

It was not until 1951 that the author John Wyndham came to the attention of the general reading public with the publication of his best-known work, *The Day of the Triffids*. However, he had been a published author since the early 1930s, primarily in science fiction magazines in the US, and nearly always under a combination of names based on his full name of John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris. The one exception was a single short story published under the name Johnson Harris in 1945. However, in his daily life, he used the name John Beynon Harris (JBH).

While the name John Wyndham is synonymous with the term triffid, it is also unfairly linked with the term "cosy catastrophe". Brian Aldiss, in his rather courageously named 1973 work *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, coined this disparaging term. He defined it as

*The essence of cosy catastrophe is that the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off.*¹

That Aldiss was dismissive of works that fitted his definition of a cosy catastrophe is clear.

Much more a period piece is R. C. Sherriff's The Hopkins Manuscript (1939). ... The Hopkins Manuscript is a cosy catastrophe ... It reads now as a gorgeous parody of all things British and thirties-ish.

*The hero, Hopkins, is in his fifties, has a Cambridge education, and comes of an old and honourable family. He breeds poultry. In true Edwardian style, he lives alone with his housekeeper in a large and comfortable house. When the Moon comes crashing down to Earth, says Hopkins, "... after careful reflection I decided to meet the crisis in the dining-room." He takes down the china ornaments and stacks them in cupboards.*²

His various references to John Wyndham's works in *Billion Year Spree* categorised them decidedly as cosy catastrophes.

Wyndham had several given names ... His full name was John Wyndham Parkes Lucas Beynon Harris, and he was born in 1903 in the Warwickshire countryside. His most famous novels would carry memories of the country, either wrecked or triumphing.

*He started selling science fiction to the American sf magazines in the thirties under the name of John Beynon Harris, and became very popular. His manner was light and amused.*³

Aldiss mentioned JBH's time in the army during the

Second World War and then continued

*After the war, when the fruits of victory were rapidly turning into the ashes of peace, he was without career or direction. It was then that he embarked on the course that was to make him master of the cosy catastrophe.*⁴

When Aldiss wrote about JBH's work he was clearly just considering his major works as he had already dismissed JBH's other works with

*Short stories poured out, all urbane and pleasing.*⁵

The works that Aldiss did consider were *The Secret People* (1935), *Planet Plane* (1936), *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), *The Kraken Wakes* (1953), *The Chrysalids* (1955), *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), *The Outward Urge* (1959), *Trouble with Lichen* (1960) and *Chocky* (1968).

Comparing each of these works against the definition of a cosy catastrophe sheds light on Aldiss's claim that JBH was the "master of the cosy catastrophe."

The Secret People – two people in a rocket plane crash into the New Sea, which is being created to recover the Sahara Desert. Their plane is dragged into an underground cave system that is inhabited by a race of pygmies who imprison them. Together with other captives, they eventually escape from the cave system as the New Sea floods in.

There is no catastrophe, except perhaps for the pygmy cave inhabitants, and the story does not satisfy the cosy catastrophe definition.

Planet Plane – is the story of an expedition to Mars and their discoveries whilst there. The expedition returns safely to the Earth.

While some members of the expedition die during the course of the story there is no general catastrophe, and the work cannot be classified as a cosy catastrophe.

The Day of the Triffids – Aldiss summarised this story as

*The triffids are huge perambulating vegetables with poisonous flails who arrive on the scene just as everyone but the hero has been blinded by unusual meteors. Rarely has there been a less promising start to a story. Yet there is magic in Day of the Triffids, and in the excitement of the hero and his girl moving through a collapsing London.*⁶

It appears that Aldiss coined the cosy catastrophe term specifically for *The Day of the Triffids* and accordingly the story satisfies his criteria to satisfy the definition.

¹ Brian W. Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc, 1973), p. 294.

² Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, pp. 292-3.

³ Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, p. 290.

⁴ Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, p. 293.

⁵ Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, p. 294.

⁶ Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction*, pp. 293-4.

The Chrysalids – years after a nuclear war decimated the world a group of young people find themselves under attack by their own community because they do not meet the accepted religious norm for humans. They are able to communicate telepathically and arrange a rescue for their most valuable members by an advanced civilization from the other side of the world.

While there had been a catastrophe in the form of a nuclear war, it was hundreds, if not thousands of years before the story is set.

