

# **Childhood's End Study Guide**

## **Childhood's End by Arthur C. Clarke**

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# Plot Summary

The science-fiction novel, published in 1953, is a tale about the extinction of the human race. Beginning in the year 1975, the Americans are competing with Russians to be the first in space travel. The hopes of both countries are dashed, when invaders from another planet occupy Earth. The ships, operated by enigmatic creatures referred to as the Overlords, hover over every major world city.

Five years later, the Overlords become rulers of Earth, turning it into a Utopian paradise. While most humans are happy about the peaceful state of the world, some are discontented about having their personal liberties stripped from them. One such group, the Freedom League, is lead by Alexander Wainwright.

Karellen, also known as the Supervisor of the Overlords, is very secretive about his appearance, and will at first only speak to Rikki Stormgren, Secretary General of the United Nations. Fifty years after Stormgren's retirement, Karellen decides to leave his ship and meet the humans face to face. They are shocked to find that the Overlords are the image of the Devil. While the Overlords keep in contact with humans, they rarely leave their ship, finding the atmosphere and lower gravitational pull uncomfortable.

A party at Rupert Boyce's African home reveals much about his guests. The main attraction is an Overlord named Rashaverak, who is interested in Rupert's collection of books on the occult. Rupert's new brother-in-law, Jan Rodericks, is an aspiring astronomer who is displeased with the Overlords' ban on space travel. Another couple, George Greggson and his girlfriend Joan Morrel, is involved in a syance that leaves them both troubled. Afterwards, the couple marries and moves to an experimental commune.

Meanwhile, Jan stows away on an Overlord's supply ship in an attempt to visit their home planet. While he is away, the world goes through the last stages of its existence. Starting with George and Jean's children, the rest of the world's youth undergoes a metamorphosis that turns them into inhuman servants of a higher authority, a power that even the Overlords bow to.

Jan returns to Earth eighty years later to find a desolate planet. The adults have died off, and the children that are left are linked together in a trance, gradually becoming part of the new race. They use their mental power to strip the Earth of all plant and animal life. Intimidated by their wrath, the Overlords decide their work is done and leave. Jan stays behind to give reports to the Overlords. Eventually, Earth evaporates into nothingness, as though it never existed. The world officially comes to an end in the year 2125.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

Set in the year 1975, the first chapter opens on the Pacific island of Taratura. American scientist Reinhold is preparing to launch "Columbus," a space shuttle he has helped the U.S. government build. He sadly reflects on how the ship's flames will obliterate the tropical island upon blast off. A boat, the James Forrestal, is scanning the coastal water with searchlights, and Reinhold wonders if it is searching for Russian submarines.

Reinhold's thoughts of Russia stir up memories of his former colleague, Konrad Schneider. He recalls the spring of 1945, during the end of World War II, while he and Konrad were working in Prussia. While Reinhold chose to return to the US, Konrad went to live in Moscow. Reinhold had spent the past 30 years assuming that Konrad was dead until the previous week, when he was paid a visit by Colonel Sandmeyer of Technical Intelligence. The Colonel requests information from Reinhold about a group of Russian scientists, who are also building a ship. The name Konrad Schneider is at the top of the Colonel's list, which surprises Reinhold. Judging Konrad's brilliant work in the past, Reinhold assumes that he is in charge of the Russian operations, and worries that he will help to put Russia in space before the U.S.

The second part of Chapter One takes place in Lake Baikal, Russia, where Konrad Schneider is running tests on the space shuttle that he is building. Grigonevitch, the Assistant Commissioner for Nuclear Science of Russia, is expecting the ship to launch in about one month, but Schneider worries that the U.S. will launch first. As Schneider works on his last report, he's interrupted by shouting. He looks outside, and is disturbed by what he sees.

Back at Taratura, as Reinhold checks on the progress of "Columbus," he looks up at the night sky to see large shadows. As they get closer to land, the shadows turn into large ships from out of space. Simultaneously, Reinhold and Schneider realize that they have both lost the race to send a ship into space, since one has come to them. The chapter ends with Reinhold's anticipation of the beings in the ships.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The spaceship, Columbus, symbolizes exploration of the unknown. It carries the same name as Christopher Columbus, the Italian explorer who stumbled upon the Americas during the late 1400's.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 is the first of Part I: Earth and the Overlords, and is set in New York City, the year 1980. By now, the invaders, referred to as the Overlords, have become God-like rulers of the world. Their ships hover over major cities, and their omnipotent presence intimidates the earthly governing bodies into achieving world peace.

The chapter begins with Rikki Stormgren, the Secretary General of the United Nations, in his office. As the liaison between the humans and the Overlords, he stays in contact with Karellen, the head Overlord, also known as the "Supervisor for Earth." Although Stormgren regularly speaks to Karellen, he has never seen his face.

Stormgren is anticipating a first visit with Alexander Wainwright. Wainwright is the head of the Freedom League, an international group that opposes the Overlords. He arrives with an angry mob of roughly 3,000 people, and voices his discontent to Stormgren over being ruled by the Overlords. A former clergyman, he introduces the religious issue surrounding the Overlord's occupation: They are playing God, instead of allowing humans the option to rule their own destinies. Wainwright is also bothered by the secrecy of the Overlords. Although Stormgren regularly speaks with Karellen, no one else has ever spoken to or seen any of the Overlords. Wainwright wonders if Karellen won't reveal himself, because he is hiding something.

The second part of Chapter 2 details the occupancy of the Overlords. After breaking into Earth's atmosphere, their ships silently hover over major cities. After six days of no contact, Karellen introduces himself in a speech that is broadcast over all radio stations worldwide. In perfect English, he uses the speech to voice his main intention for occupying Earth, which is to rule over international matters, while keeping local governments unchanged. His eventual goal is to achieve World Federation, merging all of the world's countries into one.

Unwilling to readily submit to the Overlords, an unnamed major country attempts to destroy one of the ships with an atomic bomb. Not only does the ship remain untouched, but the missile disappears entirely. Karellen gives no response to the attack, and the country responsible suffers a breakdown in government a few weeks afterward.

Next, the Overlords take direct action against the Republic of South Africa, a country which has endured civil unrest for the previous century. Karellen advises the South Africans to resolve their racial differences, or he will take action. When the government does not comply, a ship floating over Cape Town slowly begins to liquidate the city until the country decides to put an end to their fighting.

The next section of Chapter 2 focuses on the meeting between Stormgren and Karellen. As onlookers watch, a small metallic silver sphere floats down to Earth. Stormgren gets



inside, and the ship takes him up to the Overlords' headquarters. Although he can not be seen, Karellen's voice is heard as he speaks to Stormgren about Wainwright and the Freedom League's activities. Stormgren then approaches Karellen about ending his secrecy and revealing himself. However, Karellen does not feel that the time is right yet. During their conversation, Stormgren and Karellen discuss the reason for the Freedom League's unrest. Karellen thinks that the religion-based League has a fear that science and reason (represented by the Overlords) will overthrow their faith in God.

After meeting with Karellen, Stormgren has a discussion with his assistant, Pieter Van Ryberg. Van Ryberg theorizes that the Overlords are occupying Earth, because they can not go anywhere else, and are searching for a new home. He also thinks that the other ships may be empty, and are just used as an illusion to intimidate humans.

Chapter 2 ends by describing the role that the Overlords play in international government. The intimidating presence of the Overlords erased the fear that the world's nations had for each other. Once world peace had evolved, people were grateful for the Overlords' occupation, and for the most part, became accustomed to their presence. There is, however, speculation by humans about the future of Earth.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter introduces the topic of religion verses science. During Stormgren's meeting with Karellen, he discusses the concerns of Wainwright and the Freedom League. Karellen explains that the League fears the Overlords, because they represent reason and science, which dispels many religious beliefs.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

Stormgren suffers from insomnia, as he worries about his future after his retirement, which is four months away. Since he has no close family ties, Stormgren has become obsessed with his work. The secrecy of the Overlords and the identity of Karellen are consuming his thoughts.

Stormgren's thoughts are interrupted by a message coming from the fax machine. The fax is an article written by the Freedom League, speculating that the identity of the Overlords is too hideous for them to reveal themselves to humans. Stormgren detests the article, and deems it rather shallow. He feels that a being's brain is more important than their looks, and wants to convince Karellen to reveal himself on this belief. Stormgren also admits to himself that he mainly wants to see Karellen out of basic human curiosity.

The next morning, Pieter Van Ryberg, Stormgren's assistant, is alarmed when his boss does not show up for work. By noon, Van Ryberg has sent a car to his house. Afterwards, Van Ryberg learns by radio that Stormgren is missing, and that he will be the acting Secretary-General of the United Nations.

The media from the Eastern and Western parts of the world are strongly divided on the issues surrounding the Overlords' rule. The Western press is supportive of Karellen's ideology of World Federation. However, the Eastern press is resentful toward the Overlords, since many of those countries have only recently become self-governing. Although the media is very critical of Karellen's rule, the majority of humans eagerly anticipate his goal of world peace. The journalists are hushed by the news of Stormgren's disappearance, as the Freedom League strongly denies any ties to it.

