

John Wyndham's "Chocky" (1968): The First Covert Alternate World?

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"*Sic fas aut nefas*": a villain unoriginally balances while moving toward an atrocity involving another Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (2.1.133-35): "Be it right or wrong." With consistent emphasis, Le Guin has presented us with worlds that offer us choices among varieties of right and wrong. Without gods to command or forbid (*FS* 137), Le Guin still wants us to make those choices, and presents *fas* and *nefas*—by whatever names—as a choice that is meaningful and a sacred duty.—**Richard D. Erlich, Professor Emeritus, Miami University of Ohio**

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John Wyndham's *Chocky* (1968): The First Covert Alternate World? In "Alternate Presents: The Ambivalent Historicism of *Pattern Recognition*" (*SFS* 33.3 [2006]), Neil Easterbrook focuses on what he understands to be deliberate minor counterfactuals in William Gibson's novel (489-90, 500 n8). These counterfactuals inform a reader familiar with sf protocols that *Pattern Recognition* belongs to the alternate histories/alternate worlds subgenre. When I commented on Easterbrook's article in "The Present World in Other Terms" (*SFS* 34.1 [2007]: 170-71), I assumed that Gibson's novel was possibly the first example of such a covert alternate world. I now wish to propose an example that precedes Gibson's novel by thirty-five years.

In "John Wyndham and 'the Searing Anguish of Childhood': From 'Fairy Story' to *Chocky*" (*Extrapolation* 41 [Summer 2000]: 87-103), I argue that John [Wyndham Parkes Lucas] Beynon Harris's (JBH's) 1963 novella "Chocky" and his 1968 novel of the same title are the culmination of a series of his stories (including "Child of Power" [1939] and "But a Kind of Ghost," written circa

1951) in which a child or young adult benefits from an otherworldly communication. The unseen, sexually ambiguous alien whose name sounds a bit like "Chocky" and who acts as a kind of teacher/guardian angel for a boy named Matthew represents JBH's desire for an idealized form of helpful communication with his father, who disappeared from his life when his parents separated in 1911; his father died in 1933.

But that is not the whole story. There is a further autobiographical dimension to the novel version, which was composed after JBH on July 26, 1963, married the just-retired schoolteacher Grace Wilson (with whom he had had a relationship since 1935) and they both left their very long-term communal London residence, the Penn Club, and moved to a modest house in Steep, in Hampshire, where he had attended Bedales School (1918-21). It involves recognizing *Chocky* as also the last of another JBH story-series, what might be termed his "time-schism love stories." Beginning with the unpublished "The Man Who Returned" (written in 1931) and proceeding through "Chronoclasm" (1953), "Opposite Number" (1954), "Stitch in Time" (1961), "Random Quest" (1961), and the unpublished "Modification" (written in 1964), each is about a man who should have married a particular woman; she has gone on to marry someone else. The situation is rectified by some kind of time-switch transfer to an alternate world, where the "right" relationship (a minor counterfactual from the primary-world point of view) applies. The detailed account in *Chocky* of the first meeting of narrator David Gore and Mary Bosworth on a coach tour supposedly bound for Rome, soon after she has completed her history degree at the University of London (all part of an addition written for the novel version), corresponds to the first meeting in summer 1927 of JBH and Mary [or "Molly"] Cathcart Borer (1906-94), a future prolific author, screen-writer, and social historian (and one of the two women he thought he should have married), soon after she had completed her University of London degree. (The other Mrs. Right was his beautiful first cousin, Dorothy Joan Parkes.) This means that although *Chocky* appears, on the basis of references to hovercraft (Penguin edition 49), Jack de Manio (87), a transistor radio (106), and a Z car (134) to be set in the early 1960s, there is an implicit earlier autobiographical chronology by which the story is set in an alternate "1943," "sixteen years" (10) after David and Mary first met. In this chronology, David and Mary married in "1928" and Matthew was born in "1931." These dates can also, I suspect, be approximately applied to the likely primary-world genesis of the story, which seems to have had a much earlier origin than its 1963 novella publication date implies. In a probable allusion to "Chocky," Peter Hebdon, Managing Editor of the London publisher of most of "Wyndham"'s work, Michael Joseph, in his letter to JBH of October 12, 1967, quotes JBH's characteristically self-deprecatory dismissal of this "pre-war production."

The different temporal world-setting of *Chocky* indicates that it should be viewed as the one-sided (i.e., other-sided) culmination of JBH's series of "time-schism love stories." It is about an alternative "1943" that results from a shearing off from JBH's reality at some point in 1928, when he should have married Molly, who in 1935 instead married the archaeologist Oliver Myers. This "1943"

resembles the actual early 1960s, not least in the fact that no world war is in progress.

The strongest evidence that *Chocky* is set in an alternate world is the reference, in an addition to Chapter 6, to a book that Matthew has been reading: "It was Lewis Mumford's *Living in Cities*" (76). There is no such Mumford title. Similar Mumford titles are *The Culture of Cities* (1938) and his major work, *The City in History* (1961), which projects his notion of an ideal "organic city" in balance with nature. JBH was an admirer of Mumford's work. In his war-letter to Grace of February 12, 1945 (two years after the hidden year-setting of *Chocky*), he informs her that "I've started in on the first Mumford—and it's very interesting." Matthew is bored by the Mumford book he has been reading, but Chocky, he says, "thinks it's interesting" (77). The first Mumford book that JBH read in 1945 was *The Story of Utopia* (1922). And the "1943" world that JBH describes in *Chocky* amounts to a personal utopia in which he marries Molly Borer, has two children (one adopted) and, as the adopted child, regains contact with the father he lost 32 years previously.

