

On the Beach Study Guide

On the Beach by Nevil Shute

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Introduction

The antiwar novel has a grand literary tradition. Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1939), and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) are prime examples of novels that realistically portray the madness and brutality of war. While Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* is not as well-known as these other novels, it carries a powerful message about the dangers of nuclear warfare.

In his novel, Shute focuses on a group of ordinary people who wait for the inevitable radioactive fall-out of a devastating nuclear war to arrive in Melbourne, Australia. Many critics hailed the book as an insightful and humane cautionary fable. *On the Beach* continues to sell well for a forty-year-old novel, which suggests that the moral of the story remains relevant today.

Author Biography

Bora Nevil Shute Norway, Shute was born on January 17, 1899, in a suburb of London, England. His father, Arthur Hamilton Norway, was the assistant secretary of the General Post Office in London. In 1912 his father was appointed head of the post office in Ireland. After moving to Dublin, Shute was sent to the Shrewsbury School in Oxford; in the summer, he stayed with his family in the countryside near Dublin.

In 1915, Shute's only brother, nineteen-year-old Fred, died in France during World War I. A short time later, Shute served as a stretcher-bearer during the 1916 Easter Rebellion in Ireland. During the fighting, Irish rebels occupied and burned his father's post office. He entered the Royal Military Academy and trained for several months to become a gunnery officer for the Royal Flying Corps, but a childhood stammer prevented him from getting a commission. Desperate to fight for England, he enlisted in the infantry, but the war ended before he saw any combat.

After graduating from Oxford in 1923, he worked at the de Havilland Aircraft Company. At this time he wrote his first novel, *Stephen Morris*, which wasn't published until after his death. His first published novel was *Marazan*, which appeared in 1926.

He eventually left de Havilland's to work on the R-100 airship project. The R-100 was one-half of a two-airship project commissioned by the government. Although the R-100 flew a successful round-trip to Canada, the government version of the aircraft—known as the R-101—was poorly designed and crashed in an accident over France during its first flight. The project was canceled, and Shute went on to form his own company, Airspeed Ltd., in 1930.

Shute married Frances Heaton in 1931. After publishing his third novel,

Lonely Road (1932), he stopped writing to focus his attention on his new company.

In 1938 Shute resigned from Airspeed Ltd. and began writing again. With the advent of World War II, he joined the British Navy and was appointed head of the engineering section at the Admiralty Department of Miscellaneous Weapon Development. He went with the invasion fleet to Normandy on D-Day as a correspondent for the Ministry of Information.

After the war, Shute spent the next several years traveling. In 1945 he was a correspondent in Burma, and a few years later, he toured America by automobile in 1947. A few years later he flew his own airplane to Australia, which provided him with the subject matter for *A Town Like Alice* and *Round the Bend* (1951). In 1950 he moved to Australia.

Shute's later books were influenced by his growing interest in Eastern mysticism. He wrote and traveled extensively in the last decade of his life. In 1958 he had a major stroke. Only a year later he suffered a second one, but he was still able to complete his

last novel, *Trustee from the Toolroom* (1960). On January 12, 1960, Shute fell ill while writing in his study. He died later that evening.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

On the Beach opens with Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes of the Royal Australian Navy preparing for a new naval assignment. One year earlier, there had been a devastating nuclear conflict in North America, Europe, and Asia. As a result, billions of people have died from nuclear radiation, which will eventually reach Australia.

However, Peter is happy to be getting a new assignment. After he fetches milk for his wife, Mary, and his infant daughter, Jennifer, he travels to Melbourne to learn the nature of his new appointment.

In Melbourne, Peter is appointed as the liaison officer to the U.S. submarine, the *U.S.S. Scorpion*. He has met the captain, Commander Dwight Towers, and remembers him as a "... quiet, soft-spoken man of thirty-five or so with a slight New England accent."

When the war had erupted a year earlier, the *Scorpion* was cruising near Australia. When Towers was unable to raise a radio signal from the United States, he set course for Yap Island, a small cable post under U.S. control:

Here he learned for the first time of the Russian-Chinese war which had flared up out of the Russian-NATO war, that had in turn been born of the Israeli-Arab war, initiated by Albania. Consequently, Towers placed his submarine under Australian command. Peter decides to tour the submarine before his official posting begins. He informs Towers of their orders: to cruise north to Cairns, Port Moresby (New Guinea), and Darwin to search for signs of life. The Australian Royal Navy also has plans for a much longer voyage, but Peter doesn't know where. He invites Towers to spend some time as a guest at his home in Falmouth near the beach. Towers agrees to spend a night so he can go for a swim. Later, Peter and Mary introduce him to Moira Davidson, a young family friend. Towers and Moira have a drink in town before going to the Holmes household. Moira continually flirts with Towers, and he is surprised to find he still has his sense of humor. Later, after the party, a drunk Moira begins to cry because she will never be able to have a family like Mary. Towers sympathizes, but he is unable to bring himself to comfort her. He asks Mary to put her to bed.

Chapter 2

The morning after the party, Towers goes to church and reflects upon his late family. He and Moira arrange to meet again before the *Scorpion* leaves for their first mission.

When Towers returns to his submarine, he discovers that a civilian scientific officer has been assigned to the mission. A reserved, somewhat morose, young man named John Osborne is in charge of observing and recording radiation levels during the cruise.

through the northern Coral Sea. Osborne is described as having a "lean, intelligent face" and a "loose, ungainly figure."

Moira arrives the following day for a tour of the submarine. While changing her clothes in Towers's cabin, she sees photographs of his late family. She vows to herself to make their evening date fun. During their date, Towers suggests to her that she should go to school instead of spending most of her time drinking

At the end of their date, he promises to call when he returns from his mission. The next day, he learns from the First Naval Member that the radiation is now as far south as Townsville. He is forbidden to allow anyone on his submarine once he reaches that point

Chapter Three

The mission is discouraging: there are no signs of life in Darwin or Port Moresby; they see only a dog in Cairns; they find a ghostly tanker floating between Cairns and Port Moresby, but the radiation is too high to board the ship.

The men discuss the origins of the war, which seem to be mysterious. For some reason, Albania bombed Naples. Tel Aviv was then bombed, spurring an Israeli-Arab war. Towers reveals that the Americans bombed the Soviets by mistake. Egyptians using Russian bombers attacked London and Washington D.C., and the Americans retaliated by attacking Russia. China also attacked Russia, and the Soviets retaliated.

Returning to Melbourne, the men learn that one of the crew has contracted measles. Towers also learns that the only other remaining submarine in the American fleet, the *U.S.S. Swordfish*, cruised along the eastern seaboard of the United States and found no signs of life.

Towers spends more time with Moira at Fal-mouth. He tells her that he suspects that his submarine will be sent on a mission to the United States. He also tells her about his family, and he reveals his belief that he will somehow be reunited with them in the afterlife. Moira begins to understand his need to be faithful to the memory of his family.

Chapter Four

Peter and Mary begin planning flower and vegetable gardens. Moira finds the idea ridiculous because the couple will not be alive to see the gardens grow, but Towers understands the need for some kind of hope in a time of crisis:

"Maybe they don't believe [that the radiation will soon kill them]. Maybe they think they can take it all with them and have it where they're going to, someplace. I wouldn't know." He paused. "The thing is, they just kind of like to plan a garden. Don't you go and spoil it for them, telling them they're crazy."



Moira invites Towers to her parent's farm for a few days of rest and reflection. He accepts, and they spend several days helping Moira's father work on the farm.

Towers is ordered to take the *Scorpion* on a long and dangerous mission to Seattle to investigate a mysterious radio signal. Peter later discusses radiation sickness with the pharmacist, Mr. Goldie. Goldie instructs Peter on the use of the mercy-killing drugs. He tells him that they will be available for free when the radiation reaches Melbourne.

Chapter Five

Peter fears that he may not return from his next mission, so he reluctantly explains to Mary the symptoms of radiation sickness and the possibility that she may have to inject Jennifer with poison and take a suicide tablet herself in order to end their suffering. Mary is appalled and the couple has a terrible argument. Later, she realizes that Peter is only trying to protect them from prolonged agony and she apologizes for her reaction.

Osborne practices racing his Ferrari on the deserted highways and a race track. Driving the car excites him and fills him with confidence. Moira reveals to Towers that she has been taking classes. Having trouble accepting the deaths of his family members, Towers purchases an expensive bracelet for his wife and a fishing rod for his son, but he cannot locate a Pogo stick for his daughter. He is deeply moved when Moira promises to find one for him while he is on the cruise.

Chapter Six

The submarine safely makes it across the Pacific and into Puget Sound. They find no signs of life in Seattle. The submarine locates the source of the radio signal, a radio installation on Santa Maria Island.

Lieutenant Sunderstrom, an officer familiar with the installation, dons a protective suit to go ashore. He discovers that a broken window frame rattling on a transmitting key is the source of the radio signal. He sends a message to Australia to inform them that all is well, shuts the installation down, and returns to the submarine to be decontaminated.

Mary and Moira are informed that the men have completed the first half of their voyage safely. Moira tells Mary that she is in love with Towers, but that he would never be able to marry her. The *Scorpion* returns to Melbourne and Towers discovers that he has been appointed the Commanding Officer of the U.S. Naval Forces.

Chapter Seven

Towers comes down with a fever and spends several days in bed at the Davidson farm. Moira gives him a Pogo stick engraved with his daughter's name. Osborne visits the farm and shows them his Ferrari. He informs them that the radiation is showing no signs of slowing down. Towers gets well after several days of rest.

As the weeks pass, Osborne prepares for the time trials of the Australian Grand Prix, Peter and Mary work on their garden, and Towers works on the submarine while dating Moira. Osborne wins a position for the Grand Prix.

Chapter Eight

The only other surviving American naval vessel, the *U.S.S. Swordfish*, is at port in Montevideo, Uruguay, when the radiation reaches it. Towers reluctantly orders the commander to sink the submarine in deep water. The *Scorpion* is now the last submarine in the U.S. Navy.

On a shopping trip, Peter and Mary find Melbourne dirty and almost deserted. Towers is forced to discipline some of his crew when drunkenness becomes a problem.

Osborne wins the Australian Grand Prix. Later, Osborne calls Towers to inform him that the first cases of radiation sickness have appeared in Melbourne.

Chapter Nine

Towers informs Peter that he will soon be taking the *Scorpion* out to sea to sink it. He will go down with the ship, and bids Peter farewell. Osborne visits his mother for the last time. He puts her dog to sleep after his mother has committed suicide.

Peter and Mary both get radiation sickness, but Peter rebounds. He visits Osborne to ask him if recovery is possible; Osborne tells him it is temporary and Peter returns home to his wife. Osborne takes his tablet behind the wheel of his beloved Ferrari.

Peter injects the baby with poison. He and Mary take their tablets in bed together after expressing their love for each other. Moira visits Towers for the last time at the submarine; they are both very sick. She asks to go with him and he reluctantly refuses. Moira drives to a point where she can watch the submarine cruise away. There, she takes her tablet with a glass of brandy.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

On The Beach, written in 1957, is a story about a group of people spending the last six months of their lives waiting for the end of the world to arrive, casualties-to-be of radiation fallout from a nuclear war. The story takes place in 1961 in Melbourne, Australia, the southern-most city on the Australian continent. Numerous atomic bombs have detonated in the Northern Hemisphere of Earth and slowly, but steadily, the radiation fallout is moving into the Southern Hemisphere bringing certain death to everyone in its path. Soon every living person on the Earth will be dead. This story is about how they faced it.

Lt. Commander Peter Holmes of the royal Australian Navy, his wife Mary, and baby daughter Jennifer live in a bungalow in the country not far from Falmouth, Australia. It is just after Christmas and Peter and Mary have had a Christmas barbeque in the garden with friends. They went swimming in the ocean and participated in a sailing race. Both are quite sunburned and planning to stay covered up for the next couple of days.

Peter has an appointment at the Navy Department in Melbourne. He has not worked in seven months and is expecting to receive a new appointment for work; he is hoping for a posting to a ship again. Peter loves shipboard duty and misses working aboard a ship.

Peter and Mary have a small car, a Morris, which has not been used since the short war ended a year ago. They use bicycles to get around to town and to the local farm for their milk. Peter has rigged up a two-wheeled trailer that hitches to their bicycles and it is used as a baby carriage and grocery carrier.

Peter and Mary had been married six months when the war started. Peter was stationed onboard the *H.M.A.S. Anzac*. The war, "short and bewildering," started in the Northern Hemisphere and ended 37 days later with the last seismic record of explosion. After three months, the *Anzac* returned to Williamstown, Australia on the last of her fuel oil. Statesmen from the Southern Hemisphere gathered in conferences in Wellington, New Zealand to compare notes and assess the situation. Peter returned to Falmouth in his Morris and parked the car in the garage, and there it sat, fuel too short to justify using it for errands. All fuel oil came from the Northern Hemisphere and was now inaccessible.

Peter rides his bicycle and cart to the local farmer to get milk and cream. Food transportation is very limited and Peter and Mary have learned to make their own butter. Peter discusses his upcoming job with the farmer, Mr. Paul, and his concerns over the trouble his wife will have getting the milk in the future if he gets posted on a ship. Mr. Paul agrees to help Mary out by bringing the milk and cream to her home, and suggests to Peter that he, himself, could use a cart such as Peter has build; he would use the cart to take his wife into Falmouth instead of using his bullock cart which makes the round trip in seven hours. Before the war, it took twenty minutes to drive to town. Peter

decides he will try to get the wheels needed to build a cart for Mr. Paul. Mr. Paul makes a reference to the fact "there's not long to go."

Peter takes his bicycle to the electric train station and parks it at the garage that no longer services cars. Bicycles are parked there now, and horses are stabled where the cars had been. Businessmen ride in from the country on their horses, attaché cases tied to the saddles. The tempo of business life has slowed down

Peter rides the train and thinks about the condition of the Royal Australian Navy. It consists of seven small ships converted from oil burners to coal burners. The aircraft carrier *Melbourne* is no longer in commission and aircraft fuel is very scarce so the training programs have been suspended. He longs for a posting to a ship but does not hold out much hope for this. He feels lucky the Navy has continued to pay him despite his inactivity for the past seven months.

Peter arrives in Melbourne and shops around till he finds tires for the cart he promised to make Mr. Paul. He then goes to the Second Naval Member's offices for his appointment. There, the Admiral advises Peter he has been posted to the U.S.S. *Scorpion* as liaison officer under Commander Dwight Towers. Peter has met Commander Towers before and he knows the history of *Scorpion* since the war.

The submarine *Scorpion* had been at sea patrolling between Kiska and Midway when the war began. While submerged they could not reach Pearl Harbor on the radio and atmospheric radiation levels increased the closer they got to the Philippines. Eventually all communication ceased with bases in the Northern Hemisphere. Radiation levels were way above lethal on their gauges and the submarine could not surface safely. Eventually radio contact was made with Port Moresby, New Guinea and *Scorpion* headed south to Yap Island and the United States cable station. There they found an American cruiser docked and heard about the Russian-Chinese war that had broken out, that in turn had come from the Israeli-Arab war, which had been initiated by Albania. Russia and China, both, used cobalt bombs. Contact with the United States was not successful. Eventually Mexico City was reached, but it quickly went off the air. Contact was next made with Panama, Bogotá and Valparaiso. The decision was made for all U.S. ships to sail into Australian waters and place themselves under Australian command. Eventually, nuclear fuel was prepared for *Scorpion's* use; she brought supplies of fuel to Rio de Janeiro to another stranded U. S. nuclear submarine, U.S.S. *Swordfish*; and returned to port in Melbourne for a refit in the dockyard.

Peter is excited about his posting as liaison officer under Commander Towers and the two cruises currently scheduled. However, Peter is worried about the potential that he might be gone during the last couple of months. What if the predictions of the "wise men" are wrong and the radiation reaches Melbourne sooner than originally forecast? Peter feels Mary and the baby will need him at home. The Admiral understands and agrees to his posting for only five months, until May 31. They will reevaluate at that point.