Stormgren awakens to find himself trapped in a dark, cold room with stone walls. A man, indistinguishable in the darkness, lets him out and tells him that he has been unconscious for several days. While Stormgren gets dressed, the man, named Joe, gives him a review of the almost primitive living conditions in the abandoned mine where he is being held hostage. Joe leads Stormgren to a room where two other men serve him a plate of sandwiches and a glass of wine. Joe, who speaks with a Polish accent, informs Stormgren that the Freedom League had no part in his kidnapping. Stormgren then assumes that the people responsible for taking him are members of an underground extremist group.

Joe then explains the details of Stormgren's abduction. After knocking him unconscious by gas, the first set of kidnappers put Stormgren in a car and drove into an underground tunnel. Halfway through, they switched Stormgren with a decoy. Stormgren was then loaded into a large truck driven by the second set of kidnappers, who eventually brought him to the mine. Since they don't think that Karellen can see underground, the captors





believe that the tunnel switch was practically foolproof. The extremists feel that by kidnapping the Overlords' only human contact, they will overthrow Karellen's rule and regain independence.

When Stormgren asks his captors what their intentions are, they inform him that they will try to be as hospitable as possible, even presenting him with a deck of cards. This goodwill gesture, along with the realization that the pressures of his job are off of him, begins to appeal to Stormgren.

Back at the United Nations office, Van Ryberg is assuming Stormgren's duties. He is nervous about the possibility of meeting Karellen. The Chief Communications Officer lets Van Ryberg into the small room that Stormgren occasionally uses for correspondence with Karellen. Van Ryberg then uses the computer to send Karellen a message, informing him of Stormgren's abduction. Karellen's quick response frustrates Van Ryberg, since it only tells him to use his best judgment. Van Ryberg starts to feel overwhelmed by the responsibilities of his new job.

Three days have passed, and Stormgren is still being held captive in the mine. He feels that Joe is the only captor of any significance, having heated political discussions with him in between poker games. Stormgren is worried that Karellen will not find him.

A few days later, six leaders of the extremist group arrive to take Stormgren. He talks with the group's leader, an elderly man with gray eyes and a Welsh accent. The leader explains the main reason for Stormgren's kidnapping, which is to give them information about the Overlords. As Stormgren draws a diagram of Karellen's ship, he realizes that the leader is blind.

Van Ryberg is still undertaking Stormgren's responsibilities, when he receives a call on the emergency phone line. He is then startled to see that Karellen's ship is moving. It hovers so low, almost a mile above Earth, that it triggers a shock wave, shaking nearby buildings.

Back at the mine, Stormgren is still meeting with the leaders of the extremist group. The blind leader continues to interrogate him about the secrecy of the Overlords, and Stormgren secretly hopes that the group will help him reveal Karellen's plans. The leader then suggests that he and Stormgren join forces to uncover the Overlords' secrecy. However, Stormgren maintains his loyalty to Karellen, supporting the Overlord's goal of World Federation. Stormgren then challenges the extremist leader to pinpoint an incident where the Overlords have shown anger towards humans. The leader reminds Stormgren of Karellen's ban on animal cruelty, and the wrath he showed in Madrid, Spain, during a bullfight. As a matador stabbed a bull, the pain was felt by the ten thousand spectators. Even though the extremist leader thinks that Karellen's intentions might be good, he is resentful that they are taking away liberties that humans have defended for years.

As Stormgren continues to endorse the motives of the Overlords, he notices that the blind leader is now frozen, as if he were dead. Stormgren heads for the door to hear



Karellen's voice. Karellen informs Stormgren that the other men are not dead, but under a form of temporary paralysis. Communicating through small floating spheres, Karellen leads Stormgren out of the mine. Outside, the larger flying sphere waits for Stormgren. He gets in and has a discussion with Karellen about his rescue. Karellen explains that he has had a tracer on Stormgren for a while, and was using him as bait to locate and single out the heads of the underground extremist group. Stormgren starts thinking about discovering the identity of the Overlords by himself.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Although Stormgren is frightened to find himself in the underground lair of the extremist group, he is relieved to be away from the pressures of his position as Secretary General, and eventually settles in with the men, having political discussions and playing cards. He feels more of a kinship to the Overlords, since he has no close family ties or friends other than Karellen. However, Stormgren feels that Karellen has violated his trust, since Karellen used him as bait to find the extremist group's leaders. The combination of these two things, plus human curiosity, makes Stormgren more determined than ever to see Karellen's face.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Determined to uncover the Overlords' identity, Stormgren pays a visit to an old friend, Pierre Duval, Chief of the Science Bureau. Stormgren gives Duval all the details of his visits to the Overlords. Duval concludes that the screen in the ship is really a sheet of one-way glass, which Karellen uses to hide behind.

Meeting once again with Karellen, Stormgren is given a draft of the new World State's constitution. Karellen and his supervisors have decided that they will set foot on Earth and reveal themselves in fifty years. This disappoints Stormgren, since he will be dead by then. At the end of the meeting, he triggers an x-ray device in his briefcase which will show what is behind the screen.

Back at his office, Stormgren meets with Alexander Wainwright to show him the draft of the new constitution, and to inform him of the fifty-year wait. Unsatisfied with the Overlords' decision, Wainwright feels that they are purposefully waiting for the humans to forget about their time of independence. Stormgren wonders how active the Freedom League will be after he has retired, and feels that their intentions, although good, are misguided.

Stormgren then meets with Duval at the Science Bureau, to see what the x-ray device revealed. The blurred picture shows a wavy image on the other side of the screen, which Duval believes to be Karellen. Duval then concludes that since Stormgren can see Karellen simply by shining a large flashlight through the screen. Stormgren decides to expose Karellen at their upcoming meeting, which will be their last.

During their final encounter, Karellen lays out his future plans for Stormgren, who will be the last human he speaks to for the next fifty years. As Karellen abruptly leaves, Stormgren shines the flash gun against the glass, hoping to get a glimpse of the Overlord.

Flashing forward thirty years, Stormgren, now ninety years old, is walking along the bank of a lake as he does every evening. A helicopter approaches, lands, and a reporter gets out, interested in interviewing Stormgren. The journalist asks about the equipment Stormgren used to try and discover Karellen's identity. Stormgren confirms that he used the equipment, but denies having seen anything. This is actually a lie, as Stormgren did catch a glimpse of Karellen before the door closed behind him, and feels that the Overlords are right in keeping their appearance a secret. Stormgren thinks that the two races must have met before in prehistoric time, and will be successful in the future.



## Chapter 4 Analysis

After seeing Karellen, Stormgren compares his appearance to a figure of mythology, something that has frightened mankind throughout history. He feels that humans can conquer their prejudices toward this particular legendary character, and work together toward a successful future. What mythological figure would be so frightening to people that they have feared it since prehistory?

# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 is the first of "Part II: The Golden Age." There is only one ship left hovering over New York, as the others were only illusions used to intimidate the humans. The day has arrived for the Overlords to set foot on the Earth, and journalists and spectators eagerly wait to catch a first glimpse. The ship lands, and as the door opens, Karellen's voice can be heard, asking for two children to meet him inside. As they reach the ship's opening, the children are levitated inside. After twenty seconds, Karellen emerges, holding the little girl and boy in each arm. Although only a few people faint, all are in shock to see that Karellen embodies the image of the Devil, complete with horns, wings, and a barbed tail.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The author uses the literary device of irony to show that the Overlords, who are considered to be the saviors of humankind, physically embody Satan, who was supposed to topple Earth.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Karellen sums up his philosophy about world order in a past meeting with Stormgren. He feels that tactful use of power, not forceful, can create political harmony. For example, all but one of the ships floating over Earth were illusions to intimidate humans into submission. The remainder of Chapter 6 shows the ways in which Karellen applies his form of power, and the ways in which the physical presence of the Overlords affects people.

Although the Overlords have revealed themselves, they usually stay on their ship. They seem to be unaccustomed to Earth's gravity level, and have to wear weighted belts. Uncomfortable in strong sunlight, they wear sunglasses whenever outside. They can breathe Earth's air, but need supplemental gas on occasion. Few humans have actually even seen an Overlord in person, and there are still some matters which they keep secret. However, most people are too grateful for the outcome of world harmony to be bothered by the Overlords' behavior.

Now in the twenty-first century, the world has reached Utopia. There is no war, poverty, sickness or fear among humankind. It seems as though the world has started over, abandoning old cities when they no longer function suitably. The economy has been revolutionized by machines: Factories are run by robots to the point that men no longer have to work, except to buy luxuries.