*It was said ... that in the time of the Old People Labrador had been a cold land, so cold that no one could live there for long ... But that had been a long, long time ago. A thousand years? - two thousand years? - even more, perhaps? People guessed, but nobody really knew. There was no telling how many generations of people had passed their lives like savages between the coming of Tribulation and the start of recorded history.*⁷

The catastrophe that had affected the world was long since over and the story does not fit the cosy catastrophe definition of “the hero should have a pretty good time ... while everyone else is dying off.”

The Midwich Cuckoos – a UK village is isolated for a day during an alien visit. Sometime later most of the women in the village find themselves pregnant. When the children are born, they are different from normal human children. These differences become more pronounced as they get older and it becomes clear that they can communicate telepathically. This produces Children that act as two individuals, one consisting of all the male children and the other all the female children. These combined consciousness mean that the Children cannot be controlled or disciplined and they progressively react more harshly to interference. When a similar group of Children in Russia are annihilated the UK group seek to flee to a safer location and are prepared to pressure the authorities using whatever means are necessary. A local who had established a relationship with the Children determined that the safest result for the human race is for the Children to be eliminated, which he carries out.

While there was a potential for a catastrophe for the human race if the Children had been allowed to develop unhindered, this did not occur, and so the story does not fit the definition of a cosy catastrophe.

The Outward Urge – contains four (or five depending on the edition) self-contained but interconnected stories of space exploration by the Troon family. Each story is set fifty years after the previous story so spans a period of two hundred years. In the second story the nuclear “Great Northern War” occurs but the southern hemisphere remains basically unaffected. In the following stories countries in the southern hemisphere become the world powers.

Despite the nuclear war there was no catastrophe and the work does not satisfy the definition as a cosy catastrophe.

Trouble with Lichen – follows the discovery of a life prolonging treatment and the potential consequences of its use on society.

The work does not fit the definition of a cosy catastrophe as, although there is short-term social disruption in the UK, there is no actual catastrophe.

Chocky – is the story of a young boy who is in telepathic contact with an alien who is evaluating the Earth for possible future colonization. Eventually the alien breaks off communication when the Earth is determined to be unsuitable for them.

There is no catastrophe in the work and the story does not fit the definition as a cosy catastrophe in any way

Therefore, of nine major works, seven do not meet Aldiss’s definition of a cosy catastrophe while one does, which leaves just *The Kraken Wakes* to be considered.

The Kraken Wakes – follows the husband and wife journalists, Mike and Phyllis Watson, who report on the invasion of the Earth by aliens that colonize the deep seas and work to tailor those areas to their needs. Due to the alien activities, ships are sunk, coastal communities are attacked from the sea and the sea levels rise as the ice caps are melted.

Before deciding whether *The Kraken Wakes* qualifies as a cosy catastrophe it is worthwhile comparing the two main versions of the story, as they do offer different takes on the same basic narrative.

The two versions are *The Kraken Wakes*, published by Michael Joseph in the UK on 27 July 1953 and *Out of the Deep*s, published in the US by Ballantine Books on 14 December 1953.

The main difference between the two versions is that the Ballantine edition has been abridged by a little under thirty percent. A summary of the two versions is in Table 1 below.

	Michael Joseph		Ballantine	
	Pages	Words	Pages	Words
Rationale	5 – 9	1037	-	0
Phase 1	11 - 85	21581	1 - 52	16532
Phase 2	87 - 217	38753	53 - 129	25094
Phase 3	219 - 288	21289	131 - 182	17437
Total		82660		59063

Table 1

While there are minor omissions throughout the Ballantine version it is abridged primarily by the exclusion of large blocks of text. Table 2 lists the pages and block size of the largest omissions from the Michael Joseph version of *The Kraken Wakes*.

⁷ John Wyndham, *The Chrysalids*, (London: Michael Joseph Limited, 1955), p. 46.

	Page(s)	Words
Rationale	5 – 9	1037
Flight of red globes from the direction of Russia	21 – 22	234
Eliminate the impossible	28 – 29	202
Loss of US Navy ship	43 – 45	484
Journalist discussions over dinner	51 – 53	461
Non-publishing of Bocker	55 – 56	287
Journalist discussion	59	211
Captain Winters to dinner	62 – 64	580
Depth microphones	65 – 66	263
Meeting with Dr Matet	70 – 72	453
Script development and summary of Phase 1	78 – 85	1751
Newspaper reports on the sinking of the Yatsushiro	91 – 93	559
Metal fatigue	94 – 95	419
Harold and Tuny visit to Rose Cottage	97 – 105	1997
Script development on the menace in the deeps	108 – 112	884
Oxford Street pub talk	113 – 114	460
Dinner with Dr Matet	120 – 126	1431
Testing of dolphin to protect ships	129 – 134	1290
April Island	137 – 138	394
Killing time in Escondida	152 – 153	211
Leslie's song	157 – 159	458
Escondida attack de-brief	175 – 177	351
Admiralty de-briefing	180 – 183	727
Aircraft factories and shipping	189	213
Posttraumatic stress disorder	195 – 198	671
Parliamentary debate	199 – 200	226
First attempt to leave London by boat and finding of Midge	219 – 227	2060
Meeting with Tuny	232 – 233	449
Newspaper articles on icebergs	234 – 235	220
Discussion with Bocker	240 – 246	994
Unrest in the London suburbs	259	213
Parliament	261 – 262	348