Peter then goes to the submarine *Scorpion* to check out his new surroundings. He meets Dwight Towers and gets a tour of the submarine. Peter and Dwight discuss the upcoming cruises. Peter invites Dwight to his home for the weekend before they all need to report to duty for the first cruise. Dwight agrees he could use a diversion and a swim and will come for a day.

Peter gets home and tells Mary about inviting Dwight Towers for the weekend. Mary goes into a panic about how they are going to entertain him. She reminds him of the RAF officer they had down for the weekend awhile back and how awkward it had been for everyone. The RAF officer was emotionally too fragile and cried at the sight of their home and baby. "They're never all right. It's much too painful for them, coming into people's homes." Mary decides to keep Dwight busy at swimming, sailing and a party; and Mary will invite a girlfriend of hers for the weekend, Moira. Moira has a reputation as a heavy drinker with loose morals. Their goal for the weekend for Dwight is "never a dull moment."

Moira and Peter meet Dwight at the train in her Jaguar XK 140, now pulled by a gray horse. Moira does prove to be a heavy drinker, double brandies; she had to give up gin for the sake of the lining of her stomach. Moira and Dwight actually enjoy each other's company and the afternoon progresses to the sailing club. Moira and Dwight enjoyed a wild sailing race, complete with Moira losing her bathing suit top and Dwight dumping them into the water. Never a dull moment, and Moira's glad Dwight has not burst into tears yet. The day is going pretty well so far. They head back to Peter and Mary's house for a party that night.

Dwight discusses his next cruise a little with Moira. They are heading to Port Moresby, Cairns and Darwin to check the radiation levels. No one has heard from anyone there for long while. We find in their discussion that no bomb was dropped in the Southern Hemisphere. The radiation clouds are expected to keep moving south until they eventually reach Melbourne. Nothing can be done to stop it; the winds will eventually bring it to them, and then all will die. Moira pouts that it is rather like waiting to be hung. Dwight suggests that perhaps it is a period of grace. Moira discusses her dreams to travel to France that will never happen now. She does not want to visit a city of dead people. Moira drinks too much and finally starts to cry herself about her lost dreams of marriage, children and travel. She mourns never marrying and having children. Even if she were to get pregnant now there would not be time for her baby to be born. Mary puts Moira to bed.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The story is set in the southernmost city on the continent of Australia. The story slowly shows the southern progression of the radiation cloud by giving us geographical locations as landmarks to mark its progress. We know Melbourne will be the end of the story. We also know that the story will be about how people face the future after a nuclear holocaust. The story opens with Peter and Mary sunburned from a day at the

beach, and this foreshadows the radiation sickness they face. It is Christmas, setting the time of the year for the countdown.

Two of our main characters will be Peter and Mary Holmes. They also have a baby. Peter is in the Navy and his presence in the story is the thread that takes us between the global aspects and the home front. Peter is able to speak plainly about the coming death of the world in an open way that the others cannot. He brings a strong, practical calm to his wife and those around him. He helps the reader understand the cold realities of the war and the radiation death that is about to overtake the world. He represents those in the world who choose to face the facts head on, yet he brings this practicality to the others in the story with love and compassion. Mary will be one of our main characters who we watch face the future, and the death it brings, by avoidance. She is not able to accept the impending doom and doggedly continues with her life, gardening, and raising her baby, as if death is not coming. She represents a very common reaction in the populations left in the world. Her way of coping seems to be the preferred method, bringing daily happiness and purpose to her life. Their baby, Jennifer, is the only alive child in the story that the author personally introduces to us and she represents the future generations of the human race, soon to be extinguished forever. Farmer Paul's wife is pregnant but we realize their baby will never be born and represents all the unborn babies that will never be.

Chapter 1 also shows us how routine life has been affected. There are shortages of fuel and people have to stop driving their cars. All travel but the absolute most necessary has stopped. Many people have rigged up other ways to get around - bicycles, horseback, horse and bullock-drawn "carriages". Peter and Mary use bicycles and Peter, and others, have become very resourceful in building carts from scavenged parts of unused vehicles. Perhaps one of the most vivid descriptions is of Moira's Jaguar car now being pulled around by a horse in a makeshift "carriage." The image is that the human race is resourceful and adaptive and will find a way to readjust to crises and threats to survive when faced with them. The human race is the protagonist in this story, vividly represented by the men and women we will soon get to know.

The scene between Peter and Mr. Paul, the dairy farmer, is one of comradeship and cooperation. We are shown people working together in politeness and compassion. Mr. Paul is willing to help Peter and Mary and does not ask for payment for the extra service. Yet, there is a very polite suggestion from Mr. Paul that Peter might help him in return. In addition, Peter is quite willing to oblige out of sympathy for Mr. Paul's situation as well. In many ways, this interaction represents the whole rest of the world, those who are left, and how they interact. It sets the scene for cooperation, not conflict or selfishness that we will see later in the story.

Chapter 1 also describes for us where some of the main characters were when the war started. Peter and Commander Dwight Towers were onboard ship. This sets up a global perspective, juxtaposed with the others who were at home living their lives. We see that those living in the Northern Hemisphere have been killed and we realize that this quick death came on a global level to all, whether at work or at home. It will soon come to the rest of the world.

We start to get the history of the war. We are told it was "short and bewildering" to many. The image is that no one expected it or saw it coming. We will find that the whole world was taken by surprise and that the war ended life in the Northern Hemisphere within days from the end of it, leaving those behind trying to figure out what happened and trying to analyze the outcome of their future. The answer comes slowly but surely by radio communication outages, city by city on a southerly progression. The radiation dust cloud that is slowly but surely moving southward is the antagonist in this story, and, more indirectly, the death it brings. It is ever present and overshadows every moment of the story.

The chapter also sets the scene for discussions between the characters about there not being long to go before the radiation cloud reaches them and they die. This is on the minds of everyone and their lives are ruled by this timetable. We see a juxtaposition already set up between the dogged way people have adjusted their lives to the emergency changes, and their vague yet pragmatic analysis of when their deaths will occur. However, while we see people referring to "not long to go" we get the impression that at this point this is as far as they can go toward looking death in the face, and they much prefer the vagueness the phrase brings.

It is Dwight Towers, our somewhat religious man, who suggests that the next few months are a period of grace. This image gives us a context to view the short window of life with which the people in our story are left.

Chapter 1 introduces Commander Dwight Towers, a United States Naval submarine commander. He will be a major character in the story that interacts with all the other characters. Dwight is an American who has lost his entire family already to the radiation death. He had a wife, Sharon, and two children who he refuses to think of as dead. He keeps them alive in his mind and plans on going home to them in September. He is the representative of the human race from the Northern Hemisphere. His personal loss and experience is juxtaposed with the others who have yet to have death come to them. However, he also represents a daily reminder of the dead, and as the others try to be sympathetic and considerate of his feelings, they minister to their own feelings of fear and impending personal loss. His fantasy way of coping is viewed by the others with amusement and tolerance, yet some of our characters eventually learn one coping mechanism from his example.

Finally, we are introduced to Moira - feisty, heavy drinking, and fatalistic. She faces the future by drinking, seeing no point to anything else. She attends all the parties, drinks heavily and sleeps around. She lives with her parents on their cattle and sheep ranch and helps with the chores, but that is about it, except for her drinking, which she sees as her job. Moira is the example of the people in the Southern Hemisphere who try to escape the future by hiding. She cannot face the sadness of what she will never accomplish in her life and so tries to bluff herself into not caring by drinking and carousing. She takes on a physical and emotional self-destruction that perhaps is her only avenue of control at this point. Her coping mechanism is juxtaposed with every other interacting character and she represents all the people who engaged in wild drinking and carousing immediately after the war, who are indirectly referenced

throughout the story. We come to understand that most of the people eventually come out of their revelry and debauchery, facing their death with dignity; perhaps Moira will too.

Dwight and Moira form an unlikely pair. Dwight is a rigid Naval officer maintaining discipline among his crew and following U. S. Naval regulations to the end. Moira is unconcerned with following any rules. Moira drinks heavily, but we find out that Dwight has stopped his initial heavy drinking and is much more moderate. These two form an unusual alliance in the story. We find their individual coping methods so different from each other, yet both ways attempt to avoid reality - Dwight with his fantasy of going home to his family in September, and Moira with her drinking. You wonder who will be the greater influence on the other.

At Peter and Mary's party, we see Moira drinking heavily and ironically, she is the one to break down and cry, not the American. We see her tears as representing tears of regret of all those yet to die. And the question at this point is who do we pity the most, those still alive from the Northern Hemisphere who lost their families and communities and are trying to live with the loss, or those still yet facing the death of their dreams, their future and their world.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Peter goes to Mr. Paul's farm, brings him the cartwheels and gets more milk. Dwight has breakfast with Peter and Mary and decides he wants to go to Sunday church services. They give him the directions and he walks to the church. Dwight spends his time in church thinking about his family back in the United States. He is a simple man and plans out his return to his wife, and his young son and daughter. He will be seeing them in September and thinks about bringing them presents. He plans his homecoming to bring the children their birthday presents.

Back at Peter and Mary's house, Moira is awake and Dwight asks her what she does for work. She indicates that drinking alcohol is all she does these days. She finds life tedious. Dwight agrees to show her around the submarine in about a week and they arrange to meet for dinner.

Back at *Scorpion* Dwight finds a scientist, John Osborne, has been assigned to his next two cruises to test the atmosphere for radiation levels. John Osborne does not expect radiation levels to increase inside the submarine during the voyage. Eventually, they leave for the shakedown voyage that is uneventful.

Dwight calls Moira when he returns to Melbourne and arranges to meet her. She arrives at the submarine and gets a tour of the ship. Moira is drinking heavily still. She finds herself in Dwight's cabin where she changes her clothes into coveralls for the tour. Here she sees pictures of his wife and children and takes it all in pragmatically.

Dwight and Moira discuss the upcoming voyage. Dwight tells her about another submarine that just completed a similar scouting trip up to the North Atlantic. They stopped in Florida, New York, Maine, New London, Halifax, the English Channel, Brest and Lisbon. As far as they could tell there was nothing left alive. Moira tries to imagine all those cities and countrysides with nothing living but she cannot. "It's too big." Dwight agrees and tells her he does not want to try. He wants everyone to stay alive in his imagination until September.

Moira and Dwight go to dinner and dancing and discuss the voyage again. She calls it looking at dead people through a periscope and thinks it funny in an odd way. Dwight tells her they may find that the half-life of the radiation may be changed by something they do not know about, possibly being absorbed somehow. They have to explore; he has no real hopes, but is excited at the adventure anyway. Dwight tells Moira that she will have to face the facts of life someday. She will, she says - next September. He tells her it will be September, give or take about three months - they may all die in June or still be around for Christmas. No one knows for sure.



On a Saturday night, the inhabitants of Melbourne are pretty boisterous, uninhibited and lighthearted. Moira tells Dwight that right after the news of the war things were much worse. Now people are getting tired of the drunken evasion of reality. Dwight tries to encourage Moira to get a job or go to trade school and learn to be a secretary-- anything but sit around and drink all the time. She feels there is absolutely no point to that. Why go to school to learn something there is not time to finish or ever be able to use?

The next morning Dwight meets with Peter and the Prime Minister. They review the report from the commanding officer of the *U.S.S. Swordfish* of its cruise to the North Atlantic. They found a high level of radioactivity over the whole area, greater in the north than the south. He mentions that Naval operations have moved from Rio, south to Montevideo; it is getting a little "hot" up in Rio. They discuss the scope of their upcoming cruise. They are ordered not to take any chances or bring anything or anyone onboard from the contaminated areas. Radiation has reached Townsville, northern Australia, and there are still people alive there. They are forbidden to go there or to try to help them. There is nothing that can be done for them now. They are dying.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Chapter 2 we find Dwight in church, bolstering his fantasy about reuniting with his family. We see him living this unreality by planning to bring presents to his children for birthdays he has missed while he has been away. Of course, they have been dead during both months that would have been their birthdays but he chooses to ignore that and be happy thinking of how they might have spent their birthday celebrations. As for Moira, one can easily imagine how tedious it would be drinking oneself numb day after day. Moira finds the alternative idea, facing reality sober, just as tedious. Moira and Dwight both escape into their buffered realities; Dwight with his family dreams; Moira with her alcohol. It is here the story tells us September is when the radiation cloud is due to arrive Melbourne and this helps us cement the period.

We are introduced to John Osborne in this chapter. He is the science man in the story from whom we get all our solid facts about the radiation dangers. He is solid, practical and analytical and, as it turns out, related to Moira-- quite a contrast there. We do not yet see exactly how John Osborne faces the future but he is facing his duty on the job with professional calm.

Dwight and Moira agree the scope of death in the Northern Hemisphere is "too big" to fathom. He challenges her not facing reality and she reminds him she will, in September. It is ironic that Dwight does not see that Moira is avoiding the same facts he is. He will face them also in September in the same way Moira and everyone else will. Moira is starting to understand Dwight better, but he is still trying to relate to her from a mixed place of reality and fantasy.

Moir is still convinced that it is futile to start anything different in her life. There is no time. We do find that the drunken revelry is starting to tone down a bit; people are becoming more sober.

Finally, we are given an update on the progress of the radiation cloud. Ships are moving south from Rio (too "hot"), into Montevideo (southern South America), and are in Townsville, northern Australia. The cloud is getting closer.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The *U.S.S. Scorpion* surfaced in Queensland; they had been submerged for a week. They came upon a derelict tanker, no life aboard. John Osborne's radiation readings will be all they can report on. They did see one dog alive. Everywhere they went the land looked completely normal, except there was no life anywhere. Wherever they went, they called out to the shore from a microphone mounted on the periscope. Apart from the radiation readings, they learned nothing on this trip. They speculated that people went to their beds to die; they could see no bodies lying around the grounds: "...when the end had come the people had died tidily." They recall this is what the *Swordfish* found on its North Atlantic journey. They reflected on the fact that the men in that submarine are the last people to ever see the places they just visited, Cairns, Moresby or Darwin.

John Osborne tells them that the seismic records showed that about 4,700 bombs were dropped, probably most of them fusion bombs, possibly more. All of those dropped in the Russian-Chinese war were hydrogen bombs with a cobalt element.

Dwight tells the men he attended a commanding officer's course at Yerba Buena, San Francisco the month before the war where he learned what they thought might be the course of a war should one break out between Russia and China. It was all over the warm water ports. Russia's ports freeze in the winter and they had their eye on Shanghai. As to China's interests, their population overcrowding issues caused them to look at the sparsely populated areas of Russia. China's goal would be to take out the industrial centers and turn the country back to an agricultural people. They figured both countries would try to strategically place the bombs so that surrounding populations would die and become inhabitable for many years (less than 20), but after that, they would be open to conquest. They figured the fallout would go the other way around the world and be no problem by the time it reached back around to them.

The fact is that no one knows what really happened. Therefore, the U. S. bombed Russia by mistake. The first bomb was from the Albanians on Naples. Tel Aviv was bombed next but no one knows by whom. Then the British and Americans intervened and sent a demonstration flight over Cairo. Then the Egyptians sent bombers to Washington D. C. and London. However, contrary to belief that the Russians bombed Washington and London first, facts later proved they did not. The Egyptians sent long-range Russian-made bombers. Another problem was that the bombs got so cheap to make even the small countries could get them. The big mistake was in giving long-range airplanes to the Egyptians, Israel and Jordan. As to China, the general idea was that after awhile China just seized the opportunity to proceed with her radiological warfare plans. After it started, very quickly communications went out and those still working did not have much time to fill in the Southern Hemisphere powers with many details. Things happened so quickly that all anyone knew was that the planes that bombed Washington D.C. were Russian. The initial bombing took out the statesmen of



each country and left the decisions to the military leaders who were faced with extremely short decision making times. It was suggested that it was difficult to stop the bombing once all the statesmen were dead. Then there was the problem of the decisions being left to junior officers faced with attacks coming in fast and deadly. It was suggested that anyone in that room might have made the same decisions - bomb the enemy in an attempt to stop it. The consensus, however, was that it was not the big countries that started it. It was the little ones "the Irresponsibles."

