

# **And Chaos Died Short Guide**

## **And Chaos Died by Joanna Russ**

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# Characters

Jai Vedh, a homosexual environmental designer, is the central character of *And Chaos Died*. The starship in which he is traveling explodes, and he and the Captain are the only survivors together on a planet inhabited by a race of beings who have developed full telepathic powers. The Captain, a tough macho military type who has unquestioning faith in "science," initially reacts with contempt to the inhabitants of the planet, who live in an Edenic climate: "Sit a man on his ass with nothing to do but eat and the first thing that goes is his mind." He is similarly hostile to Jai Vedh, as much because he is a civilian as because he is homosexual. It is the Captain's mind, however, that "goes" in the face of this, to him, incomprehensible civilization.

He frantically tries to reconstruct a communication device to summon help, but as Jai Vedh observes, "that thing you're making is going to broadcast about as well as a Christmas tree."

The last the reader sees of the Captain, he is obsessively tinkering with his contraption and, as Jai Vedh observes, is reduced to the same "primitive" condition he has accused the planet's inhabitants of living in: "He's worshipping it, thought Jai."

Jai Vedh learns to communicate with the inhabitants of the planet in their own manner, starting with Evne, a multifaceted female who both does and does not have a "body" and an "identity." He encounters other "individuals," but it is the nearly universal metamorphic power associated with the collective consciousness of the beings on the planet that he is truly "in touch" with. The more he learns about this new consciousness, the more he realizes the irrelevance of the sense of boundaries that conventionally protect humans from experiencing the full power of their own consciousness. As Evne says, "What you call psionics ...

is the result of perception and education, nothing more, although you don't believe that." In this sense, the "powers" of these beings are not altogether unlike those of the imagination in William Blake's world view — the cleansed doors of perception give access to infinity, but not by obliterating physical reality.



## Social Concerns/Themes

And Chaos Died is about the ways in which societal boundaries around behavior and consciousness constrain one from full realization of one's potential existence. The title, characteristically ironic, alludes to a passage from the Chinese sage Chuang Tzu, describing the well-intentioned efforts of demigods to give organs of perception to the god Chaos. In its original form, this fable suggests that the sensory organs are necessary to help Chaos organize experience, but that their creation necessarily implies the destruction of "chaos," or the lack of such organization. (The village is destroyed to save it.) In Russ's version, the existence of the usual human organizations of perception constitutes a limitation of human potential; the development of a new sensory aperture (the ability to communicate directly with other minds) necessarily leads to the "death" of the old consciousness and access to a new level of existence and consciousness. Some humans are able to sustain the shock of the new consciousness, others are not. In this story, the development of "psi-powers" assumes total and unconcealed communication among all minds that have developed such powers: This represents a devastating challenge to the conventional bourgeois notions of individuality and privacy. And Chaos Died dramatizes the implications of the potential evolution of isolated human consciousness toward a condition of universal consciousness.



## Techniques

Russ employs sharp shifts from "reality" to "dream" or unreality and sudden implosions of imagery akin to surrealism in order to convey the experience of telepathic consciousness. At first, the Captain and Jai Vedh are catechized by the inhabitants like small children, but even with their gradual initiation, there is disorientation and fear, especially for the Captain. Jai Vedh, professionally trained to perceive patterns, techniques, strategies in ways that the Captain is unable to do, begins quickly to organize elements of the pattern — starting significantly with his discovery of a very large (numerically) prime number that can be pronounced, in the inhabitants' language, in one syllable. This helps him to understand the complexity and simplicity — the sophistication — of the civilization they have encountered.



## Key Questions

Our contemporary society has constructed many artificial barriers to communication. Russ explores the cost of these barriers in *And Chaos Died*. She examines the psi powers of a "lost" community and speculates on why some humans are receptive to learning how to communicate and trust other people while others dismiss these possibilities.

1. We read much today about lack of communication among people. Would psi facilitate or detract from communication? Why? Would you want to have psi powers?
2. What techniques does Russ use to show Jai's mind state?
3. This is perhaps the most "ecological" of Russ's novels. Do you feel we are all part of the universe? Do we have some responsibility to it?
4. Jai Vedh and the Captain are different types of characters. Describe each in relation to the other. How does Russ show these distinctions?
5. This colony might be seen as a Utopian community. Do you feel that it is one? What are the characteristics that would make it Utopian to you?
6. What is the chaos that the title of this novel refers to?
7. Do you feel that chaos can ever really die? Is it inherent in human nature and society? Why or why not?
8. Is this story a robinsonade? What does Jai learn about himself and society?
9. The captain is almost a stock science fiction character who relies heavily on technology. Has this heavy reliance upon technology and technological solutions limited the captain or not?
10. Describe the changes Jai undergoes during the course of the story. Do you feel all these changes are positive?

## Literary Precedents

Fictions about races with telepathic or psionic powers frequently portray them as threats to the human race, or to civilization. John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957) is an especially scary example; the total annihilation of the beautiful but ruthlessly destructive "children" who can communicate directly with each other's minds across great distances and read the minds of their human hosts with ease, is justified in the name of protecting humanity from domination by a race with such unfair advantages. Other writers, notably Ursula Le Guin in *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972) and Russ in *And Chaos Died*, portray such powers as an evolutionary advance or as a parallel evolutionary development that would lead to a more peaceable and creative civilization. In Le Guin's story, the "natives" are as much in tune with their environment as they are with each other; the earthmen's intended despoliation of the planet is as much a product of their inability to perceive the life of the environment as it is of their greed. Similarly, in Russ's novel, the Captain's dismissal of the inhabitants' powers ensures his mental and subsequent physical dissolution. The spiritual union (lovmaking) of Milton's angels, in *Paradise Lost*, and the "fourfold vision" of William Blake's cosmology may not be exact parallels or precedents, but both Le Guin and Russ are thinking on analogous lines.



# Copyright Information

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