Table 2

Although the Ballantine version is abridged there are some additions that do not appear in the Michael Joseph version. These are listed in Table 3.

	Page(s)	Words
Details of English Broadcasting Company	4	129
Bocker press conference	38 – 42	1184
Escondida de-brief	100 -101	353

Table 3

The first omission from the Michael Joseph version is worth examining.

The Rationale is a short discussion between Mike and Phyllis Watson about his decision to write an account of the alien invasion. Phyllis is enthusiastic about the idea and quickly starts suggesting a structure for the work. She suggests that there should be a quotation to start

with.

'Phase One,' she repeated firmly, and then paused. 'No. Before that you want a sort of key quotation, with a page all to itself.'

'Yes,' I agreed, 'I'd thought of –' But she shook her head, thinking. Presently:

'Got it!' she said. 'It's by Emily Pettifell, whom I don't suppose you ever heard of.'

'Quite right,' I told her. 'I'd thought of –'

'It was in The Pink Nursery Book,' she said. She pulled a gloved hand out of her pocket, and recited:

I shook my head. 'Too long. And, if I may say so, don't you think The Pink Nursery Book is a trifle out of key?'

'But the last two lines, Mike. Just right.' She repeated them:

– But, Mother, please tell me, what can those things be

That crawl up so stealthily out of the sea?

This quote has been the source of speculation on the Web regarding its true origin, as a search for Emily Pettifell, the supposed author, provides primarily results referencing *The Kraken Wakes*.

John Wyndham collector Umberto la Rocca from Turin, Italy, owns a number of works inscribed by JBH to his brother Vivian. Umberto kindly provided a copy of the first two pages of the Michael Joseph edition of *The Kraken Wakes*, which includes this inscription on the title page

To Viv

with best wishes from

Jack
July 1953.

On the preceding half title page JBH wrote out in full the poem that Phyllis wanted to quote from.

*Oh Mother, dear Mother, I understand quite
That it's dollies & gollies that bump in the night,
And of course I believe as you tell me I should
That it's only big teddies that growl in the wood.*

*Oh, I'm perfectly sure you are right when you say
That the howls in the dark are just pussies at play,
But, Mother, please tell me what can those things be*

That crawl up so stealthily out of the sea?

Emily Pettifell
(1869 -1910)

in *The Pink Nursery Book* (1907)

with assistance by

John Wyndham

The final two lines of this inscription provide the definitive evidence that the poem is actually a JBH original, rather than an obscure nursery poem that he remembered from his youth.

Despite the appropriateness of Phyllis's quotation, Mike preferred his own choice, the 1830 poem "The Kraken"

by Alfred Tennyson. In the Michael Joseph edition, the full fifteen-line poem is included, on its own page just as Phyllis had suggested.

But the exclusion of the entire Rationale from Ballantine's edition removed any reference to the Kraken and dictated a change of title. Without the Rationale, the title *The Kraken Wakes* made no sense, hence Ballantine's renaming of the work to *Out of the Deeps*.

The most significant difference between the two versions is in the last pages of each. After Mike and Phyllis made their way to Rose Cottage in Cornwall, they were considering heading south where the weather would be warmer. However, they changed their mind after learning that they were wanted in London. At that point in the text, in each version a date is given. In Michael Joseph's version the date is 24 May while the Ballantine's version has 4 May. No identifiable reason for this variation has been found.

Rather than being an abridgement the text from the date line to the end of the work in *Out of the Deeps*, is 2671 words long, more than double the 1173 words for the same section in *The Kraken Wakes*.

In Michael Joseph's edition the Watson's were visited by a local man who had heard a request for their whereabouts on the radio. He updated them on the recovery that was taking place because the Japanese had devised a method for clearing the deeps using ultrasonics, which was also being utilised by the Americans. They intended to make their way to London by boat as they were wanted there to help with communicating the recovery plans to survivors.

