

The Guardians Short Guide

The Guardians by Samuel Youd

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Guardians Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	9
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	10
For Further Reference.....	11
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

Like many of Christopher's novels, *The Guardians* examines the nature of freedom and independent thought. A sobering and relatively realistic account of life in the near future, *The Guardians* is set in an England that has deliberately been divided into two mutually suspicious camps by a small group of "dedicated men who . . . act as guardians over the rest." Although the Guardians' professed aim is benevolent, the effect of their coercive policies is to deprive all people—both the teeming masses in the Conurb and the leisured gentry in the County—of any real freedom of thought or action.

The most important conflict in the story is not the external one between the Guardians and the rebels, but the internal one that torments thirteen-year-old Rob Randall, the novel's protagonist.

Rob is an intelligent and sensitive boy who only gradually comes to understand his potential in society. Consigned to a grim Conurb boarding school after the mysterious death of his father, Rob escapes to the County, where he poses as the distant relative of a gentry family.

The Guardians has the pace and tension of a spy thriller and the philosophical insight of a serious novel. Like George Orwell's *1984* (1949) or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Christopher's novel explores presentday social and moral dilemmas by depicting a future world in which disturbing trends in modern life have been allowed to take their natural course. The result is an arresting picture of a world in which social conditioning has deprived most people of that freedom of choice which, to Christopher, makes life both difficult and worth living.

About the Author

John Christopher was born Christopher Samuel Youd in Knowley, Lancashire, England, on April 16, 1922.

When he was ten years old, his family moved to Hampshire, where he was educated at Peter Symonds's School, Winchester. Youd became interested in science fiction in the late 1930s and published a magazine in the field called *The Fantast*. He served in the Royal Corps of Signals from 1941 to 1946, and when he returned to civilian life received a Rockefeller Foundation Grant that enabled him to devote an entire year to writing. After this, he worked for ten years in the information bureau of a diamond-cutting firm, continuing to write in his spare time. Youd wrote a number of serious novels for adults under his own name, including *Giant's Arrow* (1956) and *Messages of Love* (1961). His work was well received by critics but was not a resounding commercial success.

With a family of five children to support, Youd decided in 1958 to expand the scope of his authorial enterprise and write novels in a variety of genres. He has published science fiction as "John Christopher," detective novels as "Peter Graff" and "Peter Nichols," cricketing books as "William Godfrey," and light comedies as "Hilary Ford." His "John Christopher" novels for adults, mostly science fiction, have achieved considerable success. In such books as *Caves of Night* (1958) and *The Death of Grass* (1956), Christopher explores human reactions to situations of unusual stress.

This thematic concern appears also in his science fiction for young adults, which has been exceptionally popular, especially in England. Christopher's best-known works for younger readers include *The Tripods Trilogy*—composed of *The White Mountains*, *The City of Gold and Lead*, and *The Pool of Fire*—and *The Guardians*, which won the 1970 Christopher Award and the 1971 Guardian Award for children's fiction.

Setting

The story begins in England in 2052.

The nation is divided into the crowded, violent Conurb and the green countryside of the County. Life in the Conurb offers bright lights and incessant action, and Conurban citizens enjoy the "sense of being part of a noisy mass of people who . . . give each other reassurance and security." The gentry, with their servants and large houses, lead tranquil lives in a pre-World War I ambiance.

Although modern technology exists in the County, it is carefully hidden; most transport is by horse and carriage, and candles and oil lamps light many houses. The gentry imagine Conurban life to be a raucous nightmare, while the Conurbans consider the gentry dull and their servants contemptible.

Youngsters in the Conurb are discouraged from reading and writing, and their education consists largely of indoctrination. Education of the gentry follows a more traditional pattern, although individual thought is still discouraged. The rare independent thinker who does emerge from this system—occasionally from the Conurb, but most often from the County—may be asked to join the select group of Guardians who secretly rule the nation. Those freethinkers who pose a threat of rebellion, however, are subjected to a brain operation that makes them tractable and docile.