John Osborne told them all they had six months, plus or minus something. Make the most of what you have got. He told them it was not the end of the world, just the end of "us." The world will go on, people just will not be in it. They agreed that everywhere they went nothing seemed wrong except there were no people or animals. "Maybe we've been too silly to deserve a world like this."

Dwight later makes the recommendation that on the next voyage north they will plan to send a man ashore in an insulated suit to further explore the situation. They agree and set up the plan.

Peter invites Dwight back home again. However, a case of measles has broken out on the sub and the men will be contagious for a while. Mary, worried about the baby catching measles, makes a bed on the porch for the baby covered with a mosquito net to protect her from the cat sitting on her face or mosquitoes bothering her. She is not very interested in what they found on the voyage. She is very agitated about making sure the baby is safe and alive. Peter just wants to work onboard ship.

Peter and John Osborne meet at the Pastoral Club. It is an upscale club that John wanted to join before he died; it is now or never. They meet with Sir Douglas Froude, John's great uncle, a retired Lieutenant General. After placing their drink orders, Sir Froude tells them that three years ago his doctor told him if he did not stop drinking port, he could not guarantee his life for more than a year. Well, now all that is changed and Sir Froude is enjoying his port again and has taken an inventory of what is left at the Club - over three thousand bottles of vintage port, and only about six months to go. Sir Froude quite intends not to let it go to waste and comes to the Club three times a week, plus takes a bottle home with him as well. He intends to die drinking port rather than die from the cholera-like symptoms of radiation sickness.

They discuss that Townsville communications are down now, and that there are new cases of sickness in Mackay. Sir Froude thinks he should step up his port consumption, as things are getting serious.

Moirra calls Dwight and invites him up to her place for the weekend to go sailing. He meets her in Falmouth and they discuss his recent voyage and the results of *Swordfish's* voyage. Dwight confirms for her that the best guess is September will be when the radiation cloud hits their area. Moirra orders another drink and announces that one cannot sit mooning and moaning around. Therefore, they go to the Holmes' picnic and then for an afternoon of sailing. They discuss the voyage of *Swordfish* and their

findings. It pulled into its homeport and found no one alive. They agreed how difficult it would be to go back like that and find nothing

Moira asks Dwight about his family, wife Sharon, Dwight Jr., and Helen (6yrs.). She knows how Dwight is keeping his family alive in his mind and that the devastation in the Northern Hemisphere is not a reality to Dwight. He has not seen any of the devastation for himself and cannot think of his family any other way. He has little imagination and that enables him to find some contentment in his exile in Australia. Moira asks him what Dwight Jr. wants to be when he grows up and they discuss a possible Navy career. Dwight plans on getting a sailboat when he gets home but tells Moira that September is a little late in the season to go sailing in Mystic, Connecticut. He tells her that he sees it that way, and he cannot think of it any other way. She may think him nuts but at least he is not crying over babies. Moira does not think him crazy.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Chapter 3 gives us much more insight and details into the world events leading up to and including the war. We are seeing comparisons now to the "irresponsible" smaller countries that started the bombing, and the "wiser" larger countries that engaged in the bombing out of mistaken information. It is clear the cooler heads are the larger world powers with the experience of managing the responsibility of being a nuclear power. We get the impression the "Irresponsibles" are like children given toys too big for them to handle, yet too tempting to put down.

John Osborne is the philosopher in the story. He tells the others to make the most of the time they have left. He suggests mankind has been too silly to deserve a world such as this. He paints a sobering picture of our world living on, but without people or animals.

Mary is focusing on her baby and her self-insulated world. She does not want to hear about what the voyage discovered. Sir Froude is introduced as a worldly gentleman who loves his port. His besotted character is contrasted to Moira and her excessive drinking. However, Sir Froude is a true connoisseur of good vintage and a pragmatist at the same time; he knows the port will kill him but, then, so will the radiation. He is choosing his poison, so to speak. Moira just drinks to hide from reality.

The radiation cloud is now over Mackay, Australia and those in Townsville are now dead. Sir Froude sees the necessity of stepping up his port consumption if he is to meet his own timetable aimed at not letting the good vintage go to waste. At the news Moira orders another drink but announces a possible change in her attitude in her reference to not "mooning and moaning" around over it. There is a suggestion for us to ponder what it would be like to go back to our hometowns and find every one dead. Moira is starting to understand Dwight's perspective on keeping those he loves alive in his mind and heart.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The next morning, Sunday, Moira asks to join Dwight for church services. Peter and Mary discuss whether Moira and Dwight might get married. Then they turn their attentions to planning a new garden around the house. Mary wants to plant a new flowering gum tree and other plants, all of which take years to mature.

Moira thinks the two are crazy for all the garden plans; after all, they will not be around after six months. Dwight tells her they are fine; just let them plan their garden because they like doing it. Moira opines no one really believes the end is going to come.

Back at the submarine, Dwight discusses radio signals they have been receiving from the Seattle, Washington area. No one really thinks anyone is still alive in Seattle, but investigating this will be part of the mission.

Moira and Dwight discuss the trip as well. Dwight reports to her that *Swordfish* is now docked at Montevideo, Uruguay, having had to move further south from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Some people are putting a time capsule on top of Mount Kosciuszko, the highest peak in Australia, in case the world ever gets inhabited again. It is recessed in a concrete cellar like the Pyramids.

Moira and Dwight get to know each other a little better going over their personal histories. They are becoming better friends. Dwight tells her about his wife Sharon. Moira offers to mend his laundry telling him that socks are not available in the stores anymore. Moira tells Dwight about her family and her father's farm with Angus beef cattle and sheep. She tells him the shearing is usually done in October but her father will do it earlier this year because he is worried they will not be around later. Dwight offers to come help her father with some of the chores for the week.

Dwight arrives for the visit and loves the countryside. It reminds him of the trees back home in the States. She asks him if it makes him sad and he tells her no, it just makes him happy to see them again. Moira's parents ask Dwight about the radiation approach. It is coming in very evenly all around the world; all places at the same latitude are getting it at the same time. They figure Cape Town will go a little before Sydney, and about the same time as Montevideo. Then there will be nothing left in Africa and South America. It will come to them last in Melbourne, which is the southernmost major city in the world. New Zealand and Tasmania will last just a little longer and if anyone is in Antarctic, they might go on for a while.

Moira's father asks Dwight if he plans to move his ship further south. At this point, the decision rests with his commander in Brisbane (whose ship can't move for lack of fuel). However, if it were up to him he would probably decide to stay because almost 40% of

his crew has girlfriends in town and probably would not want to leave them the last few days. He figures there is no sense giving orders you know will be ignored.

The men talk about how few refugees they have seen through the whole ordeal. Very few people move south ahead of the radiation cloud. They guess there is not much comfort in leaving home and continually having to pick up and move ever more southward. Moira's father thinks the reason is most people do not really believe it is going to happen to them and by the time they feel sick, it is too late. They have a few cases in the hospitals from the north but both men agree there is no point since all will be gone by September anyway. The Prime Minister has kept panic under control and the radio has helped keep information neutral. Moira's father says he will not leave their home. He wants to go out on the verandah with a drink in his hand or in his own bed.

Moira and Dwight go through old junk on the back porch and they come across a pogo stick and some other childhood toys. Moira says she was going to keep them for her children but now there will not be any.

Dwight and Peter go to see the First Naval Member about their new orders. The next voyage will take them into harbors guarded by minefields and they do not have the up to date maps of the minefields for many of them. As they plan the voyage, they agree it will be a great trip - one to tell their grandchildren.

Back at home Peter finds the baby is crawling around now and Mary wants a playpen. Peter tells her they will be cruising the Pacific up the western coastline of North America to Seattle, Dutch Harbor and back. The trip will probably take two months.

Dwight and Peter, back at submarine headquarters, discuss some new scientific theories about the radiation. Possibly radiation elements in the atmosphere will be falling to the ground more quickly than anticipated leaving the ground uninhabitable for many centuries. However, the transfer of radioactive material to them would be progressively decreased in which case life might be able to continue in Antarctica. There is a lot of disagreement among the scientific community on this theory. Part of their trip will be to gather data to support this new theory.

John Osborne, the science expert, takes Peter to see his pride and joy - a Ferrari that won the Grand Prix of Syracuse. It runs on a special ether-alcohol mixture of which he has eight barrels stashed in his mother's garden. He plans to bring it up to good running order and then race it.

They discuss the progress of the radiation; it is south of Rockhampton now and will be south of Brisbane by the beginning of June; it could reach them sooner. Peter is concerned about Mary and the baby if it arrives when he is away.

Peter buys a playpen for the baby and stops in the pharmacy for advice. The chemist gives him a detailed description of the progression of radiation sickness; very much like Cholera: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, bloody stools, all with increasing intensity, possibility of a slight recovery is only temporary; then death occurs from exhaustion, infection or leukemia. There is no cure. The government has provisions for free "pills to



end it" for anyone asking. Of course, he admits there may be serious religious issues at stake there. There will be two pills; one is a spare. They also have a small syringe for babies or pets. Death is almost immediately. He gives Peter placebo samples to take home with which to train Mary. He also gives him the kit for his baby.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Moira surprises us by going to church with Dwight. She does not quite realize it yet but she is starting to feel hope for the future. She still criticizes Mary for trying to escape her fears by planning her future garden. The image of the beautiful garden Mary is planting is poignant in that we know it will continue to grow and produce, but there will be no one there to enjoy its beauty. Her daffodils will continue to come up, always one of the first golden trumpeters of the arrival of spring, when life begins again in the nature world.

We are told the submarine *Swordfish* has moved to Montevideo. Cape Town, Sydney and Montevideo will be next; the end of South America and Africa; and the reader anxiously watches the globe marking the progression. In the story, Moira voices what is probably a common sentiment-- that the end is not really coming. Everyone would love to retreat into denial and if it weren't for the radio reports on the progress of the radiation cloud people might succeed in forgetting about it.

We are also given a more detailed description of what radiation sickness is. This helps the reader understand better the choices the people are faced with, as we will see later in the story. The suggestion has been introduced that there will be a religious conflict over the suicide pills. At this point in the story, the suggestion is made by the chemist, but no discussion takes place. That discussion will soon start as people are forced to face the realities a little more. However, this is a suggestion for interesting pondering by the reader.

People are putting in a time capsule in the highest peak in Australia, just in case there are ever people inhabiting the planet again. The analogy compares the time capsule to the Pyramids and reminds us of something we can relate to: a timeless memorial to the technology and spirituality of mankind, civilization surviving over eons.

Dwight is getting closer emotionally to Moira and her parents but we still see him holding up the barrier of the memory of his dead family. Dwight, practical in his approach to his command, is following the Naval regulations to the letter, tempering them with a little common sense. This, too, is his way of living in a fantasy - or is it? We find that Dwight's behavior is mirrored by so many others in the story. The overall reaction of the still-living world population is that of choosing to live honestly, ethically, and orderly, to the best of their abilities. Those workers who supply electricity still work, keeping that comfort going. The tram and electric train drivers are still running on schedule; the street cleaners and garbage haulers are still keeping the city clean. Stores and restaurants remain open; virtually all that can be kept going is being kept going by a sense of duty and respect for the order of society. It is as if to abandon such

order would be to abandon civilization itself, and no one is too anxious to do that before the radiation cloud forces it on them.

We also find that very few people are migrating south ahead of the radiation cloud. At first thought, the reader might find this a weak response to the coming death. Shouldn't people begin fleeing the cloud trying to gain months more of life? However, the story helps us understand this as a dignified acceptance. The idea is suggested that it would be horrible to go back to hometowns and find everyone dead. Everyone in the Southern Hemisphere pities those left alive from the Northern Hemisphere (those military who were posted elsewhere) having to go on with the knowledge that everyone they knew and loved are dead. So, who is to be pitied more? Those still facing death have chosen to live their lives as happily as possible, tying up loose ends, dreaming their dreams, raising their babies, planting their gardens, driving their race cars, drinking their port, and choosing to die in their homes, comfortable with their loved ones. On the other hand, they could have been running from town to town, living in tents, ever in a panic to make sure to move on before the cloud gets too close. In many ways, the image of the quiet dignity of those awaiting their fate is comforting in an otherwise very uncomfortable story.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Peter brings the pills and playpen home to Mary. She loves the playpen. Peter makes Mary discuss what she will have to do if he is not at home at the end. He tells her there is some risk with his voyage, the minefields, and he might not get back home. He wants to make sure she will know what to do if he is not there. He explains about the effects of the radiation sickness and the pills. She is confused about why it may be needed; still not believing it will really come to this. He tells her every living thing will get it - he will, she will, Jennifer will get it and die a very uncomfortable death. He tells her she has to be brave and think of what is best for Jennifer. Mary completely rebels at the idea of taking Jennifer's life. She rages at Peter that she could never do such a thing. Peter has to get even harder in his details. What if Mary and Peter die before Jennifer does? Who will care for her then? Does she want her baby living on for days, crying all alone, vomiting in her bed, lying in her muck and no body to help her until she finally dies? "This is a time when you've just got to show some guts and face up to things. Eventually she realizes the necessity. Then she continues with her daily life; stacking wood to dry for the following year; digging out stumps for the kitchen garden.

John Osborne spends his time in his Ferrari racing at a private road-racing club. His car fulfills a need in his life. He has always been the scientist, a theorist in a lab- never a man of action. The posting to the submarine terrified him but he was able to keep that fear under enough control while working. However, driving the Ferrari excites him; as he takes more and more risks driving he realizes frequently he is escaping death by inches. With these major excitements, the upcoming trip on *Scorpion* does not terrify him so much. He is anxious to have it over, get back to Melbourne, and put in three months of road racing before the end.

The upcoming voyage is planned further at headquarters and the details fine-tuned. They also discuss the Seattle radio transmissions and the need to check them out just in case there is a human behind them.

Dwight and Moira meet again in the city for lunch. She orders a single brandy and tells him about a secretarial course she has started. School is daily and she is excited about her progress. She could get a job next year after she graduates the course. She is tired of the farm work. They talk about Mary and Peter making plans for the future and Moira is concerned for Dwight's safety on the cruise. She gets sentimental and he brings up Sharon's name.

Moira and Dwight go to the National Gallery and view the artwork there. Moira likes a prizewinner of Christ on a background of the destruction of a great city. Dwight hates it; he cannot even really look at it past what he calls its "phony" subjects. He says the New York landmarks are all wrong and in the wrong locations. Moira suggests that the



catalogue does not say that it is New York, but Dwight is very agitated with distaste. They eventually find a pastoral scene he does like.

Later Dwight goes shopping for his children and wife. He buys a fishing rod and reel for his son. Next, he looks for a pogo stick for his daughter but is unable to find one. Finally, he purchases an extremely expensive emerald bracelet for his wife Sharon. He places both gifts in his room in the submarine.

Moira runs into someone in town who tells her about Dwight's shopping expedition, the bracelet and his attempts to buy a pogo stick. She realizes the bracelet is not for her. She tells the woman that she has been courting Dwight, not the other way around. Later, Moira decides she wants to help him find a pogo stick. She wants to help him but knows she has to go about it carefully. Later, on a date with Dwight, she tells him she wants to help him find a pogo stick for his daughter while he is away. He tells her it is not important but she replies that it is very important to her, and promises to have it by the time he gets back.

Chapter 5 Analysis

The contrast between the image of the playpen and suicide pills is striking. Mary asks Peter to bring her a playpen for the baby who is growing and starting to get into things. This is such a normal progression for families with active babies, such a familiar image of babies and life. This is the world where Mary wants to remain, never facing the upcoming death. Then Peter also brings her the suicide pills and forces her to listen to him telling her all about the type of death they face and horrible images of how her baby will die. The idea of having to kill her baby, which he is forcing on her, is terrifying and too horrible a thought for her.

