ____________________________
   (c) Michael ____________________________
   (d) Sally and Katherine ____________________________
   (e) Petra ____________________________
   (i) killed a man who followed their tracks.
   (ii) told the inspector about David, Rosalind and Petra.
   (iii) sent the groups of men the wrong way.
   (iv) received a message from a woman in Sealand.
   (v) found out that his dream city could be real.

CHAPTERS 9–11

Chapter 9
1. Imagine people in the story say these things. Who says them and who do they say them to?
   (a) ‘Go away, we don’t want you here!’
   (b) ‘We’re coming to help you.’
   (c) ‘I am your uncle.’
   (d) ‘Leave me alone!’

2. What do you think is going to happen next? Discuss your ideas with another student.

Chapter 10
1. This chapter is called Brothers at War. Who are the brothers?
2. Answer these questions.
   (a) How did Sophie help Rosalind and Petra escape from Gordon’s tent?
   (b) Describe the place where Sophie lives.
   (c) What happened to David’s father?
   (d) What made the strange noise?

Chapter 11
Close your book and read these sentences. Put the sentences in the correct order.
   (a) The flying machine took David, Rosalind and Petra back to Sealand.
   (b) The woman sprayed the threads on David, Rosalind and Petra.
   (c) The men stopped fighting and tried to escape from the threads.
   (d) Shiny threads came out of the flying machine.
   (e) David saw the city from his dreams.
   (f) The woman sprayed the threads on Michael.
   (g) Michael said he would go back to Waknuk to get Rachel.

Activities after reading the book

1. What do you think is the most exciting part of the story? Why?
2. Imagine that you are making a film of The Chrysalids. Make notes about what you will do. Where will you film it? Which actors will you ask to play the parts of David, his father, Rosalind, Petra and Sophie? Which parts of the story will be difficult to film and why? Will you give the story a different ending? If so, what will you change?