The world is united into one large entity: Countries have kept their old names, but only for the purpose of locating them. All people are educated, speak English, own a TV, and have the means to travel worldwide. Crime is now nonexistent. Since everyone has all of their luxuries, they have no need to steal. Also, the pace of life is more relaxed. People now stretch their education out longer, taking breaks to travel and absorb life experiences. With the evolution of effective birth control and proper DNA testing, sexual activity is loosened. The invention of a new flying apparatus makes cars virtually obsolete, revolutionizing travel.

The arrival of the Overlords also dissolves many religious beliefs. Although Karellen will not interfere in spiritual matters, he donates an apparatus to the World History Foundation which dispels many religious views. The device, similar to a television, shows actual footage of the past five thousand years. The truth of these recordings causes the fall of most religions. There is also a significant drop in scientific research, since humans assume that the Overlords have already unearthed any and all research possible. There are still a few who worry about the outcome of the new Utopia, and wonder if the Overlords' true intentions are to benefit Earth.



## Chapter 6 Analysis

Karellen explains his method of overpowering Earth to Stormgren. Instead of using brute force, he overtook the humans with psychological devices. This chapter once again brings up the topic of religion versus science, with the device Karellen donates to the humans that shows footage of historical events. In this chapter, and through the remainder of the novel, the more educated humans living in the Utopist society wonder how long their world will last, anticipating boredom with their perfect lives.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

Chapter 7 introduces a new set of characters. Guests are arriving to Rupert Boyce's party, at his home in the middle of the African jungle. One of the couples attending is George Greggson and Jean Morrel, who are unaccustomed to the sweltering heat after arriving from Alaska. Instead of greeting his guests in person, Rupert uses a device in his home that projects his image outside. Once inside, the couple is greeted by Rupert's new wife, Maia, a beautiful woman of mixed race. Jean is somewhat resentful toward Maia, since Rupert usually throws a party whenever he remarries.

After meeting and greeting the other guests, George and Jean decide to tour Rupert's new home. They are particularly interested in the library on the top floor, since Rupert collects books on magic, telepathy, and other unexplained phenomena. Since the arrival of the Overlords has taken away most mystical beliefs, Rupert's book collection can only be explained as an unusual hobby.

Upon entering the library, George and Jean are puzzled by a sharp smell. The couple traces the odor to a reading area, where they encounter their first Overlord, named Rashaverak. As Jean asks questions, George gets a closer look at the physical makeup of the Overlord, noticing that he has two opposable thumbs on each hand. Rupert calls them to come downstairs and join the party, and Rashaverak creates quite a stir among the guests. As Rupert and Maia receive their guests, George wonders why an Overlord would spend time with them, since they are normal civilians. Usually, an Overlord only meets humans for political reasons, such as Karellen's visits to the White House and Buckingham Palace.

George corners Rupert, demanding an explanation about Rashaverak's presence. Rupert explains that the Overlords are interested in his library. Since some of his books are rare, he wouldn't let the Overlords take books out, so they sent Rashaverak to research subjects of human psychology. Rupert has used Rashaverak to his advantage, helping to get him access to the projection device, normally reserved for Overlords' use. He uses this contraption in his work as a veterinarian. The machine enables Rupert to reach more of his patients, wild animals in need of medical care.

Eager to escape the noisy party, George heads to the rooftop to relax and enjoy the scenery. As he gets up to leave, another man surfaces from the roof hatch, who introduces himself as Jan Rodericks, Maia's brother. After a short conversation, George returns to the party, leaving Jan alone on the rooftop.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

George is an important part of the novel, since his sensible personality attempts to bring the other characters back to earth. However, he is disenchanted by the Utopist lifestyle,



uncomfortable with the flying machines used for everyday transportation, and annoyed with most of the other party guests who are living in the moment. His meeting on the rooftop with Jan Rodericks leaves a lasting impression on him. George feels a kinship to Jan, as a fellow educated man who is displeased with the state of the world.



# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

This chapter opens with a description of twenty-seven-year-old Jan Rodericks' background. His Scottish father, a professional magician, died at the age of 45 of alcoholism. His black mother, still living, is a professor at Edinburgh University, lecturing on advanced probability theory. In college, Jan majored in mathematics and physics, minored in philosophy and music appreciation, and became an accomplished pianist. He is currently working towards a doctorate in engineering physics, with a minor in astronomy, at the University of Cape Town.

Although he is living in Utopia, Jan is still unsatisfied with his life. He has romantic ideas about finding love, and had his heart broken by Rosita Tsien, a fellow student. Jan is also dissatisfied about the scientific boundaries that are placed on humans by the Overlords, feeling like a prisoner on his own planet.

Still standing on the rooftop at Rupert's party, Jan has a desire to see an Overlord ship take off into space. Just then, he sees one, heading toward the constellation Carina.

As the party dies down, Rupert decides to play a game with the remaining guests. He uncovers a table that is set up similar to an Ouija board. While Rupert doesn't really think that dead spirits communicate through the board, he thinks that participants use their subconscious to influence the messages that are spelled out. The players ask questions, and receive cryptic replies that indicate an otherworldly spirit is present. When Jan asks the board about the Overlords' origins, it spells out NGS 549672. Afterwards, Jean passes out.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Rupert comes across as a loud, obnoxious person, as his manners at the party indicate. As his guests arrive, he shows off his new teleporting device, and refers to his Overlord guest as "Rashy." He decides to set up the Ouija board, mainly because of the presence of Rashaverak. He is curious to see the Overlord's reaction toward a device that supposedly awakens unseen spirits.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

Karellen meets with Rashaverak back in his office, asking questions about Rupert Boyce. Rashaverak feels that Rupert is harmless, and not clever enough for the Overlords to feel threatened by his interest in the paranormal. However, they find Jean to be valuable, since the spirit communicating during Rupert's Ouija reading channeled through her. The Overlords decide to put her in Category Purple, a group reserved for the most important humans on earth. They also decide to keep tabs on Jan Rodericks, as they are suspicious of his interest in their home planet.

Rupert Boyce is somewhat puzzled by the outcome of the reading at his party. He knows that something important happened, but has fuzzy memories due to being drunk. The notes that were taken during the reading have also disappeared. Since the game was Rupert's idea, he decides to forget about the incident.

Jean's collapse at the party causes George to feel protective over her. Although he won't give up his other girlfriends, he decides to make Jean his wife. Still weak on the flight home, she reveals to George her fear of the Overlords' future for them. However, she does not tell him that she has passed out before. Instead of getting married in the traditional sense, George asks Jean to sign a five-year contract at the Archives office; then she suggests a ten-year agreement.

Jan is now on his way to London to attend a party held by the International Astronomical Union. Although the port is no longer used, the city is still relatively unchanged, with the exception of new bridges. After attending a lecture, Jan locates the library to research star catalogues. He is stunned to find that NGS 549672, from the reading at the party, is the actual location of a star, possibly the Overlords' home star. Satisfied, Jan wonders what he will do with this valuable piece of knowledge.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

Jan is becoming consumed with the idea of traveling to the Overlords' home planet. Much like Stormgren's desire to see an Overlord in the flesh, Jan is being prodded by human curiosity, especially since the Overlords have said, very specifically, that the stars were not meant for man.

# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

Chapter 10 describes the state of the world in the year 2050. Since many of the world's problems are solved, there are not many newsworthy events to put in newspapers.

Man is still prosperous, working only 20 hours a week and owning two homes. Since people are working less, they have much more time for leisure and sports. Since people have more time to perfect their physical skills, the planet is overrun with superior athletes, making professional sports obsolete. Even though the world has reached Utopia, there are still some unsatisfied people who are uncertain of the future.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

As in prior chapters, some of the more educated humans are becoming bored with their lifestyles, and also feel that it is too good to last. Even their leisure lives have become mundane, with no professional sports to watch and nothing of value to read about in the newspapers.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

Jan is back at Rupert's home, examining a stuffed elephant which is being sent to the Overlords' home. He and Rupert discuss the possibility of the Overlords sending a human to their planet. Jan thinks about telling Rupert his knowledge of their location, then reconsiders, fearing that Rupert will slip up and tell Rashaverak. Rupert also informs Jan that another animal expert, Professor Sullivan, will deliver a sperm whale and a giant squid. As Jan wonders how the Overlords collect such large animal specimens to take home with them, Rupert tells him that one of their cargo ships will fly overhead and hoist the elephant into a hatch.

In the South Pacific Basin, Jan travels by submarine to meet Professor Sullivan. On the way to his underground ocean lab, five kilometers under the sea, Jan sees and hears unusual marine life. Once inside of Deep Sea Lab One, Jan approaches Professor Sullivan about helping to smuggle him onto an Overlord's ship. Intrigued, Sullivan wants more details.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Human curiosity is driving Jan to find a way to visit the Overlords' planet. His secret about the location of the Overlords' origins is becoming a burden, as he almost tells Rupert. However, knowing Rupert's personality, Jan knows better.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

Professor Sullivan agrees to help Jan with his experiment, and Jan leaves a farewell letter for his sister, Maia. Jan begins by venting his frustrations about being held hostage on earth, unable to explore space. Jan then explains that he is going to stow away with supplies for six weeks in one of Sullivan's whales, long enough to get to the Overlords' home planet. However, he explains that time progresses more quickly on their end of the galaxy, and while he will have only aged a couple of months, eighty earth years will have passed, and Maia will probably be dead.