Here is where the discussion about the religious proscriptions against taking one's life, or another's, is vividly portrayed. We can easily put ourselves in Mary's shoes and be repelled by these ideas, just as she is. On the other hand, we can put ourselves in Peter's shoes and attempt to face the extremely hard realities from a practical view. Either way the reader is challenged to question his or her own reaction. Is the suicide pill really suicide, or would it be in God's eyes? Alternatively, could it be viewed as God's way of helping ease the horrible outcome of man's folly? Here, in this story there is no future for anyone - all will die and the human race will end within days or weeks of each person's taking the suicide pills. Is taking the pill a symbol of devaluing our lives? Those in the story clearly value their human dignity, and the future. They plan their gardens, talk about their grandchildren to be, and dream about falling in love and raising children - all in a futile setting. Yet, they still find human value in the effort to dream; there is still a benefit to their soul. Why would their lives ending by radiation sickness not be worth a similar effort in the face of such futility? Does the suicide pill take away some of that dignity and devalue whatever remaining value their suffering might have? Moira's dilemma is just that and it is the same for all the others.



Moira has been reborn by her association with Peter. She is excited about her future now and has entered the same coping fantasy as he. She has come to fully understand his need for keeping his dead wife and children alive in his mind; she approves of his shopping for their gifts and insists on helping him find the pogo stick for his daughter. Having fully entered his fantasy, she accepts what that means. Moira always wanted to give her own daughter a pogo stick and lives out this dream vicariously through Dwight and his daughter. Moira will never be primary in Dwight's heart and may never hear him tell her he loves her. However, she has entered into another religious theme, that of self sacrificing for the good of another. Moira clearly sees the value in this to both her soul and Dwight's; it gives her life meaning and value, something she had given up on and feared to never gain. She is making the most of her grace period.

John Osborne has also found a little meaning in his life - his Ferrari! His racecar has given him a way to break out of his staid existence, that of a scientist and researcher, living with his mother. Death is coming and he knows it better than the others do; however, he is excited by the moment-by-moment chances he takes at death with the wild racing. We find that he now will have no regrets in his life. This is his grace period.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The trip of the *U.S.S. Scorpion* is underway. They visit Monterey Bay and find the radiation to be uniformly high. They inspect San Francisco from five miles outside the Golden Gate and all they learn is that the bridge is down. They backtrack to Half Moon Bay and noted the houses are not much damaged but there is no sign of life anywhere. Somewhere around Fort Bragg, they are able to pinpoint the Seattle transmissions as coming from Santa Maria. They decide the transmission is too random to be a person sending. Outside the Columbia River, the radiation readings remain "thirty in the red" but not high enough to be immediately lethal.

Dwight, back in his cabin, takes out the bracelet for his wife and puts it in his shirt pocket. He falls asleep with his hand on the fishing rod.

Off the Washington coast, they arrive at Edmonds, fifteen miles north from Seattle. The place seems undamaged but the radiation level is high. This is the hometown of one of the seamen from the sub, Swain, and he asks to have a look through the periscope. Shortly, Swain escapes the sub and swims to shore. From the loud speaker the commander orders him back onboard but the seaman refuses. They see him walking through town and discuss how long before he becomes sick - possibly three days or a week till he dies.

Next, they pull into the Naval docks at Elliott Bay. The city is undamaged and they agree the area was well protected by anti-missile defenses. Lt. Sunderstrom is to go ashore in a radiation suit and prepares to go search out the mystery of the radio signals. Exploring the town, he finds people dead; one group sits around a table in a gazebo as if at a party. Finally, in the office building of the powerhouse he finds the radio transmitting room with a broken window. One end of the broken window casement is leaning on the transmitting key and another part of it is resting on a coke bottle creating a rocking balance. The casement moves occasionally from the wind sending the "messages". He transmits a message that the sub is in good condition and they are heading to Alaska. Then he switches the radio equipment off and returns to the sub.

Later, the sub notices a motorboat heading in their direction; it is Swain. So far, he feels all right but wants to stay and die at home. In the meantime, it is a beautiful day for fishing. They offer him a gun but he has his own and thanks them anyway.

Back in Melbourne, Mary and Moira visit; it is winter weather. The radiation is not far from Brisbane. Mary would like to go somewhere warmer but not closer to the oncoming cloud. They discuss Mary's plans to put in daffodils and Moira thinks it is a healthy to plan. Mary offers her a drink and she declines. She tells Mary she only drinks now at parties and with men but is tired of all that now. She admits she loves Dwight and tells Mary about Dwight' holding onto his wife and children as if they were alive. Moira tells

Mary she is not jealous of Sharon, but she would like to meet her. She tells Mary that if this upcoming doom were not in the future she might consider trying to take Dwight away from his wife and family in the hopes of starting one of her own. "But to do her dirt just for three months' pleasure and nothing at the end of it - well that's another thing."

Mary tells Moira about their plan to take the suicide pills and of the possible need to give Jennifer an injection. She breaks down and admits she does not think she can do it. Moira agrees to come help her if it comes to that. However, Peter and Dwight will come back from the voyage and everything will be fine.

The submarine is on its return trip. At Pearl Harbor, the radiation level is much the same as it was in Seattle. A radio transmission comes in for Dwight advising him he is now the commanding officer of the U.S. Naval forces in all areas. He knows this means that Brisbane is out. He recalls his prior commander and his ship were there but unable to sail out because of no fuel. All there are dead now.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The voyage of *Scorpion* confirms all are dead wherever the radiation cloud has been. This answers the question of whether there is hope for the human race to still find some way to survive this holocaust. People themselves will not, but they are trying to leave behind memorials to their existence.

One lone man, Swain, takes the opportunity to die in his already dead hometown. He picks fishing on a beautiful day as his last act on earth. The image of this lone man reminds us that death is a solitary undertaking. This image is in juxtaposition to the images we have of mass death all over the world and the upcoming death of the groups of people we have come to know.

Moira drinks very little now. She has used her grace period to heal herself in many ways. Now she gives support to her friend Mary as she promises to help her kill her baby if need be. Moira does not seem to be upset at the prospect of her own death anymore.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Peter reports to his commanding officer on return from the voyage. They discuss a continuation of his appointment but Peter is anxious about his wife. *Scorpion* is going into dry dock for about three weeks and Dwight would like Peter to continue with him for that time. Peter agrees if he can commute back and forth from home.

Moirra invites Dwight home and finds him very ill with a fever. She puts him to bed in her home and cares for him. The doctor comes by to check him out for radiation sickness but decides it is only the flu. Moirra tends Dwight, filling him in with the progress at the farm. Her father is planning to put up another dam, which he plans to start about Christmas. He even booked a bulldozer for that time. Moirra gives Dwight a gift for his daughter, a brand new pogo stick she had made with his daughter's name engraved on it. Dwight tells her he has everything now and drifts off to sleep holding the pogo stick beside him.

John Osborne and Peter lunch together and discuss the report from the trip. John tells him he has found another supply of his ether-alcohol mixture for his racecar. Peter discusses how they could rig his own car for the mixture as well. Peter and John take the Ferrari out for a run that afternoon and have a wild, dangerous ride.

They end up at Moirra's home so John can check in with Dwight and discuss the report. They discuss Swain and Dwight figures if it had been him and the fishing was good that day, and it was his last day, he wouldn't come back either. John tells him that the data from their voyage tells them there is absolutely no way the progression of the radiation cloud has been slowed or altered; if anything, it seems to be coming a little faster, predicting its arrival at the end of August. John asks Dwight if he has plans to take the sub out for another trip. Dwight has none at present and doubts his crew want to leave their wives and girlfriends here in Melbourne. He tells John he envies him his Ferrari. Dwight muses he will be worrying and working up to the end. John tells him he should see a bit of Australia before the end. Dwight would like to go trout fishing but the season doesn't start until September 1st. John suggests he should fish anyway but Dwight has his duty and honor to obey the rules when posted in a foreign country and he will follow the rules. "I think a fellow should stick by the rules." John tells Moirra about the fishing season issue.

Two weeks later, at the Pastoral Club, Sir Froude is discussing the fine wine cellar at the club. The establishment has been keeping the most expensive bottles away due to the price. Sir Froude tells them to "give it away" just do not waste it. Sir Froude is visiting with Mr. Sykes from the State Fisheries who tells him his relative, Moirra, has been causing a stir wanting the fishing season opened early. They discuss the ramifications on the future fishing seasons and agree it would be a bad idea. However, one club member after another voiced their opinions to open the season early and so it is



decided. After all, you cannot really fine or jail anyone because there will not be time to bring the case to trial.

At the beginning of July Broken Hill and Perth go out, and most work in Melbourne is slowing down. Electrical power and the supply of essential foodstuffs continues, but luxuries become very hard to find. The city becomes more sober; there are far fewer parties and drunks in the gutters. One by one, "like harbingers of the coming spring", motorcars started to appear on the deserted roads. People had been saving fuel but not anymore; and Peter is driving his Morris around more. Even Dwight is given a car with a driver by the Australian Navy.

The last part of July is very pleasant even though the weather is bad. People are still getting pay wages but they have little on which to spend it. At the butcher shop you get meat whether you have cash or not, when there is meat. Skiers ski the mountains, and gardeners, Mary and Peter, lay out new beds for spring. In the city, John Osborne works on his Ferrari; the Australian Grand Prix race has been moved from its November date to August 17 in Melbourne. Everyone in the southern area who owns a fast car has entered - about two hundred and eighty cars. So many in fact, that they are holding elimination heats before the big race. These heats are wild and dangerous and many deaths and injuries. It is likened to the Roman gladiator contests. John Osborne's comes in second in his race, but just barely, and not before several cars piled up killing drivers. John speaks to the wife of one of the dead drivers and she offers him her husband's trailer to tow his Ferrari home. She tells him her husband died the way he wanted to, not being sick. She offers John parts from the wrecked car as well and wishes him good luck in the Grand Prix.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Maira gets an opportunity to take care of Dwight when he is sick with the flu. Caring for others is what Maira has developed during her grace period. She has given Dwight and his little girl a lovely gift, a selfless act. She sees what comfort it brings Dwight, watching him hold the memory of his daughter close while he sleeps. Here we still find her father planning the future of his ranch, and others are doing the same; the bulldozer operator is taking reservations for his time long past when all are expected to be dead.

Dwight and John Osborne discuss the ending days. Dwight recognizes John Osborne has found a satisfying way to spend his last days and Dwight envies him. Dwight knows he will worry and fuss over details until his end. It is sad he will not let himself accept in an active way the love being offered by Maira; he only passively accepts what she wants to give him. This is still all right with Maira.

We find a funny discussion between Sir Froude and a Fishing Ministry official over whether to open the fishing season early. Maira has been hounding them to open it in August, knowing they will not be alive or healthy enough to enjoy fishing by September. The old gentlemen discuss the ramifications an early fishing season will have on future fishing seasons if they let people fish this early and they want to deny the request.

However, they are very practical in realizing there is no time to bring to trial those who might break the rules and fish early anyway. This scene gives us an image of civilization with some men still taking their stewardship of the earth seriously. This is in stark contrast to the irresponsible acts of mankind, which have resulted in killing all living creatures on the earth.

People are winding down their lives in one part of the city; in another, they are gearing up for one great last hurrah!



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

August brings narcissus to Mary's garden. It also brings the radio announcement that radiation sickness is now in Sydney and Adelaide. This is bad news but the "wise person" pays no attention to it. What is important was that it is a bright and sunny day. Mary and Peter discuss their future crop of narcissus over the next couple of years.

Their baby, Jennifer, is teething and running a fever. Mary is worried it is something horrible and she frets. Peter is tired of the incessant crying of the baby and leaves for the submarine on a trumped-up excuse of work. Once there, Peter has a conversation with a Wran writer about the news at Sydney and Adelaide. "First it was months, and then it got to be weeks, and now I'd say it's getting down to days." Peter plans to talk to John Osborne for speculation that is more accurate. They discuss the upcoming Grand Prix - the last race ever.

Peter and John Osborne confer about the updates. John is pushing the Grand Prix racing committee to run the race sooner than August 17, hopefully the 10th. He thinks the radiation will arrive sooner. There is radiation sickness in Canberra now. This surprises Peter who only just heard from the radio news about the Sydney report. John tells him that the radio is about three days late - they do not want to create alarm and despondency. There is also a suspected case in Albury, about 200 miles north of Melbourne.

Peter asks John how long he thinks they all have to live. John tells them they all have the sickness even now. Everything is being touched with radioactive dust now - their water, air, lettuce, bacon, eggs, everything. Some people with less tolerance will be showing symptoms in two weeks or sooner.

Peter asks John about his uncle, Sir Froude - he has made a big hole in the port and may outlast some of them. Alcohol seems to increase the tolerance to radioactivity, by a few days. John says at this point it is a toss up which gets him first. When they meet him at the Club Sir Froude agrees that it could be close; his doctor's original warnings about the port are playing out.

They discuss the progress of the radiation - now in Cape Town but there is still radio contact. All of Africa will be gone in a week or so. John Osborne tells them that it goes quickly at the end, but a bit difficult. When more than half the people in a place are dead the communication stops and then you do not know what is happening. Supplies stop, food supplies, etc., and the rest go quickly but he admits they do not really know for sure. The General thinks that is a good thing - we will all find out soon enough. John updates them: cases in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Auckland. Next, will be Melbourne; Tasmania two weeks later; then the South Island of New Zealand; and last

of all to die will be the Indians in Tierra del Fuego. They do not believe anybody is in Antarctica.

John tells them that at that point it will not be the total end of life on the Earth. Rabbits will live about one year longer. Dogs and mice too, but none of them will live after about another year. The General is stunned: after all that has been done to hold the rabbit population in check it will win out in the end!

Dwight and Moira lunch together and Dwight tells her about his Naval ship, the *Swordfish*, stationed in Montevideo. He radioed the Captain three days ago about its status and whether it was practical for them to leave. It was not - "shore associations". If he left, he would be leaving half his crew behind with wives and girlfriends onshore. Dwight ordered him to take *Swordfish* out beyond the twelve-mile limit and sink her on the high seas. He thought it would be what the Navy Department would want him to do - not leave a ship full of classified gear sitting around in a foreign country. Now his sub *Scorpion* is the last U.S. Navy ship. He tells Moira he would like to take *Scorpion* back to the United States but his crew has the same "shore associations."

Moira tells Dwight the fishing season has been opened early, and she invites him to go with her. He agrees but is worried she will get hurt, emotionally. He tells her that he is planning on going home soon and he is married. He has been true to his wife, whom he loves, and doesn't intend to spoil that now in the last few days. Moira knows this and assures him she understands. She tells him he has been very good to her the past few months and she has no intentions of starting a "smutty love affair" when she's dying in a week or ten day's time. She has her standards - at least now, any ways.

They make their vacation plans and Dwight offers Moira a drink. She declines; she has a test that afternoon, still planning on the future. Moira thinks she might like to meet Sharon some day if Dwight thinks Sharon would not mind. Dwight tells her Sharon will be grateful to her. They plan Moira's visit back to Mystic, meeting the children and Sharon.

The city is starting to deteriorate now. The trams still run but the street cleaners have stopped and the city is starting to smell. Dwight finds John Osborne in his shop with Peter and another man. They are all working on the Ferrari getting it ready for the Grand Prix. Peter has to get back to Mary and the baby soon.

Back home Mary asks Peter for a lawn mower; expensive but could not they get one anyway. He agrees; Mary is living in a world of unreality. He is not sure he wants her different and decides to give her what she wants to make her happy. She also really wants a garden seat but Peter decides to start with buying the mower first. The next day they go to Melbourne to buy one. Mary is depressed at the condition of Melbourne, smelly and dirty, and vows this will be her last trip to town. She does not even want to stay for lunch. They do find a mower; the last day the store will be open. The store took a poll and the employees decided to close early and spend their days at home.



Back home Mary is feeling better, more secure in her own surroundings and things to which she is accustomed. Mary is angry at the condition of the city - it is as if the end has already come. Peter tells her that the end will come about three weeks after the first case of sickness in their area. Mary wants the three of them to get it at the same time. Peter reminds her that we all face death but because they are younger they have not faced it yet. Jennifer could have died first, naturally, or Peter before Mary. You really do not know what the future holds. Mary admits she hoped it would happen at the same time for them.

Dwight works with Moira's father helping him ready his ranch for the end. They worry about the animals left alive after the people are dead and how they will be fed, and they really do not have an answer. No one has heard from those in the north about what solutions they found in this regard.