While in Ballantine's edition Bocker arrived at their cottage by helicopter to bring them up to date on the recovery and request they return to London to help with building morale. Bocker arranged to send another helicopter for them three days later.

Both versions record that the UK had been severely affected by the cold that had resulted in numerous deaths from pneumonia. In Ballantine's US edition, the UK population had been reduced to somewhere between six and nine million but, probably not surprisingly, the US had not been as badly hit. In the UK edition the UK population had dropped to just five million, but the effects in the US went unmentioned.

Both figures would suggest that the story might qualify as a catastrophe, but it is not quite so clear-cut. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary provides the following definition for the word catastrophe:

A sudden, widespread, or noteworthy disaster; an extreme misfortune.

It also provides the derivation of the word as having come from the Greek word *katastrophē* meaning sudden turn. So a catastrophe should have a degree of

suddenness about it.

A careful reading of *The Kraken Wakes* reveals that the story takes place over a period of about ten years. So it does seem to lack the suddenness that the word catastrophe connotes.

Additionally Aldiss's definition of a cosy catastrophe requires that the hero "should have a pretty good time." In *The Kraken Wakes* both Mike and Phyllis witnessed the devastating attack of the sea-tanks in Escondida. Later they both sought medical help.

'Yes. Now I'm going to give you the address of a friend of mine in Harley Street. I want you both to go up to London to-morrow, and see him the next day. I'll fix it up for you.'

'Very well;' I agreed. 'You know, it wasn't the thing itself that worried me so much as the pressure of getting the scripts out afterwards. That's relaxed now.'

'Possibly,' he said. 'All the same, I think you should go and see him.'

There was something wrong, and I knew it. I didn't admit to the doctor, though I did to the Harley Street man, that it was more often Phyllis than Muriel that I saw being dragged along by her hair, and more often her than an unknown man that I saw being pulled to pieces. As a quid pro quo he told me that Phyllis had been spending most of her nights listening to me and dissuading me from jumping out of the window to interfere in these imaginary happenings.

So I agreed to go out of circulation for a time.⁸

Today the condition that both Mike and Phyllis were suffering from would almost certainly be diagnosed as posttraumatic stress disorder. Certainly not something that qualifies as having "a pretty good time."

So classifying *The Kraken Wakes* as a cosy catastrophe appears somewhat dubious.

The process of publishing a book takes time. An idea of just how long it can take can be gained by considering the following two examples of works by JBH.

In December 1950, Michael Joseph Limited notified JBH that they would publish *The Day of the Triffids*. The book finally appeared in bookshops on 22 August 1951. The pre-publicity generated for the book meant that it had already been declared as the *Daily Graphic's* "Book Find of the Month" for August 1951 when it was released.

Then in July 1967, JBH was considering the artwork of various designs for the dustjacket of the Michael Joseph edition of *Chocky*, which was eventually released on 1 April 1968, over eight months later.

Part of the publication process, at least for Michael Joseph, was the preparation and limited circulation of an uncorrected proof copy. This early version of the work provided an opportunity for corrections and alterations to the text as well as for early publicity for the work.

⁸ John Wyndham, *The Kraken Wakes*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1953), pp. 197-8.

Accordingly, Michael Joseph produced an uncorrected proof copy of *The Kraken Wakes* as part of the publication process. While proof copies are often marked with the anticipated publication date, they do not normally have any indication of the printing date of the proof copy itself. When Penguin Random House UK, which now publish the Michael Joseph imprint, were contacted about a likely printing date for *The Kraken Wakes* proof copy, they provided the following response

*I am from the current MJ team, and while I don't have info specific to the title you mentioned, it is hopefully helpful to mention that we currently produce proofs around 6 months prior to publication date. It may have been the same at that time!*⁹

If this is the case then the proof copy of *The Kraken Wakes* was produced around January 1953. Regardless of the precise printing date, the Michael Joseph uncorrected proof copy was the first printing of *The Kraken Wakes* and as such, is the definitive version of the story.

I own a number of proof copies of JBH's works, including a copy of Michael Joseph's *The Kraken Wakes*. While most of the proof copies do not vary greatly from the released first edition, this is not the case for *The Kraken Wakes*. The proof copy provides a very different ending to the story and certainly puts paid to the notion that *The Kraken Wakes* is a cosy catastrophe.

As with both the Michael Joseph published edition of *The Kraken Wakes* and Ballantine's *Out of the Deeps* the uncorrected proof copy sees Mike and Phyllis contemplating a move south from Cornwall in the hope of finding a warmer climate. Again, the end of the story in the proof version is preceded by a date, but this time 22 April. As with the other two versions there is no identifiable reason for this date change.