Social Sensitivity

Christopher's story teaches that social conditioning can hamper the free exercise of moral responsibility. Rob's experience suggests that moving from one culture to another involves more than superficial change. Values rated highly in the Conurb, such as modesty, are not valued in the County, where a certain self-confidence and authority are taken for granted. The complacency and narrow-mindedness fostered among both the gentry and the Conurbans prevent them from achieving autonomy.

The Guardians-suggests that social barriers are artificial. Although this particular story is set in England, its lessons apply wherever social barriers divide people along ethnic, religious, class, or gender lines.



Literary Qualities

The Guardians is a highly readable but thematically complex novel. Perhaps in part because the book was originally conceived as a novel for adults, Christopher explores his characters' psychological struggles more fully than he does in his other novels for young readers.

Christopher defines maturation as the process of recognizing the moral implications of the various roles society invites one to play, and then making responsible choices. The device of focusing *The Guardians* on two young boys from different backgrounds, each of whom must overcome convention and social manipulation to see things from the other's perspective, works well.

Christopher is also a master of carefully controlled suspense. By delaying the novel's climactic moment—in which Rob understands the full import of his situation—Christopher allows readers to become seduced by County life along with Rob.

The Guardians is, in a sense, a quest story in which the protagonist leaves the drab, workaday world for a land of comfort and plenty, only to find that he must return home to recognize his full potential. But the boy who reluctantly returns to the Conurb at the end of the novel has acquired the wisdom and selfknowledge he needs to carry on his father's work: the fight for freedom for Conurb and County people alike.

Christopher uses small, specific symbolic episodes effectively. In one scene, for example, Mike's father explains to Rob his obsession with bonsai, the Oriental method of pruning and training trees to create a controlled miniature landscape. Mr. Gifford dwells on the pruning necessary when the plants are young, the constant care needed to assure that they are properly rooted, and the way the trees can be made to grow not as nature intended, but as careful planning dictates. Attentive readers will note a parallel with the way the Guardians control society in both County and Conurb. The incident takes on a certain poignancy later in the novel when Rob learns that Mr. Gifford was once subjected to a mind-altering operation that channeled his aggressive—and creative—instincts into harmless activities such as growing bonsai.



Themes and Characters

The Guardians tells the story of Rob Randall's gradual awakening to the realities of his world and his own responsibilities within it. Although it emerges that Rob's father had been involved in a conspiracy to overthrow the Guardians, Rob has been brought up—presumably for his own protection—as much as possible like any other boy in the Conurb. Only after his father's death and his own arrival at a repressive state boarding school does life in the Conurb become insupportable for Rob. He manages to escape to the County, where he is befriended by Mike Gifford, a boy who, like Rob, has somehow managed to resist some of his conditioning.

After Mike persuades his mother to assist them, Rob is taken in by the family at Gifford House and passed off as a distant relative from Nepal. Starved for privacy, real education, and emotional attention, Rob comes to love his new life and his second family. Mike, meanwhile, begins to look at County life more critically, and falls in with a group of student agitators who plot an unsuccessful rebellion. Mike turns to Rob for help in escaping to the Conurb—a plan that Rob is willing to keep secret, but not to follow himself.

Only in the novel's final pages does Rob begin to face the truth about his situation. The authorities announce that his masquerade as a distant cousin of the Giffords had been discovered at once; that he had been allowed to stay in the County as a government experiment; and that he might now look forward to staying there for the rest of his life as a Guardian. Offered security for the first time in his life, Rob agrees to become a Guardian. But he is shaken to discover not only that the Guardians intend to perform brain surgery on Mike when they capture him, but also that Mike's father underwent the same operation when he was Mike's age.

Rob realizes that the Guardians have offered him "the chance to be not a puppet, but a puppet master." His difficult decision to renounce the Guardians and return to the Conurb as an activist has a surprising and immediate effect. Rob remembers all the times in his childhood that his father would suddenly go away, leaving him hurt and uncomprehending. Now at last Rob has "a strange feeling as though after all it had come right. He was going with his father, long years behind but following."



Topics for Discussion

1. What factors predispose Rob to rebel and leave the Conurb?

2. Describe the lifestyle of the Conurb.

What does Rob find desirable or undesirable there? What features of contemporary social life is Christopher satirizing in his picture of the Conurb?