Back onboard ship Dwight has found there are eleven men drunk on return from leave. He sets a new rule - anyone arriving back onboard in that condition will get an immediate dishonorable discharge. That day, he will strip the uniform off the man and put him dockside in his shorts. The next day one more sailor arrives back onboard in a drunken condition and he strips him and leaves him on the dock to fend for himself. That is the last problem of that sort.

Dwight tells him he and Moira will not be at the race because they will be fishing. John tells him it will probably be the last healthy weekend for a lot of people. Peter is going to spend the weekend gardening with Mary. John Osborne's mother is worried about her Pekinese now that she realizes the dog will outlive her. The end of the month is now an optimistic goal; it will be sooner for most people. John is thinking of ending it tomorrow (before the Grand Prix), and Dwight encourages him to the race.

Moira and Dwight head up to the fishing lodge and check into the cabins they have reserved. The resort is crowded with other fishermen in good spirits, all looking forward to good fishing. Moira and Dwight have a drink in the bar and she notices a button off Dwight's shirt she wants resewn. She tells him she will not send him back to Sharon looking like that. On their way to their rooms they can hear everyone at the bar having a great time and they have a hard time realizing this will be the last weekend. She and Dwight wonder if there is existence on another plane and if it rains there or if there is fishing. Moira privately dreams what it would have been like with her and Dwight if she could have gotten him away from Sharon and the children.

The next day they have a wonderful time fishing. Moira starts feeling sad they will not have another day fishing in this spot. Dwight agrees, but for a different reason. For him he is going home to his own place and his own folks. He plans to tell Sharon that Moira made this bad time a good one for him; though she knew there was nothing in it for her from the beginning. It is because of Moira that he'll come back to Sharon like he used to be, and not a drunken bum. He will tell her what it cost Moira to make it easy for him to remain faithful to Sharon till the end.

Both have forgotten it is the day of the Grand Prix race but they eventually find out John Osborne won the race. They both decide it is a good idea to head home. Moira feels like she won a victory over something but she is not sure what. He tells her to just be thankful. Then Dwight admits that he'd heard about a case of radiation sickness in Melbourne this past Thursday and fears there may be many sick by now.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 8 finds the radiation cloud quickly approaching Melbourne, in fact by the end of this long chapter we find that some have already become sick in Melbourne. People are realizing this is really going to happen; yet, there is no panic, just people going forward with their plans for the future. One image is of Dwight setting new rules against drunkenness in his sailors. He threatens them with a dishonorable discharge and they willingly obey. Civilization will continue to the last.

Another striking image is the narcissus garden at Mary and Peter's house. We all can imagine these bright clumps of color emerging from the dead of winter bringing a promise of new growth, new life, and fruits of our labor. They represent the hopes and dreams of those who will soon be dying. They also represent the new life to which each soul will soon transform. They reassure that there is a life after death.

The baby Jennifer has been sick with her teething and this is a foreshadowing of the radiation sickness to come. Peter's impatience with her crying is a symptom of his subconscious fear for the future. We see him trying to escape the reality now by leaving his family and going to town, the submarine, John Osborne's garage, anywhere where the end of the future is not in his face.

John Osborne is getting ready for his race this coming weekend; Moira's father is putting in a new fence, making final arrangements to leave his farm; and Peter and Mary plan to do their gardening that weekend. Moira and Dwight go fishing, along with many others.

It is in this chapter where Dwight finally gives Moira her due. He has appreciated her joining him in his coping fantasy. They have even planned for Moira to come visit him and his wife and children later, and they discuss this as if it is a future reality. Moira has made it easier for him to remain sane these final months. Dwight is not crazy and he has control over when he slips in and out of his fantasy. In this chapter, he slips out long enough to tell Moira that if not for her selfless giving to him, he would have ended his last days as a drunken bum. What a contrast to where Moira herself started in the story! Moira has also overcome her own drunkenness and has emerged as a whole, loving soul. She comments that she knows she has overcome something but does not quite know what. She has overcome the despair the human soul can slip to when faced with no future and no hope for a future. We get this image from all the people in the story that are still living and planning. The religious overtones of the story are subtle but pervasive. Moira's grace period has given her the opportunity to rebirth her soul in

preparation for her journey from this life to the next. She represents the highest sacrifice and the ultimate growth a human can achieve, selfless love.

Moirra and Dwight ponder the hereafter in a way that does not quite mesh with his fantasy. However, reality is quickly approaching, hours away, and they are starting to break down and face it clearly.

John Osborne has won his race and how poignant that it represents the race all men run on their time on earth; wild, scary, challenging, exhilarating, yet with a sobering ending. We are glad John has won his, and in many other ways, people all over are winning theirs too, in each one's own way.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

It's Tuesday and the radio has announced the first cases of radiation sickness in the city. Mary is worried Peter will catch it when he goes to the city and offers him formalin lozenges. He will be careful. Peter knows now it is down to hours now, not days. He knows his trip to town will be the last of his Naval career.

Peter meets with Dwight, who is cheerful. His secretary is out for the day and another officer has not shown up for their meeting. Dwight tells them he is now the senior executive officer of the U. S. Navy and that he is taking his ship out of the command of the Australian Navy. The Australian admiral understands and offers any services they need. He tells them he is taking the submarine out to Bass Straits to sink her. Peter wonders if he should offer to send a ship out with them to bring the crew back but realizes they probably would prefer death at sea rather than a death homeless in a strange land. The admiral has to excuse himself to the bathroom and the others speculate on what has happened to Dwight's secretary as well. The admiral returns and says his farewell to the American Naval Commander. Dwight relieves Peter of duty. They say their goodbyes. Dwight tells Peter he is going home to Mystic, Connecticut, and glad to go. They part as friends.

John Osborne is home with his mother who is sick in bed with the radiation sickness. She asks John how long the sickness might last before bringing death. He tells her about a week; "how absurd . . . much too long", she says. She worries again about her dog and John tells her he has Ming tied up in the garden. She gives John feeding instructions for Ming. John heads to his office in town.

At his office, John finds a goodbye note from his secretary; she is sick today. Shortly he heads home, worried about his mother. He takes the tram, which is still running. The driver tells him he is not going to stop driving until he cannot. Back at home, John finds his mother dead in her bed with a note on the table alongside the red suicide pillbox. She tells him she does not want to spoil his last few days with having to worry and care for her. She wants no funeral; close the door and leave her in her bed. "I shall be quite alright."

A little while later John goes to the chemist and picks up his own red pill box and returns home. He prepares to feed Ming and mixes Nembutal in the food, which puts the little dog to sleep. Then he gives the dog the injection. He makes a reservation for a room at the Club for the next week, places the little dog beside his mother and leaves his home.

Tuesday night the Holmes's baby starts crying and by dawn, she is vomiting. Both Peter and Mary become sick that same day, both initially trying to hide it from the other. Peter later finds Mary singing in the kitchen, relieved that they all have it at the same time. "Aren't we lucky?"



On Friday, Peter goes to town looking for a garden seat; he is really looking for John Osborne. He finds him at the Pastoral Club and John is ill. Peter tells him that he has had a recovery and is feeling very well now and very hungry - he is eating all the time. He tells John Mary is home, very sick, yet putting moth balls in their clothing; she can still do it between spasms. Peter just wants to confirm that there is no chance he will recover. John tells him, "Nobody survives this thing. It makes a clean sweep." Peter says his good byes and heads off to buy the garden seat for Mary.

John Osborne knows that it has to be today; tomorrow he will be too weak. He goes downstairs and meets his uncle sitting by the fire. His uncle is still feeling fine and complaining he has to cook his own breakfast now. He reports that he is on the last bin of port now; about fifty bottles left; should just about do it. John wonders just how much longer one will last due to the alcohol factor. He tells his uncle goodbye; he will see him later. John goes to his Ferrari and puts it on blocks, the effort taking him outside to the backyard several times, weakening him further. He unhooks the battery, removes the spark plugs and fills the cylinders with oil. He makes himself comfortable in the drivers seat thinking about how this car had won for him the race that was the climax of his life. There is no point to anything further; he takes his own pill.

Peter goes to the hardware store and finds it untended with the door broken open. He picks out a garden bench with a brightly colored cushion and brings it home to Mary. He is still ravenously hungry and feeling good. He has not told Mary he has had a remission. He eats breakfast at the café run by a "beery" couple that is in good health. He also orders a cache of sandwiches for later snacking on the sly so Mary does not see him.

Back home Mary and Jennifer are very ill. The baby cannot take anything in now and is messing all the time. Peter lies to Mary about how he feels. Peter cares for Jennifer, builds a fire to warm the house and sets the garden seat up where Mary wanted it. Mary is very pleased - "It's going to be awfully nice to sit there, on a summer evening. ." Peter fixes her a hot brandy with lemon and they sit talking about why and how this whole war started. Russia and China started fighting each other. America, England and Russia started bombing for destruction first; the whole thing started with Albania. It all happened so quickly, over in a month. There probably was nothing anyone could have done to stop it. What should have been done was to educate against the "silliness" using newspapers if they had been wise enough.

Peter looks in on his baby and decides she probably will not live through the night. He is very bothered with the thought of living after Mary dies; there will be nothing for him to do. Mary asks Peter for the pill tonight for herself and Jennifer; Peter tells her he will come too. She reminds him to shut off the electricity. He gives the baby her injection, fixes a thermos of hot brandy, fixes up the bedroom and brings Mary to bed. He changes into his pajamas and gets in bed with her. They say their goodbyes and take their pills.

Dwight calls Moira that evening to see how she and her parents are doing. They are all very ill. He tells her he is taking *Scorpion* out 8:00 tomorrow morning to sink her. He



thanks her for the last six months; it meant a lot to him. She wants to come say goodbye. He passes on goodbye messages for her parents. Her parents tell her to go to the submarine in the morning to say goodbye but that they might be gone when she gets back home. Moira goes out and opens the gates in the stockyard and this relieves her father's mind. There is nothing more they can do.

The next morning Moira kisses her parents goodbye and goes to see Dwight off. She wants to come with him in the submarine but he is not allowing it for her or any of the other seamen who have asked. He is running the vessel the Navy way right up to the end. She makes sure he has his presents with him and asks him to tell Sharon about her. They hug and kiss and Dwight tells her the route he plans on taking the submarine.

Mary thinks that at about 10 minutes past 10:00 am, Dwight will be going home to Connecticut and she decides not to go home to die. Instead, she sips her brandy, makes sure she has her pills and drives along the coast to where she thinks she will be able to see the submarine pass by. Turning towards the lighthouse, she sees the submarine in the distance. She waves to Dwight even though she knows he cannot see her or know that she is there watching. This is the very, very end. She says the Lord's Prayer, and at 10 minutes past 10:00 am she takes her pills with a swallow of brandy. "Dwight, if you're on your way already, wait for me."

Chapter 9 Analysis

Chapter 9 is the climax of the story. The characters in our story hold on to their dreams to the very end. The chapter shares with us each person's moment of death, which gives the reader a sad but satisfying ending to the story. We have come to respect each of these characters in their different approaches to life and death.

The radiation cloud has arrived Melbourne, a little ahead of schedule, but no one is taken unprepared. You get the sense that everyone has used their grace period well, and what a tribute to mankind at the end. This is a contrast with the total death and destruction caused by mankind, but not by all men, just a few.

The story is full of juxtaposed themes: wise men versus irresponsible men; sudden death versus a healing grace period; death as the final end versus life after death; selfish self preservation versus selfless giving.

Death for all has a dignity in this story. Civilization has made a grand effort to continue, and there will be many tributes and symbols left behind. For one, the world will have been left in as tidy and orderly a condition as possible. There will be no panicked piles of dead bodies; but everyone will be in their chosen spots for the end. For most, it is their homes with their loved ones. For others it is a duty station: the tram driver, the Naval crewmembers. Farms will have been left in order; race cars properly prepared for long storage. The flowers will continue to come up year after year in the carefully prepared gardens, and the trees will bloom and produce fruit.

Hopefully, life will come again to the earth and what will be left visible from the past will be a reminder of two things: mankind's capacity for complete and utter destruction of the most senseless type; contrasted with mankind's ability to love fully and selflessly, and act as caring stewards of the earth, and the people and creatures in it. Those of us reading this book have to realize that civilization is grand and noble, yet also terrifyingly irresponsible. There are timeless lessons and questions raised in this book worth pondering and seriously taking to heart. Not the least of which is the importance of preserving life and our earth for our future generations.

Characters

Bill Davidson

Bill is Moira's father. An old-fashioned sheep rancher, he is glad to welcome Dwight Towers to his home for a visit. The two men discuss the grim effects the nuclear holocaust will have on Australia. Bill plans to remain on his farm when the radiation reaches Melbourne. In the end, he and his wife express regret that Tower and Moira do not marry.

Moira Davidson

Moira Davidson is a friend of Peter and Mary Holmes. She copes with her impending death by constant drinking and promiscuity. However, her relationship with American naval officer Dwight Towers changes her.

At first she is flighty and flirtatious with him, but the officer's good nature and loyalty to his dead family touches her. Unfortunately, Moira gradually realizes that Towers will never be able to completely give himself to her because he is faithful to the memory of his wife.

Yet her relationship with Towers inspires her to quit drinking and find constructive ways to spend her last days. In addition, she strives to make his last months in Australia as pleasant as possible. She brings him home to her family, mends his clothes, and takes him on a fishing trip. Although Towers will not take her with him when he leaves to sink the submarine, she dies with dignity and peace.

Mrs. Davidson

Mrs. Davidson is Moira's mother. She helps Moira mend Towers's clothes.

Sir Douglas Froude

Sir Douglas is John Osborne's great-uncle and a former general in the Australian army. In his final months, he devotes himself to drinking the three thousand bottles of vintage port stored in the cellars of the exclusive Pastoral Club.

Mr. Goldie

Mr. Goldie is the plainspoken pharmacist who describes the symptoms of radiation sickness to Peter Holmes. He demonstrates the use of the suicide tablets and syringes and informs Holmes that there will be no charge for the poison when it is needed.



Jennifer Holmes

Jennifer Holmes is the infant child of Peter and Mary Holmes. At the end of the novel, Holmes must inject the child with poison when the family becomes fatally ill from radiation poisoning.

Mary Holmes

Mary Holmes is the English wife of Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes. She is supportive of her husband's naval career, even though it calls for him to be away from his family as the final days of civilization approach.

Mary's life revolves around her infant daughter, Jennifer. She has difficulty coming to terms with reality of her family's inevitable deaths and the devastation around her. To avoid it, she occupies her time by caring for her baby, housekeeping, and planning a garden that nobody will live to see.

Before leaving on an extended voyage to the United States, Peter explains to Mary that she may have to euthanize Jennifer and take a suicide tablet herself if the radiation reaches Melbourne before he returns from his mission. Mary is angry and horrified; she accuses him of trying to rid himself of his wife and child in order to run off with another woman.

It is at this point in the novel that Mary finally understands the reality of the situation. After her husband returns from his last mission, they spend their remaining time together working on the garden. They commit suicide together at the end of the novel.

Peter Holmes

Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes of the Australian Royal Navy is appointed as the liaison officer to U.S. Commander Dwight Towers at the beginning of the novel. Peter is a good and generous man, loyal to the navy and a dutiful, loving husband to his wife, Mary. He becomes friends with Towers and introduces him to Moira Davidson. In his duties as liaison officer, Holmes goes on two missions aboard the American nuclear submarine, the *U.S.S. Scorpion*.

Before the second and final voyage, Peter reluctantly demonstrates the use of the suicide drugs to Mary in case he should not return. They have a terrible argument, but Mary ultimately recognizes the necessity of her husband's actions.

Fortunately, he does return from the mission in time to spend his final days with his family. When the first cases of radiation sickness appear in Melbourne, he bids farewell to Towers. Although Holmes and Mary get radiation sickness at approximately the same time, a couple of days later he feels as if his health is coming back. He tells John Osborne, only to be told that his recovery is only temporary. Peter decides the time has

come, and he injects his baby daughter with the poison. Then he takes his tablet with Mary, committing suicide.

John Osborne

John Osborne is the pragmatic scientist assigned to the *U.S.S. Scorpion*. He studies the spread of radiation in the area. He is somewhat pessimistic and dour, as demonstrated by his comments when the submarine reaches Port Darwin:

They learned nothing, save for the inference that when the end had come the people had died tidily. "It's what animals do," John Osborne said. "Creep away into holes to die. They're probably all in bed."