The proof version then continues

Ten days ago a sea-tank was found stranded in a field about a mile away, after the spring tide. It is still there.

The thing has obviously been badly damaged by being crushed, perhaps between two icebergs, or between an iceberg and a rock. In two or three places the metal is crazed with fine cracks from which streamers of jelly-like stuff have oozed. ... We have been to look at it each day since, and there is no change except for a slight increase in the amount of jelly that has leaked out ... This afternoon when we came back from looking at it again, Phyllis was thoughtful for a long time, then she said:

*'Mike, we ought to try to find out all we can about that thing. It might be terribly important. If we were to open it ...'*¹⁰

Eventually they decide to investigate the stranded sea-

tank in detail. The concluding two pages of the proof copy, which are shown on the following page, read

NOTE BY DR ALASTAIR BOCKER:

It was indeed a melancholy occasion when I received the typescript of the foregoing. It came to me with a covering letter from the Regional Director, Northern Europe, of the International Renaissance Commission, in which he stated that a surveying party had discovered it in a cottage on one of the Cornish Isles, and asked whether I would have any objection to publication of it as it stood. I replied that while it contains several points that I should have been glad to take up with my good friends, Michael and Phyllis Watson, were that possible, I could not feel that I had any right to tamper on personal grounds with their work. It stands, therefore, as it was written.

One would have liked to hope that there were later pages that have disappeared, but there can, I fear, be little doubt that it is complete.

My friends' assumption that the stranded sea-tank had become innocuous was, I am afraid, as in so many other cases about the same time, premature. If only they had waited a little longer ... But it was characteristic of Mrs Watson that she should let her sense of public duty override her caution, and of her husband that he often respected her judgment above his own.

At the time of writing the cause of the decline in xenobathetic activity which was then beginning is still obscure. It is, however, significant that the failure in direction which was stranding innumerable sea-tanks soon became world-wide, and that the diminution of all the other submarine activities associated with them took place over the same period. This may have been due to failure to breed, or to adapt, or to resist disease, or to any of the other causes which it is popularly ascribed, and, in consequence, we may be able to continue the work of salvage and reconstruction without further interruptions from the Deeps. Nevertheless, there are dangers in easy optimism. It should be pointed out that we still know little or nothing of the natures of these xenobathetic entities, and it would be unwise to overlook the possibility that they may require, from time to time, periods of regeneration analogous with our own need for sleep, or that of other types of creature for hibernation. The present could well be some such period of quiescence.

Out of respect for my friends Michael and Phyllis, and all those others who have attempted in various ways to learn more of this menace which has tried to take our own world from us – and also for our own future peace of mind – we should, I think, do well to go on 'burning our brains in the backroom,' just in case ...

A.B.¹¹

This version of *The Kraken Wakes*, as JBH originally conceived it, clearly does not satisfy Aldiss's definition of a cosy catastrophe. Not only is there the suggestion that the threat has possibly run its natural course, but also the death of the main characters removes the pivotal

⁹ Ellie Hughes (Penguin Random House), email message to Neil Pollard, 5 Sep 2017.

¹⁰ John Wyndham, *The Kraken Wakes (uncorrected proof copy)*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1953), pp. 283-4.

¹¹ Wyndham, *The Kraken Wakes (uncorrected proof copy)*, pp. 286-7.

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A. B.

The last two pages of Michael Joseph's proof copy of *The Kraken Wakes*

requirement that the hero "should have a pretty good time."

Even if *The Kraken Wakes* is added to the list of JBH catastrophic works, which would seem a questionable decision, it cannot be considered as anything other than an un-cosy catastrophe, at best.

Accordingly, the count of JBH major works should be considered as one work that is a cosy catastrophe and eight works that are not. If this really does make JBH the master of the cosy catastrophe, as Brian Aldiss claimed, then he has achieved that distinction with just a single book, *The Day of the Triffids*.

Rather than accepting the title "master of the cosy catastrophe" as a criticism of JBH's work, this achievement of mastering a genre in a single work may perhaps have been intended as a recognition of the prowess of JBH's writing. Alternatively, and this seems more likely, Aldiss may simply have underestimated the significance and diversity of JBH's works.

As *The Day of the Triffids* has never been out of print since it first appeared in 1951, and new editions of JBH's works are still being published more than forty years after his death, it appears that the reading public has a better grasp of the importance of JBH's work than did the author of *The True History of Science Fiction*.

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