3. What are Rob's strengths and weaknesses? Does he change at all over the course of the story?

4. Compare Rob and Mike. How have their backgrounds prepared them to feel about each other? How do they feel?

Why?

5. Compare the lifestyle of the County with that of the Conurb.

6. Why does Rob refuse to escape to the Conurb with Mike?

7. Why does Rob at first accept the proposal that he become one of the Guardians? Why does he change his mind?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Many of Christopher's novels are concerned with the temptation to submit to authority rather than accept the sometimes painful responsibility of freedom. How is this theme worked out in *The Guardians*? Compare or contrast the way Christopher handles the theme here and in his *Tripods Trilogy* or *The Lotus Caves*.

2. Identify some of the more fantastic elements in the world of *The Guardians*.

What do these imaginary touches add to the story?

3. In this story, the climax comes in the last few pages, when Rob discovers that the apparently separate worlds of Conurb and County are both controlled by the Guardians. What is the effect of Christopher's withholding this information from Rob and the reader for so long?

4. *The Guardians* is a form of Utopian fiction often termed dystopian, in that it extrapolates present-day trends into an alarming world of the future. Research and report on *The Guardians*' use of themes and plot devices common in dystopian fiction. You might compare Christopher's work with that of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, H. G. Wells, or Margaret Atwood.

5. Outline a sequel to *The Guardians* that, like the original, focuses as much on an internal struggle—such as Rob's decision whether or not to join the Guardians—as it does on external conflict.

For Further Reference

Carpenter, Humphrey, and Mari Prichard. *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Includes a brief biographical and critical note.

Crouch, Marcus. *The Nesbit Tradition: The Children's Novel in England 1945-1970*. London: Ernest Benn, 1972.

Christopher's novels are treated briefly in a chapter devoted to science fiction.

Gough, John. "An Interview with John Christopher." *Children's Literature in Education* 15 (Summer 1984): 93-102.

This article is based on the author's correspondence with Christopher.

Hillegas, Mark R. *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the AntiUtopians*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967. In addition to Wells, Hillegas considers authors Karel Capek, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell, as well as some later dystopian writers.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. 2d ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Contains a short critical commentary with an extensive bibliography.

Milner, Joseph O. "Oathkeepers and Vagrants: Meliorists and Reactive World Views in Science Fiction."

Children's Literature Association Quarterly 10 (Summer 1985): 71-73. This article divides science fiction writing into two camps, classifying Christopher's fiction as "reactive" for projecting a view of humanity as ultimately flawed.

Scholes, Robert, and Eric S. Rabkin.

Science Fiction: History. Science.

Vision. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. This book offers a short history of science fiction and features a good bibliography.

Townsend, John R. *A Sense of Story: Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children*. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1971. Includes a favorable chapter on Christopher.

Written for Children: An Outline of English Language Children's Literature. New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1974.

Discusses Christopher's books in the context of British science fiction writing for children.

Williams, Jay. "John Christopher: Allegorical Historian." *Signal* 4 (January 1971): 18-23.
Williams sees Christopher as a fantasist writing about present critical and ecological dilemmas.

Related Titles

The White Mountains is the first book of what has come to be known as Christopher's Tripods Trilogy. The novels are set in a future world in which the earth has been invaded by aliens, called Masters, who rule through the Tripods— great metal machines that move on three legs. The series' protagonist, Will Parker, and two companions embark on a quest across a Tripod-controlled Europe to join a band of resisters headquartered in the Alps. In the next book of the trilogy, *The City of Gold and Lead*, Will and a friend enter the domed city of the Masters as slaves in order to explore the alien culture. In *The Pool of Fire*, the freedom fighters wage a war against the Masters and manage to regain control of the earth.

The Lotus Caves is a highly original novel that explores the temptation to yield individual will to a beneficent and omnipotent being. Christopher's Sword Trilogy, which includes *The Prince in Waiting*, *Beyond the Burning Lands*, and *The Sword of the Spirits*, explores a futuristic England that has retreated from technology. *Dom and Va*, set in prehistoric times, was originally written as a limited-vocabulary book, as was *Wild Jack*, a futuristic Robin Hood story.

Empty World deals with the plight of young survivors of a future plague.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996