"That's enough about that," the captain said. "It's true," the scientist remarked.

However, Osborne's personality changes whenever he is near his treasured racing car, a red Ferrari he obtains from a widow. Osborne, knowing the end is near, plans to fulfill his lifetime dream of racing in a Grand Prix (even though he has never raced before).

In one of the more exciting passages in the book, Osborne competes in the time trials for the Grand Prix. Several racers are killed in the trials, but Osborne perseveres and gains a place in the race. Later, Towers and Moira learn of Osborne's victory in the Grand Prix while they are on a fishing trip. In the end, Osborne takes his tablet as he sits behind the wheel of his beloved Ferrari.

Mrs. Osborne

Mrs. Osborne is John Osborne's mother. John shares a few moments with her before going to the office for the last time. She worries about her pet dog, a Pekinese named Ming. When John returns from the office, he finds his mother has taken her pill and left him a note saying goodbye. He euthanizes the dog and puts it in its basket next to his mother's bed.

Mr. Paul

At the beginning of *On the Beach*, Peter Holmes acquires milk from a farmer named Mr. Paul. His conversation with the farmer reveals the grim conditions of postwar Australia in the novel. They discuss the difficulty of obtaining fuel and other items, and the decreasing value of money is demonstrated by the farmer's casual attitude when Peter promises that he will pay for any milk that Mary needs when he returns.



Lieutenant Sunderstrom

Lieutenant Sunderstrom volunteers to go ashore to investigate the communications installation on Santa Maria Island in order to determine the origin of the mysterious radio signal. At one time stationed on the island, he is familiar with the layout of the area. Protected by a radiation suit, he determines that the signal was caused by a broken window frame resting on a transmitting key. He yearns to take a carton of Lucky Strikes that he finds at the installation, but he knows they are hot with radioactivity. He does, however, sneak back three issues of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Ralph Swain

Radar operator Yeoman First Class Ralph Swain jumps ship when the submarine surfaces near the shore of his hometown in United States. They are unable to convince him to return as he swims to shore. The submarine returns after Sunderstrom's mission on Santa Maria Island only to find Swain fishing. The young man reports that everyone in the city is dead. He apologizes for jumping ship, but tells the captain that he wants to die in his hometown. The captain wishes him luck and the submarine returns to Australia.

Dwight Towers

Dwight Towers is the captain of the U.S. submarine, the *U.S.S. Scorpion*. The *Scorpion* was cruising near Midway when the nuclear holocaust devastated most of the civilized world. The Australian Royal Navy ultimately sends the submarine on two missions: one to the northern coast of Australia, and one to the western coast of the United States.

Towers becomes friends with the Australian liaison officer, Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes. Peter and his wife, Mary, introduce him to Moira Davidson, a family friend. Moira, a vivacious young woman, falls in love with him.

Towers comes to care deeply for Moira, but he cannot completely reciprocate her feelings because he is faithful to the memory of his dead wife. In fact, he behaves as if his family isn't dead. He tries to buy a special gift for each family member, such as an expensive bracelet for his wife and a fishing pole for his son. However, he cannot locate a Pogo stick for his daughter. He is moved when Moira has one specially made for him.

Towers spends a considerable amount of time with Moira. Yet he is still unable to completely relinquish the memory of his wife. His loyalty to his job prevents him from allowing her to join him on the submarine at the end of the novel. Moira drives as close as she can to the point where Towers will sink the submarine. She vows to meet him in the afterlife as she takes her suicide tablet.

Social Sensitivity

The one overriding social issue of the novel is the end of society itself.

Most interesting, though, throughout the novel is the way that social structures, functions, and mores are carried on as if total eclipse were not just around the corner. The keeper of a small inn is delighted at the resurgence in business when the fishing season — the last one — begins early; a tram driver declares that he has been driving trams for years, and isn't going to stop now. Peter Holmes writes a check for a lawn mower with money no one will ever use. The reasons for the war that causes this obliteration are almost secondary; in the end, what is most important is carrying on, and, when the end nears, tidying up (as John Osborne does with his car, and Moira's father does with his livestock), and going in an orderly manner. Thus Osborne's mother goes without fuss, in her bed; Towers keeps discipline on his ship as tight as he can; and Peter and Mary Holmes go together, in their own bed.

Techniques

Two of Shute's narrative strengths are dialogue and technical description.

Indeed, one of the elements that makes Shute so readable is dialogue that does not sound forced, and description that is specific yet unobtrusive. The description of the naval procedures surrounding the *Scorpion* and the Australian Naval office, for example, are clear yet substantial; there is a feeling after having read it of having been in the presence of an urbane yet friendly narrator. Urbanity is also a hallmark of the dialogue. In the novel, society is, for a time, continuing in its familiar tracks; the way we learn this is through the dialogue, through people telling each other their plans, relating how their day has gone, or, conversely, discussing the unthinkable in calm, matter-of-fact tones. At the very end, the feeling may be one of sentiment or sadness, but is never dramatic or maudlin; when John Osborne finds his mother has taken her suicide pill quietly when he is away, "A few tears trickled down his cheeks, but only a few. Mum had always been right, all his life, and now she was right again."

Themes

Death

The inevitability of death is the major theme of *On the Beach*. With the radiation cloud approaching Melbourne, the characters in the novel are very aware of their impending deaths. The main characters are all relatively young and they struggle with the intrinsic *unfairness* of this tragedy, as Peter does when he tries to explain the situation to his wife

"It's the end of everything for all of us," [Peter] said. "We're going to lose most of the years of life we've looked forward to, and Jennifer's going to lose all of them"

Shute explores the way various people react to the sobering reality of death. Several of the characters in *On the Beach* are in denial, which means they ignore their impending death. For example, Mary plans a garden that she will never live to see. Towers buys thoughtful presents for his late family and remains faithful to his dead wife.

Other characters resort to self-indulgence in the face of death Sir Douglas Froude plans to drink the entire wine inventory of the Pastoral Club. At the beginning of the novel, Moira is a somewhat promiscuous drunk. Through her growing feelings for Towers, she transforms into a selfless heroine; she tempers her drinking and self-pity in order to care for him although she knows he will never reciprocate. This selflessness is also a viable and recognized reaction to death.

Another reaction to death is to take outrageous challenges In the novel, John Osborne's obsession with racing illustrates this reaction. Osborne is a dreary and meek man until he gets behind the wheel of his Ferrari. When Towers asks Osborne what the car is like in a race, Osborne's reply is reminiscent of someone who has been on a great roller-coaster ride.

"You get scared stiff. Then directly it's over you want to go on and do it again."

War

On the Beach can be viewed as a cautionary fable that is meant to warn readers about the dangers of nuclear war. Written during the height of the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, many people believed that World War in was inevitable.

Shute is more concerned with exploring the reactions of the characters to the war's aftermath than he is with the war itself, but it is obvious that he believes that the idea of a "winnable" nuclear war is ridiculous and irresponsible. This attitude is reflected during the final conversation between Peter and Mary:



"Couldn't anyone have stopped it?" [asked Mary]

"I don't know . Some kinds of silliness you just can't stop " [Peter] said "I mean, if a couple of hundred million people all decide that their national honour requires them to drop cobalt bombs upon their neighbour, well, there's not much that you or I can do about it The only possible hope would have been to educate them out of their silliness "

Hope

In the novel, Shute recognizes the human capacity for hope under even the worst of circumstances The Royal Australian Navy sends the *U.S.S. Scorpion* on two missions in the hope that they will find some signs of life. Peter and Mary plan a garden. However, the most stirring example of hope in the novel is Towers's fervent belief that he will be joining his wife and children in the afterlife. His hope also inspires Moira at the very end of the novel

She took the cork out of the bottle It was ten past ten She said earnestly, "Dwight, if you're on your way already, wait for me "

Then she put the tablets in her mouth and swallowed them down with a mouthful of brandy, sitting behind the wheel of her big car

Euthanasia

Euthanasia, or mercy-killing, is one of the most controversial themes of *On the Beach* In the novel, euthanasia is used in order to save people from the horrible affects of radiation poisoning

Radiation sickness has horribly debilitating effects on the human body. The Australian government doles out a free drug to the general public so that people may end their lives painlessly. Syringes are also provided so that people may be injected by another person. The pharmacist, Mr. Goldie, recognizes the implications of this development.

"There must be terrible complications over the religious side," he said. "I suppose then that it's a matter for the individual"

There are indeed "terrible complications." One of the most traumatic episodes in the book takes place when Peter tries to explain to Mary that it may be necessary for her to kill her own infant daughter to spare the child from suffering. Mary is understandably horrified, and she accuses Peter of trying to rid himself of her and the baby so he can run off with another woman. Peter angrily describes an appalling scenario to shock some sense into her:

'There's another thing you'd better think about," he said "Jennifer may live longer than you will .. You can battle on as long as you can stand, until you die But Jennifer may not be dead She may live on for days, crying and vomiting all over herself in her cot and

laying in her muck, with you dead on the floor beside her and nobody to help her. Finally, of course, she'll die. Do you want her to die like that' If you do, I don't" He turned away "Just think about it, and don't be such a bloody fool."

In the end, Peter is responsible for injecting his daughter with the drug. Shute examines this disturbing theme in a very straightforward manner. The novelist seems less troubled by the moral issues of euthanasia than by the circumstances that might force a man to kill his own daughter.

Style

Science Fiction

Science fiction is a type of narrative that utilizes real or imagined scientific theories and technology. Although Shute is not typically recognized as a science fiction writer, *On the Beach* can be considered a science fiction novel because it contemplates the consequences of a global nuclear war.

Some critics do not take science fiction literature seriously as a genre. However, since the late 1950s, many science fiction authors have tackled themes of enormous importance with spectacular results. Many of the writers associated with the genre, such as Harlan Ellison, Kurt Vonnegut, and J. G. Ballard, have earned the respect of critics for their insightful and stylish work.

The devastating potential of a nuclear war is the subject of many science fiction novels and short stories. Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959), Harlan Ellison's "A Boy and His Dog" (1969), and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* (1980) are just a few diverse examples. Shute is more concerned with the psychology of his characters and their reactions to their grim circumstances than he is with the war itself, but the speculative nature of the work identifies it as science fiction.

Setting

The setting of *On the Beach* is an important plot element. Australia's location spares the country from the awful destruction that takes place in other parts of the world during the war. Unfortunately, there is no escaping the radioactive fall-out that accompanies the widespread use of nuclear weapons. The earth's winds gradually move the radiation cloud southward.

Most of the novel's action takes place in and around Melbourne. As the city is in Australia's southern region, it would be one of the last cities in the world to be affected by the radiation. The inhabitants of Melbourne are therefore forced to watch as the entire populations of the cities to the north die of radiation sickness.

Shute evokes a nightmarish atmosphere. For example, most of Australia's large cities are located on the coasts. This allows the *Scorpion* to directly observe the ghostly, deserted streets of Cairns and Darwin. The crew realizes that in just a few months Melbourne will look the same. Thus, the setting of the novel allows Shute to examine the behavior of characters who are aware of their terrifying predicament.

Point of View

On the Beach is written in the third-person point of view. In other words, the reader is provided with an omniscient narrative perspective in order to get the thoughts of many characters.

The majority of the book concerns the thoughts and feelings of the five major characters: Peter Holmes, Mary Holmes, Dwight Towers, Moira Davidson, and John Osborne. However, the reader is also privy to the thoughts of secondary characters, such as Lieutenant Sunderstrom.

Stereotype

There are several familiar stereotypes in *On the Beach*. Both Peter Holmes and Dwight Towers are presented as loyal, brave military men. Mary is portrayed as the devoted mother.

Perhaps most recognizable is the mousy, pragmatic scientist, John Osborne, who is characterized by his serious, sullen demeanor. Of course, he is a completely different man when he is behind the wheel of his Ferrari. He then becomes a daredevil. All of these are common stereotypes in modern fiction.

Historical Context

Australia

On the Beach is set on the island continent of Australia. As mentioned above, the setting of the story is important as its location spares it from the destruction that takes place in the rest of the world.

Australia is the only continent occupied by a single nation. As two-thirds of the continent is desert or semi-desert, over 86% of the population lives in cities. It is the most urbanized country in the world.

When Dwight Towers visits the Davidson family's farm, he comments on the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Mrs. Davidson's reply reveals Australia's historical origins:

"Yes, it's nice up here," said Mrs. Davidson. "But it can't compare with England. England's beautiful."

The American asked, "Were you born in England?"

"Me? No. I was born in Australia. My grandfather came out to Sydney in the early days, but he wasn't a convict. Then he took up land in the Riverina. Some of the family are there still."

The history of Australia is an interesting one. After the great navigator James Cook (1728-1779) charted the waters off the eastern coast of the continent in 1770, the English began to use New South Wales (as Australia was known at the time) as a penal colony.

The first governor-designate of New South Wales, Arthur Philip, established a settlement in Sydney Harbour on January, 26, 1788 (now celebrated as Australia Day). He had with him eleven ships, 443 seamen, 586 male and 192 female convicts, and 211 marines, as well as officials, wives, and children. Over the next several decades, there were 825 passages by convict ships transporting more than 150,000 criminals to Australia.

However, Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1796-1862), a British official who led the efforts to colonize the continent, realized that a stable, civil society could not depend entirely on the transportation of convicts. The proceeds of land sales were used to subsidize the migration of free settlers. By 1839 there were twice as many free settlers as there were convicts. Abolitionist sentiment in England, along with the resentment of the free settlers, ultimately led to the end of the use of exile as punishment for crimes.

Australia was granted independence from England on January 1, 1901. The nation maintained a close relationship with England through most of the twentieth century. Australia was a firm ally of the United States during the Cold War.



However, Australia increasingly began to view itself as an Asian nation with people of European descent. Although Australia's contact with America and Europe remains close, the country now has vital trading partners in the economic powerhouses of East Asia.

On February 13, 1998, Australia's legislators proposed a referendum to turn the country into a fully independent republic by severing its ties to the British Crown. The proposed Republic of Australia would replace the monarchy with an Australian citizen as president. However, in 1999, the nation voted against the referendum. Today, Australia enjoys one of the world's highest standards of living, ranking sixteenth among the industrialized nations.

Aborigines

It might seem surprising that there is no mention of aboriginal culture in *On the Beach*. However, Shute's characters probably wouldn't have had much contact with the aborigines.

The aborigines are Australia's indigenous people. Scientists believe that the aborigines canoed to Australia from Southeast Asia approximately 30,000 to 50,000 years ago. The aborigines were hunter-gatherers living in tribes located for the most part in the northern part of the continent.

Unfortunately, like their Native American counterparts, contact with European settlers was detrimental to their culture and their existence. When the first settlers arrived in 1788, there were approximately 750,000 aborigines. Early settlers viewed the aborigines as uncivilized savages and attacked them remorselessly over the next century. By 1930, only 67,000 aborigines remained in Australia.

Colonial leaders recognized the problem as early as 1860 when the first protection act was passed. Many reserves were also established for aboriginal use and the aboriginal people presently own 11% of Australia's land. Aborigines were granted Australian citizenship by the government in 1967, although they were not granted the right to vote until 1984.

The Cold War

On the Beach is influenced by the historical events of the Cold War between the United States (along with its Western European allies) and the Soviet Union. According to the second edition of *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, a *cold war* can be defined as a sharp conflict in diplomacy, economics, etc. between states, regarded as potentially leading to war. During a 1947 congressional debate, American financier Bernard Baruch was one of the first people on record to use the term.

In an infamous 1946 speech, Winston Churchill warned that the United States and its allies had to be on guard against Soviet expansionism. His remarks seemed prescient when, in June 1948, the Soviet Union began the Berlin blockade, cutting off Berlin from

the West. The United States began a vast airlift to keep Berlin supplied with food and fuel. In August of 1949, tensions increased even further when the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic device. For the first time, war had the potential to wipe out the human race.

America and its allies sought to impose a "policy of containment" on the Soviet Union and the spread of communism. They created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to prevent the Soviet Union from expanding in Western Europe. The Soviets responded by signing the Warsaw Pact with its Eastern European satellites.