## Chapter 12 Analysis

In his farewell letter to Maia, Jan refers to the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale. He feels a kinship to Jonah, because as Jonah was cast off at sea and eaten by the whale, Jan has felt cast-off by his family, since they were never close. He indicates this in his letter. As Jonah's whale brings him to shore enlightened, Jan feels that he too will be enlightened once his whale arrives at the Overlords' home.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

Jan meets with Sullivan to check on the progress of the whale/squid display. Instead of stuffing an actual whale, Sullivan is building a decoy, which will be easier and more comfortable for Jan to stow away in. Sullivan's chief clerk brings him a message from Karellen, who wants to see the display in person.

Karellen, impressed with the display, does not have animals of that size on his home planet, and reveals that they have no oceans. He then recalls the biblical story of Jonah, who was swallowed by the whale, and wonders if there could be any truth to the myth. Sullivan dismisses the theory, relieved that Karellen does not suspect anything.

Sullivan then assists Jan into the mouth of the whale, saddened that they will never see each other again, and afraid that Jan will not withstand the trip. Once Jan is settled into his living quarters of the whale's belly, he injects himself with Narcosamine, a drug that gives one an effect similar to a hibernating animal. It will slow down Jan's bodily functions to help him survive the six week long trip. He sleeps through the hoisting of the whale into the Overlords' ship.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

The climax of the story occurs in this chapter, when Jan is being stowed away on the ship. There is also heavy symbolism in this act, the novel itself referring to the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale. The whale/squid display is symbolic of the outcome of the novel, referring to the squid as the "food that objected strongly to being eaten alive." The giant squid embroiled in this battle is symbolic of the tragic outcome that the humans will eventually face in the story. Using the element of foreshadowing, "the whale was always the winner...Its great expressionless eyes, half a meter across, stared at its destroyer-though, in all probability, neither creature could see the other in the darkness of the abyss" (Chapter 13, pg. 125).



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

During a weekly press conference, Karellen reveals that Jan has been discovered stowing away on one of the ships. The Overlords plan to return Jan safely to earth, since conditions on their planet would be very uncomfortable for him.

Jan's adventure leads to the complaints Karellen has received concerning humans' restricted access to outer space. He uses a device which turns the pressroom into a makeshift planetarium to show the reporters the vastness of the galaxy. Karellen then explains that his purpose for occupying Earth is to protect it, since it will serve a larger purpose. After the meeting, Karellen reflects on the future from the confines of his ship. Karellen predicts that the perfect world he has helped create will soon be obsolete.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

Here, the author uses foreshadowing, as he portrays most of the chapter through Karellen's point of view. Karellen delicately attempts to explain the outcome of Earth to humans, as a father would explain the death of a pet to his child. The stretches of silence between phrases, and his soft-spoken delivery of them, show Karellen as a creature who feels an attachment toward the humans. His affection for these people helps to develop Karellen into a sympathetic character.





# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

George is becoming more and more discontented with the utopist state of the world. He and Jean visit the island of New Athens, an experimental commune made up largely of artists. Since she feels that the move would benefit their children, Jean agrees to move there.

The family has to adjust to their new surroundings. Jean is shocked to see a kitchen in the house, since she is accustomed to using an automatic food service. She also enjoys the picturesque surroundings, but is concerned by the nearby inactive volcano, Sparta. Since private cars are not allowed, George must travel by bicycle.

The remainder of Chapter 15 details the creation of New Athens. Ben Salomon, the Jewish founder, is compared to Moses. Born in Israel, he is particularly bitter toward the Overlords for taking his freedom, since his country had only recently achieved independence before Karellen arrived. Although he felt that the Overlords' reforms benefited earth, Salomon was concerned that the blandness of Utopia was killing mankind's soul. He collaborated with several infamous artists to establish the city for the purpose of salvaging what was left of great art. Unfortunately, Salomon died three years before the settlement was founded.

The greatest artistic achievement for New Athens is in the field of animation. The goal of these artists is to make a theatrical experience real for the audience, using devices to stimulate their senses.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

Here, as in Chapters 12 and 13, the author uses biblical references, as he compares Ben Salomon to Moses. Much like Moses did for his people, Ben is leading his followers to what he feels is a path of spiritual enlightenment. Irony is used in the naming of the experimental community of New Athens, since it is named after the ancient Greek city known for its innovations in philosophy. In fact, Charles Yan Sen, the island's council chairman, is referred to as a philosopher in Chapter 17.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

George Greggson and his family have adjusted to their new surroundings. The oldest son, Jeffrey, enjoys swimming in the lagoon and playing with his dog, Fey. The daughter, Jennifer Anne, is unaware of the move, as she is still a baby.

George still reflects on the party at Rupert's house in Africa ten years before. He and Jean refuse to discuss the syance, when she passed out, and refuse to attend any more of Rupert's parties. Since then, Jean has lost all interest in the occult, and busies herself with motherhood. George still remembers meeting Jan Rodericks on the rooftop that night, and is still amazed that Jan would disobey the Overlords by hiding in their ship. George is bothered by the fact that Jan's age progression will be much slower while in space, yet admires him for taking the risk of defying the Overlords.

George arrives home early from work to find that his son, Jeff, has gone to Sparta to swim with friends. While George thinks about going for a swim himself, he is interrupted by the sound of a siren. While Jeff is exploring the reef, the ocean is hit by a tsunami. A few hours later, he is found by a rescue squad, hanging on a chunk of coral. Jean, convinced that her son was killed in the catastrophe, wants him to forget the incident. However, Jeff, unshaken by the occurrence, is certain that he was saved by someone. As Jeff explains the details of his rescue to his parents, George is convinced that he was helped by an Overlord.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

George's thoughts on Jan once again show the similarities between the two. Dissatisfied with their surroundings, each of them embarked on new adventures to new lands. Although he is grateful to find his son alive, George is upset that an Overlord saved him, feeling that the Overlords violated their trust by monitoring them.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

Karellen decides to send an Overlord to Athens to observe the goings-on of the new colony. The Overlord, named Thanthalteresco, a.k.a. the "Inspector," is led on a tour by Dr. Charles Yan Sen, a philosopher and current council chairman. On the second day, Dr. Sen compares humans' child rearing practices to the Overlords' cultivation of earth. However, The Inspector gives an unflattering reply, so Dr. Sen prepares the Overlord for an upcoming conference with the rest of Athens' council.

During the conference, the town officials discuss the reason for the creation of Athens to the Inspector; then they all take in a concert. On the third day, George meets the Inspector, and is frustrated, because they can not speak in private about the tsunami incident.

After the Overlord leaves, Jeff tells his father that he thinks the Inspector was the one who helped him during the tsunami. George discusses this with Jean, and then tries to reassure her that the Overlords are watching over Jeff to protect, not harm him.

The Inspector returns to Karellen with his report on Athens. He feels that the Colony is no threat to the Overlords, and regards it as a fascinating experiment. The Inspector discusses Jeff, who he refers to as subject Zero, as though he has some sort of special power that has yet to be unleashed. Predicting a grave outcome for earth, Karellen becomes increasingly sympathetic toward the human race.

Other than the contact with the Overlord, Jeff is described as an ordinary child. He enjoys life on Athens, and feels that the islanders are destined to do great things for the rest of mankind.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

Here, the author uses foreshadowing. Upon hearing the Inspector's report, Karellen becomes increasingly sympathetic toward humans, as though he predicts a serious outcome for them. Much like the affection one would have for a pet, Karellen has become attached to the people left in his care, and laments that he will eventually have to let them go. Also, at the close of the chapter, the author hints that one day soon, the island of Athens will play a large part in changing the world.



# Chapter 18

## Chapter 18 Summary

Jeff is beginning to have strange dreams about other planets. His dreams are being traced and analyzed by the Overlords, who anticipate a meeting with his parents. Jeff's dreams are becoming increasingly vivid. They're filled with visions of planets and solar systems farther and farther away. The Overlords anticipate some sort of change in Jeff, as his dreams become more frequent.

Puzzled by recent events, George meets with Rashaverak, the Overlord who attended Rupert Boyce's party years before. Although the Overlords no longer spy on humans, they have to watch George and Jean's children, because they are taking on inhuman characteristics. For example, George's baby daughter, Jennifer, has developed heightened senses. She now keeps her eyes closed, and can shake a rattle without touching it. Rashaverak goes on to explain that George and Jean's children were chosen at random for an experiment being carried out by a power above the Overlords. He warns George of the impending tragedy facing earth, and suggests that he spend as much time as possible with his children.

## Chapter 18 Analysis

Devastated by the impending loss of their children, George and Jean's priorities change. As their children move farther and farther out of consciousness, the couple becomes closer.

