

# False Dawn Short Guide

## False Dawn by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

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# Contents

<a href="#">False Dawn Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Social Concerns/Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Techniques.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>

## Social Concerns/Characters

This widely reviewed novel, which appeared the same year as the first Saint-Germain novel, is both bleak and poorly constructed. The bleakness comes from the fact that this is a postholocaust novel that offers no hope for the future; the weakness in construction owes its existence to the author's expansion of the story into a full length work.

In this work, Doomsday has come, but readers are not certain how, except that pollution is extreme and plants and animals have both adapted to it in bizarre ways long since. The Ponderosa pines are red now, and deadly water spiders that resemble scorpions bunch together wherever there is water; their sting brings a swift, painful death.

Danger is virtually everywhere people are found. Goups of indeterminate size range the California setting of this novel and possibly elsewhere, all viciously mean men on motorcycles who owe their inspiration to the Mongols, it would seem. Paul Walker complained in *Galaxy* that it seems at first that there is an army, but in the end only a handful are fought off by the two central characters, both of whom are mutants, but why or how readers do not know.

Thea, a young woman born in 1986, is now about twenty-six years old. She was made a mutant by someone, possibly a consenting parent, in an attempt to create various types of mutants ("mutes" in the novel) who might survive more successfully than ordinary human beings in the postholocaust world. Thea has a nictitating membrane in her eye (vestigial in most people) which is of dubious value.

More to the point is the ability she and her male savior-sidekick Evan share to regenerate tissue and apparently, at least in the forty-six-year-old Evan's case, to regenerate bone, too; he loses an entire arm to the Pirates, but it grows right back. They spend the nearly 200 pages of the novel trekking around the ruined Western mountains trying to find a safe home, but instead the homicidal maniacs that seem to abound in every era in Yarbro's work do everything they can to destroy the two. Besides the Pirates, there are cannibals and fanatical monks who persecute the pair. Gretchen Rix, writing in *Science Fiction Review*, found the "gimmicky villains" the one flaw of the novel, but others have a longer list.

# Techniques

False Dawn was expanded from a short story by the same name (in *Strange Bedfellows*). John Clute, writing in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, was very critical of Yarbrow's decision to expand this story into a novel. In the short story, he noted, the rape of Thea and the rape of the land "model each other effectively," but the effect is lost when the novel drags out for many more pages, episodic in nature and "shambling."

# Themes

Man's inhumanity to man is allowed full reign here, since no law enforcement agency exists. In a 1980 symposium on postholocaust literature, Yarbrow warned feminists away from the idea that a holocaust, "even a miniholocaust," would be a welcome way to start with a clean slate and begin to establish female equality. Once anything like that occurs, she declared, history shows that "any small rights that you may have had for anyone but the physically strongest are gone, kaput, zowie. You do not see them again.

If you want to be reduced to a state of chattel again . . . the best thing you can do is to get yourself a holocaust, even a small one. You're going to find out how it feels to earn your bread on your back." Thea is spared that fate, but she is raped once, quite brutally, and the scar that remains is a major block to her acceptance of Evan's love for her.

Man's stupidity is the cause, in some way that is left vague, of the pollution and radioactivity of the planet. Yarbrow's lack of confidence in the human race is evident in the fact that no hope whatever is offered. The hope implied in a dawn is here inevitably and always false. This hopelessness and cynicism is best for those who are embittered anyway, and love gloomy affirmations of their bias.



## Related Titles

*The Time of the Fourth Horseman* (1976) is an apocalyptic novel concerning the Modest-Proposal-style decision of some doctors at the top to kill off the excess population by using placebos for one third of all the vaccinations for diphtheria and typhoid and such illnesses. Of course epidemics rage and the diseases mutate into unstoppable forms. Horrors dominate.

*Firecode* (1987) belongs to Yarbro's second most typical form of fiction, the apocalyptic or holocaust novel. As with *False Dawn* and *The Time of the Fourth Horseman*, she appeals to the reader's paranoia to create a sense of helplessness in the face of mass death and destruction. Here, the fear is that of the innumerate who fear the dominance of computers and their incomprehensible "number-crunching" in the late twentieth century. Needless to say, the computers bring ruin to humankind.

The central character is a statistician named Carter Milne. When a series of incredibly destructive fires of unknown origin break out all over North America, she correlates all the data using computers, which is ironic because the fault lies with computers to begin with.

Carter is opposed by those who disagree with her theories and by the FBI, which hopes to isolate the cause of the fires and to use it as a weapon against enemies of the United States. By using a female detective/mathematician, Yarbro makes the point that stereotypes of women as less rational or mathematically talented are to be rejected. Carter Milne is presented as a role model for female readers.

In *Firecode*, as in all of Yarbro's novels, there is a supernatural or mystical component to the plot. In this case, Carter Milne solves the mystery of the fires when she happens upon ancient mystical books in her new house, which she buys after her husband, a victim of mysterious forces, burns up the old house with himself inside. To modernize the novel and to take credit away from religious mystics, Yarbro demonstrates that the mystics are only half right — there is something out there that is inadvertently summoned by the computers, but it is an actual physical "something." One reviewer termed this something a "whatsit, a natural phenomenon, a resonance with reality." What occurs is simply that when the thousands of computers clicking away happen to hit upon a specific sequence of numbers, fire is called down from this "whatsit," destroying the typist and everything around.

The reviewer was scornful of this premise because the sequence of death numbers is only fifteen digits long. He reasons that society as a whole probably hits upon this number thousands of times every day. As he points out, such a weak basis for our fear is merely "the night terror of someone who belongs to a different millennium and does not really comprehend that new-fangled thing called arithmetic and how it helps one control the world."



Although Firecode is clearly related to Yarbro's other apocalyptic science fiction novels, it is also related to her detective novels that feature a male American Indian lawyer/detective, Charlie Spotted Moon. Whereas Charlie uses some sort of Indian sixth sense to solve crimes, Milne does not rely on "feminine intuition" but on a liberated woman's analytical powers. Further, as in Yarbro's two other apocalyptic novels, the blame falls upon a corrupt, short-sighted, or insensitive humanity that has allowed technology to get out of control.



# Copyright Information

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