Like many other people at the time, Shute believed that one of these conflicts would eventually lead to a full-scale nuclear war. The Cold War was considered over when the Berlin Wall collapsed on November 9, 1989. However, there is still a great concern over the use of nuclear weapons—as demonstrated by the nuclear testing done by India and Pakistan in 1998.

Critical Overview

On the Beach received mixed reviews when it was published in 1957. Most critical reaction focused on the antiwar theme. In a review published in a 1957 edition of the *Atlantic*, critic Edward Weeks wrote:

Only a very humane writer could have told a story as desolate as this and made it seem at once so close and implacable. The book held a kind of cobra fascination for me. I didn't want to keep looking, but I did to the end.

The eminent critic Edmund Fuller deemed *On the Beach* "[a]n austere, grim, moving, important book that could become real." Fuller asserted that Shute had skillfully written a suspenseful novel in spite of the fact that the reader knows how the book will end.

His success in this is manifest in the concern we feel for his characters; for concern, identification, and anguish—not surprise—are the essence of suspense.

However, it is those same characters that create problems for other critics. Several maintained that the characters are boring or unrealistic. For example, in a review published in the October 1957 edition of the *Canadian Forum*, critic Edith Fowke wrote:

Despite its powerful theme, Nevil Shute's book is a very bad novel. The people in it are dull and unimaginative, and the ending is anticlimactic rather than apocalyptic. In fact, his characters are so flat and unappealing that you may well feel their final death from the inevitable radioactive sickness is no great loss.

Several other critics suggested that the death of the characters in the novel is a relief. Of course, to be fair, more than one critic pointed out that the lives of the characters are deliberately portrayed as being average in an effort to make readers empathize. As for an anticlimactic ending, Shute foreshadows this on the title page of his novel with a quote from T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men":

In this last of meeting places / We grope together / And avoid speech / Gathered on this beach of the tumid river... / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper.

There has been very little critical attention for Shute's novel. As it is a dated work of popular fiction, there is little for scholars to study. However, it still attracts some interest as a cautionary fable. Perhaps the fairest assessment of the novel was written by Robert H. Estabrook in the August 12, 1957, issue of *The New Republic*: "*On the Beach* is not great literature, but it is not, either, a mere science fiction thriller... It falls, actually, into the category of an evangelical effort, in the form of a novel, to save the world from its own folly. Hence, its significance lies in the possibility that it might stimulate action through capturing the popular imagination..."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

*Don Akers is a freelance writer with an interest in literature. In the following essay, he compares Shute's fictional war scenario in *On the Beach* with historical events in the past several decades.*

While the literary merits of Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* may be debated, there is no doubt that he struck a nerve with the readers of popular fiction in 1957.

World War II concluded with the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the end of the most destructive war of the twentieth century signaled the beginning of a new conflict: the Cold War. After defeating Germany and Japan, the Soviet Union separated from its western allies. Winston Churchill coined the term "iron curtain" in a 1946 speech describing this separation. Tensions escalated between these former allies when the Soviets detonated their own nuclear bomb in 1949.

During the next decade, a variety of events intensified worry over world peace: the Korean War; the communist witch-hunts in the United States; and the launching of the Soviet satellite Sputnik the same year *On the Beach* was published. Shute was one of many observers who believed another regional conflict like the one in Korea could very well lead to a devastating nuclear confrontation between the superpowers.

The war scenario Shute created would have been impossible during the time frame in which he set his novel (the early sixties). Of course, today's readers have the benefit of hindsight, and some elements of Shute's scenario are still worth examining. Shute based his novel on the various political conflicts of his day. Some of these animosities still exist, but today's world is much different than it was in the 1950s. Fortunately, the threat of a nuclear war between the superpowers has abated. There are still, however, great concerns over nuclear proliferation.

At this point, a brief review of Shute's fictional war is necessary. The novel begins just after Christmas, 1962. The story of the thirty-seven-day war that takes place almost a year before the opening of the novel are revealed in the thoughts and conversations of the characters. There are many gaps in their understanding of the war; in fact, even military men Dwight Towers and Peter Holmes are bewildered by many of the events and why they happened.

Early in 1962, Albania dropped a nuclear bomb on Naples, Italy. Albania's behavior is never explained. In an apparently related event, an unidentified Arab country bombed Tel Aviv, igniting an Arab-Israeli conflict. Shortly after the bombing of Tel Aviv, American and British airplanes flew over Egypt in a show of force. The Egyptians then sent a force of thirteen bombers, all of them manufactured by Russia and identified as Russian aircraft, to bomb Washington, D.C. and London. One reached the United States and two made it to London.

NATO, believing that the Russians had bombed the United States and England, dropped bombs on several Russian cities before learning that the Egyptians were to blame. China, in an attempt to take advantage of Russia's war with NATO, dropped bombs on several Russian industrial cities. However, the Soviets had been planning an attack on China even before the war with NATO. They retaliated against China swiftly. Over 4700 nuclear bombs were used during the course of the war. Much of the world is destroyed and it is only a matter of time before the radioactive fall-out wipes out the remaining life on the planet.

One of the inaccuracies in Shute's scenario is in his overestimation of the rate of nuclear proliferation among the nations of the world. When Shute wrote the book in 1957, only the United States, Soviet Union, and Great Britain had detonated nuclear weapons. By 1962, when the war in the novel takes place, France was the only nation to join the nuclear powers. Thus, it would have been impossible for the rest of the countries in Shute's book to use a nuclear bomb.

As of 1999, the United States, Russia, Britain, France, China, and Israel are recognized as major nuclear powers. India and Pakistan recently joined the "nuclear club," although their delivery systems are not as advanced as the aforementioned nations. There are approximately thirty-six additional countries with some form of nuclear capability (Albania is not one of them).

While a nuclear clash between the superpowers may not be as likely as it was in Shute's era, there is as much concern about proliferation now than there ever was. The United States and its allies fear that various "rogue states," such as Iraq, Iran, Libya, and North Korea, may develop nuclear weapons and endanger the rest of the world with their instability.

Here, Shute may yet prove to be prescient. His characters do not blame the major powers for the start of the war. They blame the "Irresponsibles," meaning the smaller, unstable countries (such as Albania and Egypt in the novel), for beginning a war that quickly grew out of control. Today's readers can see a power-hungry dictator like Saddam Hussein in Iraq playing the role of an "Irresponsible."

As mentioned above, there is no explanation given for Albania's bombing of Italy in the novel. In 1957 Albania was a Warsaw Pact country. Albania strengthened its ties with the Soviet Union when Yugoslavia broke with Stalin in the late 1940s. One can only speculate on the Albanian bombing in the novel; perhaps it was in retaliation for Italy's invasion of the country in World War II.

Shute also connects the bombing of Naples with the bombing of Tel Aviv for some reason. Perhaps this was a show of support by an Arab country for the large Muslim population of Albania. Of course, there is no mystery as to why an Arab nation such as Egypt might have bombed Israel during the early sixties. Israel was not even a decade old when Shute published his novel. The new country was surrounded by enemies and, in 1956, Israel went to war with Egypt and captured the Gaza Strip on the Sinai.

Peninsula. Israel fought several wars with its Arab neighbors over the next three decades.

However, Israel and Egypt signed a historic peace treaty mediated by President Jimmy Carter on March 26, 1979. In the last decade, the world has watched with hope as the Israelis and Palestinians bargain for a lasting peace.

One of the most frightening elements of Shute's fictional war is the "accidental" bombing of Russia. NATO bombs the Soviet Union in retaliation for the bombing of Washington, D C. and London, when in fact the Egyptians are responsible. The mistakenly launched nuclear missile has been a plot element in several novels, including Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's *Fail-Safe* (1962), and films, such as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).

The idea is disturbing precisely because it is within the realm of possibility. After all, fallible human beings design and operate complex nuclear weapons systems. The men and women who make decisions regarding the use of these systems are not perfect. In fact, a web edition of *Scientific American* (November 1997) posted a chilling article detailing a very close call.

On January 25, 1995, Russian radar technicians picked up a troubling blip on their screens. A rocket had been launched somewhere off the coast of Norway. An American submarine could conceivably launch a rocket from that range capable of dropping eight nuclear bombs on Moscow within fifteen minutes. Boris Yeltsin was contacted immediately as the technicians tracked the trajectory of the rocket. Yeltsin was holding the electronic case that could fire Russian nuclear missiles in response. For the first time ever, that case was activated for emergency use:

For a few tense moments, the trajectory of the mysterious rocket remained unknown to the worried Russian officials. Anxiety mounted when the separation of multiple rocket stages created an impression of a possible attack by several missiles. But the radar crews continued to track their targets, and after about eight minutes (just a few minutes short of the procedural deadline to respond to an impending nuclear attack), senior military officials determined that the rocket was headed far out to sea and posed no threat to Russia. The unidentified rocket in this case turned out to be a U.S. scientific probe, sent up to investigate the northern lights. Weeks earlier the Norwegians had duly informed Russian officials of the launch from the offshore island of Andoya, but somehow word of the high-altitude experiment had not reached the right ears.

Although the circumstances of the "accident" in Shute's novel are quite different, the above account demonstrates the terrifying possibility of an accidental launching of nuclear missiles.

On the Beach also details an abominable concept in its description of the war between the Russians and the Chinese: radiological warfare. Rather than use their nuclear arsenals as defensive weapons, the two nations simultaneously plan to drop hydrogen bombs on each other in a strategic use of radiation.

First of all, as noted above, this would have been impossible in 1962 because the Chinese had not yet developed a bomb. Second, even though Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated after the death of Joseph Stalin, both countries were too involved in their own affairs to meddle with each other. Finally, it is hard to believe that either government would choose to follow such an insane path Sino-Soviet relations were normalized once again when Mikhail Gorbachev met Deng Xiaoping during a 1989 summit in Beijing.

In conclusion, the Cold War tensions that influenced the creation of a work like *On the Beach* are today virtually nonexistent. The world rejoiced when the symbol of communist oppression, the Berlin Wall, was brought down in November of 1989. Of course, even though a major conflict doesn't appear imminent, there are some potentially dangerous situations in various hot spots around the globe. The recent ethnic and religious hostilities in the Balkans serve as an example.

Shute's intent was to educate people on the madness of nuclear war. One would like to think that he accomplished his objective, but a recent vote in the U.S. Senate might indicate otherwise. Partisan conflict prevented the ratification of a worldwide nuclear test ban treaty. Certain U.S. senators might serve their constituents better if they were to read *On the Beach*.

Source: Don Akers, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

*In the following review LaFaille contrasts the book to Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*.*

Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, although certainly intended for a mainstream audience when it was first published in 1957, immediately attracted the attention of the science fiction community because of its brilliant and horrifying depiction of the end of human life after an atomic war. *On the Beach* begins in Melbourne, Australia, in 1963, one year after a limited exchange of atomic weapons between China and Russia resulted in a wider conflict between the superpowers, as well as a series of regional conflicts with further atomic warfare. The result of this cataclysm is that there are no outward signs of human life after an atomic war. *On the Beach* begins in Melbourne, Australia in 1963, one year after a limited exchange of atomic weapons between China and Russia resulted in a wider conflict between the superpowers, as well as a series of regional conflicts with further atomic warfare. The result of this cataclysm is that there are no outward signs of human life in the Northern Hemisphere, and all life appears to be dying as the radioactive fallout is swept further and further south toward Australia by the wind. The impact of this approaching death on the increasingly restricted lives of the people of Australia over the course of the next year is admirably chronicled in *On the Beach*, but the focus of the novel is on the interaction of American naval officer Dwight Towers and Australian naval officer Peter Holmes, as well as on their friends and families. Towers, commander of the nuclear submarine *U.S.S. Scorpion*, which had been forced to travel to Australia in order to survive the holocaust, has left his family in America, where by now everyone is certainly dead. Holmes is the father of a new baby; his wife cannot fathom the finality of the approaching doom. Thrown together by the demands of this emergency and the need to work together in order to have a purpose in life, each struggles to maintain his sanity and values in a society that is slowly losing its grip on what is normal ..

Despite the possibility of becoming a hysterical work, as did Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, *On the Beach* never succumbs to that level, maintaining the narrative thread of an unrelenting fate even in the most tearful of situations. Women of the 1990s may be offended by the limited and stereotypical roles for women in this work, but *On the Beach* accurately reflects 1950s society. Moreover, it is the message that is important, and that message is as powerful after thirty-five years as when it was written. *On the Beach* is mesmerizing in its intensity, and almost impossible to put down once begun. This is very highly recommended for grade nine to adult collections in school and public libraries.

Source: Gene ^LaFaille, review of *On the Beach*, in *Wilson Library Bulletin*, Vol 66, No. 10, 1992, p. 131

Critical Essay #3

*In the essay below, Smith discusses how Shute came to write *On the Beach*, noting the author's progress from optimism to pessimism and back again before, during, and after the novel's writing.*

Saturday, November 6th. The blast at Am-chitka had gone off six hours before, generating loud only knows what Shockwaves in the Pacific, not to mention concerned comments on the eleven o'clock news. The news ended, and the first of the late movies began: Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach*, based upon Nevil Shute's novel.

An epiphany! That movie of all movies on that night of all nights. The first important film treatment of nuclear holocaust, it premiered all around the world just thirteen years ago last November. I sat through it to the bitter end—everyone dead and a banner flying across the screen THERE'S STILL TIME, BROTHER.

Thirteen years. And we're still playing with our devil toys. Is there really still time, brother, before the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper? The newscaster made a cute allusion to Eliot's lines, but I'm not being cute here, for Shute's novel took its title and epigraph from "The Hollow Men":

In this last meeting place We grope together And avoid speech

Gathered on this beach of the tumid river. .. *This is the way the world ends ..*

Feeling on the beach myself, I sit down to tell you the story of how Nevil Shute, a most unlikely pacifist, came to write what is probably the most famous and best-selling antibomb novel of, as the expression goes, all time.

Oddly enough, I discovered the genesis of *On the Beach* with the help of a federal agency (no, not the CIA). It all started right in the middle of the campus unrest following the first of our annual territorial extensions of the Vietnam war, and during a period when I was having most grave doubts about the wisdom of ever having anything further to do with our government. It was then that I was co-opted most sinisterly via a travel and research grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Why had my soul, I wondered, suddenly become so valuable? So it came to pass that I found myself bestowed in the National Library of Australia, there charged with somehow making a "wider application of humanistic knowledge and insights to the general public interest". Luckily, I discovered letters and notes, some on the back of the proverbial envelope, tracing the growth of *On the Beach*. And therein lies the story of an engineer and novelist who suddenly came to the realization that the technology he had espoused all his life might not after all be capable of creating an earthly paradise.

An earthly paradise—Shute took pride in the fact that he used the money from the only prize he won at Oxford to buy a slide rule and a copy of William Morris' *The Earthly Paradise*. But he quickly forgot his Morris. From the end of the First War to the outbreak

of the Second, he was an aeronautical engineer. After a very responsible position in England's disastrous rigid-airship program in the twenties, he became a founder and managing director of an aviation firm that helped develop a number of technologies (in-flight refueling, for one) that would make air warfare the tremendous success it is. In 1939, angered by the shortsightedness of air-raid planning for the coming war, he wrote a very accurate description of the impact of bombing on the civilian population of England. The book was a great popular hit but somehow missed pointing out that dropping bombs on people was, well, immoral. And during the war he headed the engineering staff for a secret Admiralty department charged with developing clever ways of dispatching the Boche. Chief among his toys was a gigantic flame-thrower for knocking down low-flying planes. Ultimately impractical, the flamethrower scheme gave him the idea for a novel in which the heroes have lots of fun squirting *dirty* burning oil on Germans in order to kill and maim them in a particularly nasty way meant to impress the dispirited French. Oh, noble aspirations of man. Oh, William Morris.

How did this man of the machine, this author of twenty-odd romantic potboilers, decide to write *the* classic story of the end of the world? The answer, very simply, is that he didn't decide any such thing, that he set out quite cheerfully to write a kind of Australian Swiss Family Robinson about civilization carrying on Down Under after the big war Up Above.