# Chapter 19

## Chapter 19 Summary

George and Jean are spending as much time as possible with their son. Jennifer remains in a continuous state of sleep, and will never awaken. Jeff floats in and out of consciousness, and no longer needs sleep. The transformation that is happening to George and Jean's children is spreading worldwide, affecting all children under the age of ten. The loss of these children greatly affects the adults forced to watch, killing their spirit. As the end of civilization nears, Karellen decides to address the world.

## Chapter 19 Analysis

Due to the loss of their children, people worldwide are grieving heavily. The profound state of depression makes life unbearable for many, ending the Utopist state of the world.



# Chapter 20

## Chapter 20 Summary

On the radio, Karellen announces to the world that he has almost completed his work, and states his purpose for occupying the planet. He explains that the western world's advancements in science were tampering with an unknown force that would have potentially destroyed Earth. The Overlords were sent by a higher power to protect Earth from self-annihilation, and to prepare it for the next stage of evolution. Karellen explains that humans are going to develop some sort of energy that the 'higher power' will tap into and feed off of. Since the adults' intellects are already fully developed, the 'higher power' will use the minds of children. Karellen refers to the higher power as the 'Overmind,' and explains that all of the minds of the children will eventually mold into one, and become an entity of the Overmind. In order to protect the children from being harmed, Karellen will evacuate them the next day.

Karellen goes on to explain that the Overlords built Utopia to divert people from their doomed future. He wants the remaining survivors to try and live the remainder of their lives peacefully. He reminds them that, even though their children are evolving into a different race, the human race will survive through them.

## Chapter 20 Analysis

Karellen must follow orders from the Overmind, or his people could be annihilated, as well. Earth is not the first planet that he has had to acquire for the Overmind, but he feels a tremendous affection for the humans left in his care. He envies them, since they will continue to exist, albeit in a different state. Once the Overlords die, they will eventually become extinct.



# Chapter 21

## Chapter 21 Summary

The children are now being evacuated by the Overlords. As George watches their departure, he is reminded of an old newsreel that depicted the evacuation of children during one of the World Wars. He and Jean see their son, Jeff, as he boards the ship.

The remaining people are left to decide how to live the remainders of their lives. Some choose to live on, while others commit suicide. The island of Athens once again turns into an active volcano, where George and Jean decide to stay and die.

## Chapter 21 Analysis

The removal of the children symbolizes the removal of the human spirit. Since parents place much of themselves into their children (emotionally, financially, etc.), a large piece of themselves is gone after their children depart. Therefore, many people lose their will to live.



# Chapter 22

## Chapter 22 Summary

Jan Rodericks is now returning to Earth after his stay on Carina, the Overlords' planet. Here, he has to adjust his way of thinking in order to function in their environment. He feels that he now has an understanding of why they have occupied Earth. Jan meets Vindarten, the only Overlord who speaks English, and tours the planet with him. They visit a museum that features exhibits from several planets, including Earth. Jan also sees a large mountain, surrounded by a strange ring of light. It is the only thing on the planet that he is not allowed to photograph.

The Overlords suggest that Jan take the next ship home, since there won't be another one for many years. During their descent to Earth, Jan is alarmed to see that the land is dark, not lit by man-made lights. Jan leaves the ship to find Karellen standing with a group of Overlords, waiting for him.

## Chapter 22 Analysis

It is a shock to Jan's system to see the planet in its barren state. The Overlords have been anticipating his return, as though they are expecting to use him for a purpose.





# Chapter 23

## Chapter 23 Summary

Karellen shows Jan what has happened to Earth since he last saw it. They are watching the progression of time on a screen, as the evacuated children were returned to land, located together on one continent. No longer human, the children show no emotion, and are involved in some sort of ritual dance, which lasts almost a year. Three years later, their minds have become more closely connected, and they use their power to play with nature, destroying all plant and animal life. The Overlords remain in their ships, studying what they can from space. For some time, the children have been motionless, like statues.

Jan asks Karellen about the ancient fear that man had over the Overlords' devil-like appearance. Karellen explains that there was no past interaction with humans to cause the "boogey-man" type of myths. Thousands of years before, humans with heightened psychic powers had visions of the Overlords, developing the legend.

Jan then comes to the realization that he is the last man on Earth. He stays in a deserted villa close to the Overlords' base, and renews his interest in the piano, since there is now nothing else left to occupy him.

## Chapter 23 Analysis

Here, the author uses irony: Jan spent his life studying the stars, resentful because the Overlords wouldn't allow him to explore space. The Earth's end makes him lament for wasting his musical talent. Now that he is the only man left, he is literally the best pianist in the world.



# Chapter 24

## Chapter 24 Summary

Almost five years have passed since Jan returned to Earth. The new race has now risen from its slumber, and is trying out its new powers, such as making the Moon spin. No longer safe, the Overlords decide to leave. They leave Jan in charge of their base, so that they can still observe the goings on of Earth.

Jan observes a giant web of light and color covering the atmosphere, and remembers seeing something similar on the Overlords' planet. The force of gravity is decreasing, as Jan feels lighter. Small inanimate objects begin to float toward space. Solid, more concrete objects, begin to dissolve. Jan has difficulty breathing. As the web disappears, Earth disintegrates.

Karellen's mission is now over, and he is sad for his race, since they are trapped by the forces of the Overmind. From his view of the Solar System, it looks as though Earth never existed. He silently bids farewell to the humans that he came to know and become attached to, then turns away from the Sun.

## Chapter 24 Analysis

Jan wonders if the Overlords had a hand in setting him up to stow away on their ship, since they needed someone to stay on Earth after they left to help them. Although Earth has dissolved completely into space, the planet and everything on it is supposedly now an entity of the Overmind. At the end of the novel, Karellen silently grieves for the humans, since he has grown so attached to them.



# Characters

## Reinhold

Reinhold, an American scientist, builds a space shuttle to compete with Russia to be the first in space flight. He fled Europe during World War II for America, and is only in the first chapter of the book.

## Konrad Schneider

Konrad Schneider is the Russian scientist competing with Reinhold to be the first to travel in space. They were friends and colleagues during World War II in Prussia. He is only included in the first chapter of the book.

## The Overlords

The Overlords are the mysterious beings that invade Earth. They keep their identity a secret for the first fifty-five years of occupation. The Overlords' appearance is that of the Devil. They are covered in a hard, black shell, and have horns, small leathery wings and a barbed tail. Large in stature, they exude an acidic smell. The Overlords are also sensitive to sunlight, wearing sunglasses whenever outdoors.

## Karellen

Karellen, leader of the group of Overlords, is also known as the Supervisor. His appearance is an enigma through half of the story. Burdened by his duty to his superiors, Karellen becomes a sympathetic character by the end of the story.

## Rikki Stormgren

Stormgren, sixty years old, is Secretary-General for the United Nations. He is the liaison between the humans and the Overlords, and is referred to as Karellen's office boy by the Freedom League. After retirement, he lives into his nineties, hoping to see Karellen again before he dies.

## Pieter Van Ryberg

Van Ryberg is Stormgren's assistant. He is constantly speculating about the motives of the Overlords. When Stormgren is kidnapped by an extremist group, he is forced to assume the duties of Secretary-General.



## Freedom League

The Freedom League is the group that opposes the Overlords' occupation. They demonstrate in front of Stormgren's office and produce propaganda slandering the Overlords.

## Alexander Wainwright

A former clergyman, Alexander Wainwright is the head of the Freedom League. He is "a tall, handsome man in his late forties." Stormgren perceives his honesty and motives as a threat to the Overlords' plan for a World Federation.

## Joe

Joe is in charge of the extremist group that kidnapped Stormgren. "He was a man of about fifty, and must have weighed well over two hundred pounds. Everything about him was outsize, from the stained battle-dress that might have come from any of a half a dozen armed forces, to the startlingly large signet ring on his left hand." He speaks with a Polish accent, and has radical political beliefs.

## Pierre Duval

Pierre Duval is the French scientist, who assists Stormgren in finding Karellen's identity.

As chief of the Science Bureau, he is equipped to help Stormgren.

## Rupert Boyce

Rupert Boyce is a veterinarian who specializes in the care of wild animals in the African jungle. He is somewhat of a show-off, throwing lavish parties whenever he remarries, which is frequently. He has an interest in the occult, and has a rare library of books on the subjects of magic and superstition.

## Maia Boyce

Maia Boyce is Rupert's newest and final wife. The product of a Scottish father and black mother, she is considered gorgeous in a world where beauty is common. Her brother, Jan Rodricks, will eventually become the last man on Earth.



## Jan Rodricks

Jan Rodricks, Maia Boyce's brother, is a handsome, twenty-seven-year-old man, who is interested in astronomy. His Scottish father was a drunk, and professional musician. His black mother was a physics professor at Edinburgh University. He is resentful toward the Overlords for not allowing humans to explore space. By the end of the novel, he literally becomes the last man on Earth. Jan is also an accomplished pianist.