A non-fiction Penguin pamphlet was published in 1942 entitled *Living in Cities* by Ralph Tubbs. Profusely illustrated, it anticipates a time after the war when the UK's destroyed cities can be rebuilt along much more progressive lines. Tubbs includes Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* (1938) among his acknowledgments. Tubbs's *Living in Cities* was available to be read in 1943 and no doubt JBH did read it. But only David Gore, Matthew, and Chocky could have read Mumford's *Living in Cities* in "1943." It did not exist in 1943 (or at any later point in Mumford's life) in our reality.

We can now more fully understand the disclaimer that precedes *Chocky*: "All persons and institutions in this story (other than Jack de Manio and the BBC) are entirely fictional[.]" In place of "mythical," with its suggestion of a higher truth, one would expect "fictional." But the alternate world of *Chocky* is more appropriately described as "mythical" because it represents JBH's ideal reality. Jack de Manio began hosting the early morning "Today" radio program in 1958. He was famous for his frequent time-slip announcements and JBH mentions him in a lengthy addition in the novel (83-123) for that very reason. "Jack de Manio said: 'The time is *exactly* twenty-five and a half minutes past eight—no, hang it, I mean past seven'" (87; emphasis in original). The real time is actually earlier than de Manio at first believed. Similarly, the real time in *Chocky*, the year "1943," is earlier than the 1960s date a reader would assume. The BBC and de Manio communicate between these two alternate worlds and have a real existence in both of them. Broadcasting makes two worlds adjacent—that of the listener or viewer and that of the broadcast. De Manio is an entity of the broadcast world that can communicate with "1943." At the same time, of course, as a disembodied voice, he has one characteristic in common with Chocky.

No doubt the "England" of "1943" includes the county of Winshire (Wyn[dham]shire) in the vicinity of Hampshire and Sussex. Introduced in JBH's detective novel *Foul Play Suspected* (1935), Winshire includes the villages of West Harding, Hambling, Stouch, Oppley, Hickhan, and Midwich. We are informed, in *Chocky* but not in "Chocky," that the Gore family live in close-by

Surrey in Hindmere, a place that cannot be found on any map of Surrey in our world but which combines Hindhead, where JBH's father lived for many years, and nearby Haslemere.—**David Ketterer, Honorary Research Fellow, University of Liverpool**

Pariah Elite. In my review-essay covering several works on J.G. Ballard in *SFS* 34.3 (Nov. 2007), I questioned whether the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America would ever consider giving their Grand Master Award to one of the “more central New Wave controversialists”—such as Ballard, or Michael Moorcock, or Thomas M. Disch—“whose best work was designed not just to shock sf orthodoxies but to transcend the limits of the field” (484). Well, the SFFWA has promptly answered my question by electing Moorcock as their 25th Grand Master; he joins such Golden Age luminaries as Robert A. Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, and Arthur C. Clarke. Moorcock will receive the award—now named in honor of SFWA's founder, Damon Knight—at the Nebula Awards banquet in Austin, Texas, on April 27. In a press release announcing the tribute (available online at <<http://sfwa.org/news/2008/grandmaster.htm>>), Moorcock is quoted as saying he “feel[s] especially honoured to receive the Grand Master award.” This event would seem finally to settle the issue of whether major New Wave figures can now comfortably be acknowledged as central contributors to the field's development. At the same time, however, the press release makes no mention of the New Wave controversy or its legacy, or even of *New Worlds* magazine, from whose helm in the mid-1960s Moorcock, as editor- and polemicist-in-chief, launched a frontal assault on the genre's cherished traditions. Either those fiery struggles have now been long forgotten, or it was thought prudent not to stir their still-smoldering ashes at this moment of discreet apotheosis.

My prediction that Ballard himself would never be named Grand Master seems all but certain given that the author has announced, in what he has called his final book, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton* (Fourth Estate, 2008), that he is dying of cancer. This lack of formal recognition for the “excellence” of a “lifetime of contributions to the genres of science fiction and fantasy” (as the award language puts it) is likely felt as no great loss by Ballard, who once referred to the SFWA as “a reactionary s-f writers' guild” which had helped to usher in “the most commercial phase [the genre] has ever known” (“New Means Worse,” in *A User's Guide to the Millenium* [New York: Picador, 1996], 189-91; the quotation is from p. 190). But it is a loss to the field that Ballard, almost certainly the greatest English-language sf writer of the past half-century, will not be enshrined among the elite. He belongs there with Ellison, and Silverberg, and Aldiss, and Moorcock—and, yes, with Heinlein, Asimov, and Lester del Rey, who once called the New Wave “completely lacking in even the slightest trace of originality, while it claims to be something new and revolutionary” (“Art or Artiness?” in *Famous Science Fiction* 8 [Fall 1968]: 78-86; the quotation is from p. 82). Forty years on, now that the New Wave is something *old* and revolutionary, one cannot help but wonder whether its aging partisans do not still cause some factions of the genre establishment the faintest twinge of embarrassment and contempt.—**RL**