It was exactly the same thing that happened to Mark Twain when he started *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*: let's think of all the funny and wonderful things that could happen to a clever Yankee thrown back to the sixth century. Poor Twain, he set his Yankees in motion, and before he could stop him, Hank Morgan had machine-gunned, dynamited, and electrocuted thirty thousand knights—and found himself surrounded, trapped, and doomed by a pile of rotting corpses. What a paradigm of total war was there! So with Shute, as we will see.

The idea for *On the Beach* "started as a joke", Shute wrote a friend. "Now that I was living in Australia I kidded my friends in the northern hemisphere, telling them that if they weren't careful with atomic explosions they'd destroy themselves and we Australians would inherit the world". "The idea stayed in my mind in that form for about a year, in a slightly cynical or humorous form", he wrote an interviewer; but when research on the subject showed him that Australia would not escape a general doom but would only have a one-year reprieve, "it became an attractive speculation—what would ordinary people in my part of the world do with that year"? An *attractive* speculation. How Mark Twain must have smiled when his friends who roam through the world seeking the ruin of souls told him about that one. Behold, he who builds attractive speculations upon the misery of others shall be cast down.

The casting down of Nevil Shute began even before he started writing *On the Beach*. In mid-1954, while the idea for the book was still in its cynical form, he spent six weeks visiting West Australian oil-exploration sites. If civilization was to flourish in oil-poor Australia in the absence of the northern nations, a large part of the drama would be found in the discovery of native oil resources. It would be an exciting story, the kind he had been telling since his first Australian novel, *A Town Like Alice* (1950). At about the

time he started research for the after-the-war book, he gushed to an interviewer that Australia "is a country with everything before it. It's what's called an expanding economy. Every time you drive along the road to town you see a new factory going up. It gives you a kind of kick to see that".

But within a year of the trip to the would-be oil fields, he had written his dreariest, most static novel, *Beyond the Black Stump*, in which an American oil-survey team finds no oil, in which the Australian heroine forsakes her family's remote sheep ranch for the bright America she discovers in the *Saturday Evening Post* and returns disillusioned to her starting point. Never had he written such a book; the sense of movement and change and expansion that had marked his earlier books was suddenly aborted and would soon be followed by that almost motionless story of waiting for the end of mankind.

"When I was a student I was taught that engineering was 'the art of directing the great sources of Power in Nature to the use and convenience of man '" Shute had operated throughout his professional life on that principle, but something had made him change: perhaps it was the result of thinking about the abuse of those great sources of Power in Nature that had made nuclear catastrophe a constant threat. But there is no way of knowing how the change came about—among the piles of notes and letters, no external clue to the internal process that darkened him, convinced him of a universal fate.

On the Beach envisions a world done in by gadgets, but a world that still loves the gadgets which have destroyed and will outlast their markers and quondam masters. The best example is the cataclysmic auto race that comes late in the novel. Round and round the track goes mankind, concerned only with proving that one machine is faster than another, concerned more with the efficiency of the machine than the safety of the men who use them or worship them. Shute was not mocking man, only explaining how things are. In fact, he bought a brand new Jaguar XK 140 when he started writing *On the Beach* and raced it himself in order to write about racing in the novel—or that was his excuse. From beginning to end, the novel is suffused with man's love for his creations: the scientist who carefully prepares his Ferrari for eternal storage before taking a suicide pill in the driver's seat; the captain who takes his submarine out to sea and sinks it, crew and all, rather than leave it behind "unprotected". Best of all, the book's last sentence: back on the beach a young woman watches the submarine disappear, then takes her pills, "swallowing them down with a mouthful of brandy, sitting behind the wheel of the big car". Drug, drink, car: the best the world has to offer. No criticism intended.

Ah, Amchitka. We don't intend to *use* our bombs, you understand. We just want to see if they will work.

On the Beach's message, if any, is that the human race was a nice try. Unfortunately, it worked too well, trundling down the path until it found a way to destroy itself. This is not the novel of an angry man or even an anxious man, but of a man who has seen the possibilities and accepted them. Mankind endures in obedience only, making its appointed rounds, going about its business as usual, indulging in that hobgoblin of little

minds (for the average human mind *is* little): consistency. Once a thousand rockets have been launched by mistake, why not launch the rest?

The novel's obvious sincerity has kept it alive, and so has its versatility. It has been praised by pacifists, theologians, philosophers, political scientists—and now crops up on environmental reading lists. Indeed, it was probably the first important fictional study of ecological disaster. The Australian heroine rejects her fate as unfair, for "No one in the Southern Hemisphere ever dropped a bomb .. We had nothing to do with it. Why should we have to die because other countries nine or ten thousand miles away from us wanted to have a war"? Having discovered Spaceship Earth for himself, Shute probably did more than any other writer of the fifties to make a large audience understand that men must suffer equally the results of what they do at home or allow to happen far away. Moreover, the novel's stoicism and objectivity left the burden for feeling on the reader, made it clear that the author didn't care one way or another how his audience reacted. After all, "It's not the end of the world", says Shute's alter ego, the auto-racing scientist. "It's only the end of us. The world will go on just the same, only we shan't be in it. I daresay it will get along all right without us".

Another writer talented at looking at the future, Philip Wylie, suggested that *On the Beach* "ought to be compulsory reading at the Pentagon, West Point, Annapolis. Ike should set aside his western and puzzle his way through it". When I came across a letter from John Kennedy, then a senator, thanking Shute's American publishers for sending him a copy of the novel, I wondered for a minute whether he would have dared the Cuban Missile Crisis had he read *On the Beach*. Then I came back to reality: presidents don't need novelists to tell them what can happen—they already know, or are supposed to. No, Shute was talking to the ordinary reader, the man charged with the extraordinary responsibility of telling his politicians what to do. And when I read John Kennedy's letter, I suddenly remembered that 1962, the year Shute chose for Armageddon, was also the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis. And if the reader in 1973 quivers a bit when he remembers that Shute's Russian-Chinese war grew out of Arab-Israeli conflict, then Shute's little time bomb is still lethal.

Exactly a hundred years before Shute's doomsday, Henry Adams made his own prediction in a letter to his brother: "Man has mounted science, and is now run away with. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world".

Is there really still time, brother?

Critical Essay #4

Shute finished his novel in late 1956. In November, 1959, the month he saw Kramer's film, he began the story of a miraculous birth in the Australian wilderness, an epiphany witnessed by "three wise men" bearing a series of gifts that sound like a return to the wishful thinking that preceded the writing of *On the Beach*: the gifts of oil to Australia through known coal deposits, of water by magnetic distillation, of defense against radioactivity. In other words, self-sufficiency in industry and agriculture combined with protection from the follies of the rest of the world—all sanctified through an implied or explicit Second Coming. He had recovered the optimism that the creation of *On the Beach* had robbed him of. He never lived to finish the novel, but died two months later while Kramer's film was premiering all around the world. It was almost as though he had been struck down before he had a chance to undercut his own last testament to the world.

Source: Julian Smith, "On the Beach at Arachitka. The Conversion of Nevil Shute," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 72, 1973, pp 22-28

Adaptations

On the Beach was adapted as a film by John Paxton in 1959. This critically acclaimed film version was directed by Stanley Kramer and features an all-star cast, including Gregory Peck as Dwight Towers, Ava Gardner as Moira Davidson, Anthony Perkins as Peter Holmes, and Fred Astaire as Julian (John in the novel) Osborne. It is available on videotape and DVD.

There is also a 1989 audiotope version of the novel, read by James Smillie, available from Chivers Audio Books.

A television movie version is currently in production, scheduled for broadcast in 2000. Australians Bryan Brown (Osborne) and Rachel Ward (Moira Davidson) are featured.

Topics for Further Study

Study the anti-nuclear movements of the past several decades. Who were the leaders of these movements? Were they successful in their efforts? What effects have nuclear accidents at power plants, such as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, had on these movements?

In one passage of *On the Beach*, Towers and Moira go to a museum to view paintings influenced by the devastation of the nuclear holocaust. Using whatever media you wish (pencils, paint, collage, video, etc), make your own "statement" about nuclear warfare.

Several of the characters in *On the Beach* spend their last days fulfilling lifelong dreams. Os-borne races his car in the Grand Prix, Mary works on her garden, and Sir Douglas Froude attempts to drink thousands of bottles of port. Write an essay describing what you would do if you had only six months left to live.

Create a timeline for the novel. How fast does radiation spread? Does the novel accurately portray what would happen in a nuclear war? How would the world's weather patterns impact the spread of radiation? Illustrate your timeline by using maps.

Watch the film version of *On the Beach* and compare it to the novel. You might also watch other films dealing with nuclear warfare, such as *Testament* and *The Day After*, and compare them to *On the Beach*.

Compare and Contrast

1954: The United States launches the first nuclear-powered submarine, the *U.S.S. Nautilus*. In 1958 the *Nautilus* becomes the first ship to cross the North Pole.

Today: The U.S. Navy operates approximately eighty nuclear submarines. However, reductions in defense budgeting target the latest class of nuclear attack sub, the Seawolf. Originally, the government planned to build thirty of the two-billion-dollar subs; this number was reduced to three.

1957: On October 4, the Soviets launch Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, into orbit. This signals the beginning of the space race between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Today: The U. S. space program continues to dominate space exploration. Plans are implemented to explore the surface of Mars and groundbreaking information is gathered from the Hubble telescope.

1957: Australia remains close to its Western allies Prime Minister Robert Menzies strives to attract U.S. and European investment in the country. However, the nation's growing independence from Great Britain is symbolized by the change in its monetary unit from the British pound to the dollar in 1966. Australia begins to consider itself as an Asian nation

Today: Despite its increasingly Asian identity, the people of Australia vote against a parliamentary referendum to become a republic.

1961: American forces secretly invade Cuba on April 17 to quash Fidel Castro's communist government. The Bay of Pigs invasion, as it was known, is a disaster. The 1500 troops led by the CIA are forced to retreat One year later, President John F. Kennedy forces the Soviets to remove nuclear missiles from Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The United States agrees to remove its missiles from Greece and Turkey in return.

Today: Fidel Castro remains in power in Cuba. However, Castro attempts to improve his country's image by allowing Pope John Paul II to visit in 1998 and by hosting the Ibero-American summit in November, 1999

What Do I Read Next?

For those interested in other novels by Nevil Shute, his most popular work is probably *A Town Like Alice* (1950). It chronicles Jean Paget's experiences during World War II in Malaya and her subsequent life in the Australian outback.

Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959) is an American novel about the survivors of a nuclear war living in Florida. A loafer named Randy Bragg turns into a leader after a bomb is dropped on Miami.

Russell Hoban's 1980 novel, *Riddley Walker*, is set in England thousands of years in the future after a nuclear war wipes out most of the life on the planet. It relates the story of a young man's life in a neo-barbarian society. The novel is notable because of Hoban's clever use of language.

The Making of the Atom Bomb (1986), written by Richard Rhodes, is an in-depth history of the development of the atom bomb. The book won several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award.

Australia: A Traveler's Literary Companion (1998) is a collection of stories by some of Australia's most celebrated writers, including Peter Carey, Robert Drewe, and aboriginal writers Oodgeroo and Kabul Oodgeroo Noonuccal. The stories present vivid portraits of Australian culture and society.

Key Questions

Ever since its publication, *On the Beach* has been one of the most discussed books in America, as well as in other countries. At first its appeal was primarily topical: Americans were practicing air-raid drills in case of nuclear attack; their schoolchildren were learning to duck under their desks should a nuclear bomb be dropped nearby; and building bomb shelters was a booming business, becoming urgent as the Soviet Union swept Eastern European countries into its empire and China invaded Tibet and after that, India. By the late 1950s, the book had become a fundamental cultural reference — something someone could merely refer to by title and reasonably expect his listener to know exactly what he meant. It also came to be regarded as a kind of prophesy — a prediction of what might happen even to the best of people if the world's nuclear powers went to war, as well as a statement of the moral responsibility of those nuclear powers, since everyone, regardless of whether he or she was part of the war, would be killed horribly. The novel's sentimentality, with its portraits of people preparing gardens that would never bloom and of someone fishing where all the fish were dead, made it a favorite reading in the 1960s, one that captured the imaginations of young people when it became standard reading in America's schools. From then until now, the book has had renewed life with each succeeding generation of readers, each finding its portrait of people as helplessly struggling to maintain their humanity against a technological outrage to be appealing in its addressing an almost universal fear that modern civilization's technology has not only grown beyond human control but additionally, diminishes the value of human life.

In spite of the general belief (or hope) that the Cold War has ended, *On the Beach* retains its ability to move, frighten, and uplift readers. A modern discussion group should have little trouble stirring up a vigorous debate.

Is Shute's vision of a dying humanity realistic? Would people actually behave as he suggests? Are their sensibilities too English — and thus not representative of how people of other cultures might behave? Does the sentimentality take off the edge of the tragedy — and might this be good? Is the book prophetic?

The description of the great radioactive cloud sounds very much like the "nuclear winter" theory of a prolonged night created by dust blasted into the atmosphere by a nuclear war — a theory first expressed about three decades after publication of *On the Beach*. Was there anything the last human beings alive could have done besides surrender to the encroaching radiation?

Should they have fought harder to stay alive? Could anyone find the will for such a fight in light of the calamity that had taken the lives of billions of people? Since the novel moralizes, the implications of its tale could be taken personally by members of the discussion group — what is one's moral responsibility to prevent nuclear war; what would one's moral responsibility be after a nuclear war? If one is looking for a novel that can stir passions and create a discussion that could well be remembered for a lifetime, *On the Beach* would be an excellent choice.



1. The present-day world is a considerably different place politically from the tension-charged Cold War that generated *On the Beach*. What can you tell about the Cold War from the novel? What are the political and military concerns that have replaced those of then projected 1963 in the novel?
 2. How is the world, or for that matter, society different now from the 1963 world of the novel?
 3. What differences can you see between American society and the Australian society of the novel? How is the American captain, Commander Towers, made to seem different from the Australians he comes in contact with?
 4. How do the Australians and Americans in the novel cope with the imminent end of human life on Earth?
- Is there any substantial difference in the way the two nationalities prepare for the end?
5. Is the way the characters prepare for the end of the world a believable one? Is the behavior of Commander Towers believable, especially in regard to his wife and children?

Robert D. Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

The theme of the end of the world was explored in Whitley Streiber and James W. Kunetka's *Warday* (1984). In *Warday*, however, the human race does not come to an end; the Soviet Union and the United States have pulverized each other, and both countries are at the point of disintegration (we see mostly the U.S. perspective).

Similar, though, is the matter-of-fact reportage of occurrences too enormous to easily contemplate. *Fail-Safe*, by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler (1962), also recounts in a calm, yet chilling, tone the effects of a nuclear confrontation gone out of control.

Farnham's Freehold (1964), by Robert A. Heinlein, although considerably different in story line, still raises the idea that control and social cohesion may be the only things that will get mankind through such an occurrence as a nuclear apocalypse.

There are numerous novels that deal with the end of the world by nuclear holocaust, but most of them take place prior to the millennium and seek to avert it. Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon* (1959) is the story of survival after the bomb has been dropped. When a defective missile causes World War III and American cities have been annihilated, a small town in central Florida is propelled into a primitive existence, cut off from the world that has also been devastated. The novel portrays human beings numbed by catastrophe but still driven by the unconquerable determination to cling to life. This ending stands in contrast to the resignation toward death in *On the Beach*.

Further Study

Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb*, Simon & Schuster, 1995, 731 p

The sequel to his Pulitzer Prize-winning history *The Making of the Atom Bomb* (1986)

Nevil Shute, *Slide Rule The Autobiography of an Engineer*, Morrow, 1954, 254 p

Shute's autobiography chronicles his experiences as an engineer and a writer

Julian Smith, *Nevil Shute*, Twayne, 1976, 166 p

Smith provides the only critical biography of Nevil Shute Although this book is no longer in print, it is available in its entirety on the web at <http://www.cha-neover.com/shutebw/>.

H. A Taylor, *Airspeed Aircraft since 1931*, Putnam, 1970, 206 p.

Recounts the history of Shute's aircraft company.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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