## Rashaverak

Rashaverak is the Overlord who is studying Rupert's books. He also reappears at the end of the novel to help explain to George what is happening to his children.

## George Greggson

George is one of Rupert's party guests. Although he is promiscuous, George eventually marries Jean Morrel. He fathers two children, Jeff and Jennifer, which eventually starts the fall of man. He is reserved and skeptical by nature.

## Jean Morrel

Jean Morrel is George's girlfriend. She marries him after Rupert's party. She is an attractive lady, with platinum blonde hair, and shares Rupert's interest in the occult. Jean is the mother of Jeff and Jennifer.

## Jeffrey Greggson

Jeff is the seven-year-old son of George and Jean. He is a normal, active child, who enjoys swimming. Jeff is attached to his father, and shares his interest for the arts. After the tsunami, Jeff begins the metamorphosis that leads to the end of mankind.

## Jennifer Greggson

Jennifer is the baby daughter of George and Jean. A typical, healthy baby, she eventually succumbs to the powers of the Overmind.

## The Overmind

The Overmind is the supervising force that the Overlords work for. It overtakes planets, feeding off of their energy to make it more powerful. The Overmind is the antagonist of the story, since it sets off the chain of events that destroys Earth.



# Objects/Places

## Taratua

Taratua is a pacific island, where Americans are attempting to launch the space shuttle Columbus. A former volcano, it is only mentioned in the first chapter of the novel. Taratua is important, because it is the first place that the Overlords' ship is seen.

## Stormgren's Office

Stormgren's office is located several floors up in a skyscraper in New York City. It is here that Stormgren meets with Alexander Wainwright to discuss the Overlords' activities, and where Pieter Van Ryberg works while Stormgren is held hostage.

## The Sphere

The sphere is a silver-shaped orb that the Overlords use to transport Stormgren to the mother ship. The inside is dimly lit and soundproof. It has no visible doorway, but the surface puckers open, creating an entrance. The sphere travels quickly, taking Stormgren several miles in five minutes time, all while no motion is sensed in the interior.

## The Conference Room

The Conference Room is the area in the mother ship where Stormgren meets with Karellen. "The little conference room at the end of the short connecting corridor was unfurnished, apart from the single chair and the table beneath the vision screen. As was intended, it told absolutely nothing of the creatures who built it." Chapter 2, pg. 18

## The Underground Mine

The underground mine is the place where Stormgren is held hostage by members of the extremist group. It is sparse and cold. Since it is underground, it cannot be traced by the Overlords.

## The Science Bureau

The Science Bureau, run by Pierre Duval, is the meeting place where he and Stormgren plot to find the Overlords' identity. Since it is underground, the Overlords cannot monitor the goings on there.



## Utopia

Under the Overlords' rule, the state of the world becomes Utopia, where there is no war, poverty or ignorance. The Overlords use this to divert the humans from their dismal outcome.

## Rupert Boyce's Home

Rupert's home is set in the African jungle, since his occupation as a veterinarian requires him to assist the wild animals that frequent the area. As Jean Morrel describes it, "It looks rather like a box that somebody's stepped on." The library on the top floor is where the Overlord Rashaverak studies Rupert's books on the occult. Rupert's house is vital to the novel, as it is the place where the syance occurs, and where the Overlords' home is revealed. It also introduces the main characters that will remain throughout the rest of the story.

## NGS 549672

Originally a message on an Ouija board at Rupert Boyce's party, this letter/number combo actually revealed the location of the Overlords' home planet. The star name was labeled in a National Geographic Survey, as was found by astronomer Jan Rodericks.

## Deep Sea Lab One

Deep Sea Lab One is the location of Sullivan's headquarters. Here, he conspires with Jan Rodericks to devise a plot to smuggle Jan onto the Overlords' supply ship.

## The Whale

Built by Sullivan, the scientist, this replica of a whale was constructed as a hideaway for Jan, so that he could smuggle himself onto the Overlords' home planet. The stowaway scene is important, because it is the climax of the novel.

## Carina

Carina is the constellation in which the Overlords' home planet exists. Jan compares the red lit planet to man's vision of hell. Since the Overlords can fly, they have no streets, and doorways appear in strange places on buildings, which are sparsely decorated. Flickering shapes and lights float through the air, and two moons appear in the sky. One large mountain exists, which changes colors and is surrounded by a blue ring.



## **New Athens/Sparta**

New Athens is the island where George Greggson and his family move. It is an experimental commune, occupied largely by artists and philosophers. The people live in primitive conditions, cooking their own food and riding bicycles in lieu of modern transportation. Sparta, the neighboring island, is a dormant volcano, which eventually becomes active again, destroying both islands.



# Social Sensitivity

The opening of the novel describes an arms and space race which humanity can no longer control; *Childhood's End* suggests men desperately need a benevolent alien to save them from the politics and technologies that flow from their own nature. But it also suggests that man's nature must be abandoned and thus seems to acquiesce in the abolition of humanity that is portrayed, with elegiac qualification, as a triumph in its last pages.

Its anxiety over nuclear power is projected into an anxiety over the potentially explosive aspects of human nature.

A more central concern is the division the novel portrays between the generations in an era of swift technological and cultural change: "The present sheared asunder from the past as an iceberg splits from its frozen, parent cliffs, and goes sailing out to sea in lonely pride." The parents find their children's dreams impenetrable, and the parental guardians of humanity cannot understand paranormal or aesthetic experiences; yet it is these gratuitous toys which power the transcendence from the end of Mother Earth. The novel seems to describe and justify the generation gap that seemed so wide in the 1960s.

A related topic of the novel is the increasing specialization and complacency of the modern world. As the society of the novel proceeds toward Utopia, it becomes more caught up in the demands of dilettantism, refining and cataloguing but unable to create anything new. Unable to cope with the infinity of the universe, society is condemned to live out its possibilities in a closed world. The novel expresses a great fear that society after World War II cannot maintain a vision of humanity's diverse values; the political unity imposed by its guardians cannot alleviate the hollowness of the lives led by this multitude of second-raters.



## Techniques

Clarke's narrative is conservative, his vocabulary undemanding, his imagery conventional, and his point-of-view solidly that of the omniscient narrator. His style will occasionally rise to a semi-Biblical chant, which some critics have found bathetic, or become more sober for an occasional essay upon a remarkable feature of the physical world, for he clearly believes in the didactic potential of science fiction.

Each of his major novels seems composed of short stories. *Childhood's End* began as a short story entitled "Guardian Angel" (1950). In its final form it breaks into five sections, the prologue, the story of Stormgren, the scene at the seance, the story of Jan, and the story of the Greggsons and their children; it is, however, especially adroit in its last half, juggling the quests of Jan, George, the children, and Karellen. *2001* (1968), which also began as a short story, falls into three sections around the three protagonists, Moon-Watcher, Floyd, and Bowman.

*Rendezvous with Rama* (1973) breaks into several separate actions governed by the private dreams the members of the crew bring into the alien artifact; and it seems to mimic the triple back-up system that recurs thematically. Before its epilogue far in the future, *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979) alternates between two protagonists two thousand years apart. And *The Songs of Distant Earth* (1986) seems composed of vignettes. Only *The City and the Stars* (1956) and *Imperial Earth* (1975) possess simple plots, but since both are quests these plots are episodic and depend upon tableaux for a large part of their meanings. All of these novels concern the inability of any one protagonist or action to deal with reality.

His minor fictions have more unified plots because they concern that optimistic moment in Clarke's account of humanity when technology is still competent to manage the limited world around it. In most of Clarke's work this world lies only so far as the outskirts of the solar system and only one-hundred years in the future. Outside of those limits all prophesy may be vain, and the kind of plot in which character has an organic relation with the world becomes insufficient.



# Themes

## Themes

Several commentators have noted how *Childhood's End* opposes the intuitive to the rational, the immaterial to the material, and the community to the individual.

The prohibition the aliens deliver, "The stars are not for Man," implies human impotence on the epistemological, sexual, and personal levels. Not only is technology unable to cope with the manifold appearances of the universe, its maker, the analytic mind, is unable. Several of the novel's questers are blind, actually or metaphorically; the insights of the novel are achieved by those characters willing to acquiesce or to sleep.

Most of the protagonists suffer some form of sexual isolation: Stormgren is a widower, Jan has been jilted, and George's marriage becomes a convention.

Their condition is summarized by Rashaverak's description of the Overlords, "We are the midwives. But we ourselves are barren." The only permanent sexual relation is the semimaternal one between Maia and the childish Boyce. Nor is the sterility ended when George and Jean are reconciled over the loss of their children; their embrace is shattered by the atomic bomb that destroys their island: "The segments of uranium began to rush together, seeking the union they could never achieve." Only prepubescent children, no longer human, live through the explosive transcendence of the novel.

Nor can human society achieve a vision of the universe. Its destructive politics have to be controlled by outside forces, for the society is composed of individuals who make no contact with each other. As in much science fiction, their main activity seems to be problem-solving, with no reason for solving a problem beyond personal whim; except as a tic of characterization, human curiosity is purposeless. Jan, the chief representative of the individual quest, returns isolated when "his mind had nearly reached the end of its resources."

Within these carefully drawn limits, however, the novel achieves a powerful, resonant affirmation of human power in its willingness to break through such barriers. Its childish demand for the impossible becomes the signature of its greatness, so that through the individual deaths humanity explodes into the sky, assumed into the Overmind. The several satiric points of the novel prepare for that religious resolution.

## Religion versus Science

Repeated throughout the novel, this argument is perhaps the most strongly represented by the Freedom League. They oppose the Overlords, who represent science and reason. The League is led by Alexander Wainwright, a former clergyman known for his



piousness and honesty. However, many people's faiths are shaken after the Overlords donate a television-like device that dispels many religious beliefs.

On the other hand, the Overlords' home planet was revealed during the syance at Rupert Boyce's party. This message did not come from a concrete source. It somehow came through the Ouija board from a supernatural source. Karellen also brings up the argument that if Rupert didn't believe in the content of the books in his library, then why was he so sensitive about their care. Therefore, it can be assumed that Rupert possesses some sort of faith, or belief in a supernatural power.

## **Enslavement versus Free Will**

This is the cause for which the Freedom League is fighting. They feel that even though the Overlords have made improvements upon the world, it is not their place to do so. Throughout the story, references are made about the way in which the Overlords are ruling over the humans. At the end of Chapter 2, they are "shepherding mankind" (pg. 24). The Overlords are also referred to as "interlopers" by the extremist group that kidnapped Stormgren (Chapter 3, pg. 41). In his farewell letter to Maia, Jan feels that the Overlords have been "keeping us in the nursery" (Chapter 12, pg. 119).

The author makes the concept of free will sound as though it is an inborn human instinct. When Stormgren plots to discover Karellen's physical identity, he mainly does it out of the nature of curiosity. Jan uses his free will and his knowledge in astronomy to discover the Overlords' home planet. He uses it again to sneak aboard their supply ship. George Greggson's free will drives him to uproot his family to the experimental community of New Athens. These characters use free will to defy the Overlords' rule, because they desire the freedom to control over their own lives.

## **The Concept of Fate/Fulfilling One's Destiny**

After stowing away in the whale, Jan is surprised to find that the Overlords on the ship are expecting him. As Jan returns to the desolate state of Earth, Karellen wants him to stay and monitor the progress of the planet's obliteration. Did Karellen knowingly set Jan up to stow away on the ship and return to become the last man on Earth; or perhaps it was predestined by a higher power.

Also, the Overlords have to control certain events, so that they can follow the orders of the Overmind. For example, Jeff must be rescued by an Overlord, so that he may be one of the first to become a part of the new evolution, which is to become an entity of the Overmind. Following this event, children worldwide must be evacuated by the Overlords, since there is a fear that parents will harm or kill their kids to prevent them from fulfilling this destiny.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told in a third person point of view. There are many characters that have their own interpretation on the events occurring, so it is important to see what each of them are feeling. For Stormgren, it is the regret over not being alive long enough to see the Overlords leave their ship. For George, it is the discontent over the Utopist state of the world, the anguish of losing his children to the Overmind, and the regret over not having appreciated his wife, Jean, more. Jan shares romanticized ideas about finding true love and traveling into outer space.

For Karellen, the third person point of view is probably the most important. As the Supervisor of the Overlord occupants, he is at first perceived as an invader, possibly some sort of monster. However, as the plot moves along, he explains the motives for his actions. The anguish he feels over the humans' extinction gives Karellen credibility as a sympathetic character.

## Setting

The story occurs over a one hundred and fifty year time span, and covers events worldwide. It begins in the year 1976, on the Pacific island of Taratura, where the Overlords' ship is first spotted. Later, the story moves to New York City, to Stormgren's headquarters in the office of the United Nations. When he is kidnapped, Stormgren is taken to a remote area of South America.

Fifty years later, after the Overlords' descent to Earth's soil, the setting moves to a remote African jungle, where Rupert Boyce lives and works as a veterinarian. His home is an important place in the story, since it is here that the Overlords' home planet is revealed. After this, Jan Rodericks spends a short time in London, researching and finding the planet in an astronomy chart. Later, he stows away on an Overlord supply ship and visits their home, known as the constellation Carina. Since Carina is thousands of light years away, the time span is different. Eighty years of Earth's time is only a couple of weeks on the Overlords' planet. Therefore, Jan will return to Earth virtually unchanged, while his sister and acquaintances will most likely be dead.

Meanwhile, George and Jean Greggson move to New Athens, a remote island where an experimental commune is evolving. After losing their children to the Overmind, they perish when a volcano on the neighboring island Sparta erupts. Roughly eighty Earth years later, Jan returns home to find a desolate planet, with no plant or animal life. He remains on the planet for five more years, reporting to the Overlords until the planet evaporates into space in the year 2125. Since the plot concerns the eventual demise of Earth and the Overlords' worldwide Utopist diversion, it is vital to see how different areas of Earth are affected.



## Language and Meaning

The novel, written in English, is very easy to read, with the exception of some of the Overlords' names, which can be tongue twisters. Since the author is British, he tends to use metric measurements in his descriptions, which can be confusing to American readers. Using mostly short chapters, Clarke can be descriptive without being overly wordy. His concise, non-objective description of Earth's end leaves a feeling of emptiness, much like the outcome of the planet itself.

## Structure

Made up of twenty-four chapters, the novel is comprised of four parts, each revealing its outcome. The Prologue, containing only the first chapter, introduces the appearance of the Overlords' ships. The characters Reinhold and Konrad Schneider are introduced here, but aren't included in the rest of the novel.

Part I: "Earth and the Overlords" contains Chapters two through four, the longest chapters of the book. They describe the humans' attitude towards the Overlords, and portray Stormgren's relationship with Karellen. Part II: "The Golden Age" contains Chapters five through fourteen, and builds the plot up to the climax of the novel. In Chapter five, the Overlords come down from their ships and reveal their identity to a stunned crowd. However, the public soon adjusts to their demonic exterior, as they transform the world into Utopia in Chapter six. Chapter seven introduces the main characters that will remain in the rest of the story, as they meet at Rupert Boyce's party. The eighth chapter contains the climax of the novel, when the Overlords' home planet is revealed during the syance. In Chapter nine, George and Jean decide to marry, while Jan researches and locates the Overlords' home planet. The remainder of Part II concerns Jan's plot to travel to the Overlords' home by stowing away on their supply ship. Part II closes by introducing the end of "The Golden Age," when Karellen holds a press conference, revealing his reasons for occupying Earth.

The final section, Part III, is called "The Last Generation," referring to the existing adults on Earth, revealing the outcome of the story. It consists of Chapters fifteen through twenty-four, and begins with George Greggson moving his family to New Athens, where he feels that he will have more freedom to explore his artistic talents. While Chapter fifteen shows the family adjusting to their new lifestyle, the island is hit by a tsunami in Chapter sixteen, and reveals that the Overlords have been monitoring George's son. An Overlord visits the colony in Chapter seventeen, and reveals to George that he will lose his children to the Overmind in Chapter eighteen. Chapters nineteen through twenty-one focus on the children's destiny of becoming a product of the Overmind, and their worldwide evacuation carried out by the Overlords.

Jan Rodericks is returning home from his visit with the Overlords in Chapter twenty-two, and is shocked to find the desolate state of the planet in Chapter twenty-three. The Overlords flee Earth in the final chapter, twenty-four, but leave Jan behind to monitor the events leading to the planet's demise.



## Quotes

"He felt no regrets as the work of a lifetime was swept away. He had labored to take man to the stars, and, in a moment of success, the stars - the aloof - indifferent stars - had come to him. This was the moment when history held its breath, and the present sheared asunder from the past as an iceberg splits from its frozen, parent cliffs, and goes sailing out to sea in lonely pride. All that the past ages had achieved was as nothing now: only one thought echoed and re-echoed through Reinhold's brain: The human race was no longer alone." Chapter 1, pg. 6

"It was amazing that so many abuses, follies, and evils could be dispelled by those messages from the sky. With the arrival of the Overlords, nations knew that they need no longer fear each other, and they guessed-even before the experiment was made-that their existing weapons were certainly impotent against a civilization that could bridge the stars. So at once the greatest single obstacle to the happiness of mankind had been removed." Chapter 2, pg. 24

"Though it had always been obvious to any rational mind that *all* the world's religious writings could not be true, the shock was nevertheless profound. Here was a revelation which no one could doubt or deny: here, seen by some magic of Overlord science, were the true beginnings of all the world's great faiths. Most of them were noble and inspiring-but that was not enough. Within a few days, all mankind's multitudinous messiahs had lost their divinity. Beneath the fierce and passionless light of truth, faiths that had sustained millions for twice a thousand years vanished like morning dew. All the good and all the evil they had wrought were swept suddenly into the past, and could touch the minds of men no more." (Chapter 6, pg. 71)

"Utopia was here at last: its novelty had not yet been assailed by the supreme enemy of all Utopias-boredom." (Chapter 6, pg. 72)

"No Utopia can ever give satisfaction to everyone, all the time. As their material conditions improve, men raise their sights and become discontented with power and possessions that once would have seemed beyond their wildest dreams. And even when the external world has granted all it can, there still remains the searchings of the mind and the longings of the heart." (Chapter 8, pg. 87)

"A century before, Man had set foot upon the ladder that could lead him to the stars. At that very moment - could it have been coincidence? - the door to the planets had been slammed in his face." (Chapter 8, pg. 89)

"The human race continued to bask in the long, cloudless summer afternoon of peace and prosperity. Would there ever be a winter again? It was unthinkable. The age of reason, prematurely welcomed by the leaders of the French Revolution two and a half centuries before, had now really arrived." (Chapter 10, pg. 107)





"The existence of so much leisure would have created tremendous problems a century before. Education had overcome most of these, for a well-stocked mind is safe from boredom." (Chapter 10, pg. 108)

"He was going into a realm of nightmare creatures, preying upon each other in a darkness undisturbed since the world began. It was a realm above which men had sailed for thousands of years: it lay no more than a kilometer below the keels of their ships-yet until the last hundred years they had known less about it than the visible face of the moon." (Chapter 11, pg. 112)

"They would never know how lucky they had been. For a lifetime, mankind had achieved as much happiness as any race can ever know. It has been the Golden Age. But gold was also the color of sunset, of autumn: and only Karellen's ears could catch the first wailings of the winter storms." (Chapter 15, pg. 134)

"The universe was vast, but that fact terrified him less than its mystery. George was not a person who thought deeply on such matters, yet it sometimes seemed to him that men were like children amusing themselves in some secluded playground, protected from the fierce realities of the outer world." (Chapter 16, p.148)

"It was the end of civilization, the end of all that men had striven for since the beginning of time. In the space of a few days, humanity had lost its future, for the heart of any race is destroyed, and its will to survive is utterly broken, when its children are taken from it." (Chapter 18, p. 177)

"In a soundless concussion of light, Earth's core gave up its hoarded energies. For a little while the gravitational waves crossed and re-crossed the Solar System, disturbing ever so slightly the orbits of the planets. Then the Sun's remaining children pursued their ancient paths once more, as corks floating on a placid lake ride out the tiny ripples set in motion by a falling stone." (Chapter 24, pg. 215)





## Key Questions

Science fiction in general, looks to the future—near or far. Clarke's visions of the future in prose sometimes build from present-day technology and theory into a not-too-distant tomorrow within Earth's known solar system and sometimes range millennia into the future in settings far outside the galaxy which contains Earth and its sun. Clarke's novels and stories offer good possibilities for discussion because the author conventionally works from known fact and technology to project logical developments in human endeavors in space. This satisfies those readers who prefer "science-based" fiction to more speculative fantasy. In describing the effects of technological advances on human society, however, Clarke may quickly summarize social changes across centuries or millennia, giving little or no detail of the intricate and serious cause-and-effect relationships which would necessarily function in any significant social movement. As author, he assumes the luxury of skipping many possible stories within the story and quickly posits the stage of development or philosophical outlook of human societies or cultures that best suits his purpose in a given novel. At times, critics feel his characters are quite scantily sketched, not really "flesh-and-blood" human beings. Some of his novels are admittedly expansions of earlier short stories, and some readers may find the novel-length treatment somewhat disjointed when compared to the original short version. A novel by Clarke can often be discussed for the relative plausibility of its technological descriptions or assumptions, for the usefulness of its characters in the plot line, and for the relative depth of its characters. Readers more interested in scientific and philosophical speculation may be less concerned if plots are thin and characters are pale. Readers sensitive to the fate or development of humans in their respective social contexts may find Clarke's sweeping generalizations about cultural and ideological change unsatisfactory if they do not find sufficient explanation of the ways such changes affect identifiable, individual human beings. Thus, the believability of personalities and the effectiveness of a character's action—or inaction—can be the focus of useful debate in discussion groups.

1. When the Overlords assume control of earth, Karellen, Supervisor for Earth, broadcasts a speech to the world. Clarke terms it "a work of superlative genius," but gives the reader not a single word of the speech directly. Should the reader be given at least some excerpts of Karellen's speech in order to support the judgment of its "genius"?
2. In the first years of his control of Earth, Supervisor Karellen never shows himself or any other Overlords to human beings. Why does he remain hidden?
3. What laws do the Overlords impose upon Earth, and how do they enforce them? How does the Overlords' rule affect humanity's competing scientific, religious, educational, and military institutions?
4. Why does the Freedom League kidnap Stormgren? How are they able to manage the kidnapping without being stopped immediately by the Overlords?



Does the kidnapping bring punishment to any of the perpetrators?

5. Chapter Five's final paragraph gives a few physical features of the Overlords when they reveal themselves for the first time. What do these physical traits suggest in terms of ancient Earth folk and religious traditions?

6. The Overlord Rashaverak is assigned to read material in Rupert Boyce's library.

What specific topics does he explore, and why?

7. What specific steps do the Overlords take to counter racism and injustice in human societies? How much attention does Clarke give to these issues? Does he do so more through description, narration, or characterization?

8. Why does Jan Rodricks want to visit the Overlords' home planet? Since the Overlords seem to be able to control many aspects of human life and social activity, how does Rodricks get off the Earth on a space flight? How and why is he returned to Earth?

9. How many different ages or eras are covered in *Childhood's End*? How many sets of human characters appear and disappear during the story? Does the use of these several sets of characters work smoothly, or does it make for a choppy or fragmented plot?

10. Clarke's biographer, McAleer, cites an instance of Clarke's greeting a Jesuit priest with the declaration, "I am an atheist." In what aspects does *Childhood's End* draw on imagery from ancient and medieval Christian tradition about the end of the world? In what ways is Clarke reinterpreting the images? Are his renderings antireligious? Do they completely discount the notions of some higher power?

11. In the "end time" as Clarke poses it in *Childhood's End*, what has humanity become?

12. Karellen has told humans, "The stars are not for man," while the Overlords have the capacity for space travel.

Yet, Clarke poses the "maturing" human race as moving to a state greater than that of the Overlords. In what way are the Overlords limited, and in what ways are the members of the "new" human race becoming superior?

## Topics for Discussion

Compare/contrast the rise and fall of the island of New Athens to the Greek empire of the same name.

Apply the outcome of the novel to the philosophy of existentialism, the belief that all of humankind's efforts to evolve and improve the world are in vain.

Apply points of the story to Darwin's theories of evolution, and survival of the fittest.

Relate Freud's psychological concept of id, ego and superego to the following groups from the story: the Humans, the Overlords, and the Overmind.

The author sometimes uses seasons to describe the state of the world throughout the novel. For example, as Part II ends with Karellen's thoughts on the world's bleak future, "But gold was also the color of sunset, of autumn: and only Karellen's ears could catch the first wailings of the winter storms" (Chapter 14, pg. 134). Compare the three parts of the book to the four seasons.

The first hundred years of the Overlords' occupation are referred to as the new Age of Reason, as Utopia is achieved and science topples religious beliefs. Compare this new Age of Reason to the Age of Reason that occurred in Europe during the 1500's and 1600's.

Although religion is trampled by science during the new Age of Reason, there are still many biblical references throughout the story. For example, Jan's plot to stowaway in the whale is compared to the story of Jonah. Find these references, and compare them to their biblical counterparts. Also, if religion has become obsolete in the story; then why are these biblical references used?

## Literary Precedents

Any understanding of Clarke must acknowledge the influence of Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1931): "With its multi-million-year vistas, and its roll call of great but doomed civilizations, the book produced an overwhelming impact upon me." Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1938) and *Odd John* were also formative, especially the latter in its story of a paranormal child. But Clarke should also be read in the light of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895; see separate entry), *The War of the Worlds* (1898; see separate entry), and "The Star." From Stapledon he learned a blend of lament and exultation confronting cosmic tragedy, and from Wells a respect for the detailed limits and opportunities science offers, met with irony and humor. He is more content to suggest Stapledon's scope than to describe it, and certain effects in *Tales from the White Hart* (1957) are reminiscent of Wells's cautionary tales. J. D. Bernal's *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* impressed him with its human response to entropy.

*Childhood's End* has particular debts to C. S. Lewis's notion in *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938; see separate entry) that humanity, in its fallen state, should be quarantined to Earth. In imagery, tone, and plot it resembles Henry Kuttner and C. L. Moore's "Mimsy Were the Borogoves," in which the children of a casual marriage learn how to skip out of a world of merely three dimensions. And some of its imagery and sense of isolation are probably indebted to Matthew Arnold's *Marguerite* poems.



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