

Science Fiction Book Club

Interview with Amy Binns (October 2019)

Dr Amy Binns is a senior journalism lecturer at the University of Central Lancashire. Her most recent work is a biography of the science fiction author John Wyndham, "Hidden Wyndham: Life, Love, Letters".

John Grayshaw: Why do you think that Wyndham is not the “household name” that other comparable authors of the time are?

In the 1950s, Wyndham did something extraordinary – he made science fiction mainstream. He took it out of the exclusive preserve of adolescent boys (all those girls in zippered spacesuits) and took it to a wider audience. Chocky first appeared in both *Amazing Stories* and a women’s magazine. But because of that he kind of fell between two stools at the time and has continued to do so. Sci-fi experts don’t really touch him because he “deserted” the genre, whilst for the literati, he is science fiction, not “literature”.

Barry Turner: How did it come about [your research] as I've often toyed with investigating the life of much under-rated Welsh sci-fi whizz L.P. Davies?

It started with me wondering who this sparky woman was who appeared in several Wyndham books. I felt sure she was a real person. Wikipedia just said he married an old friend late in life. I didn’t quite believe that was all there was to it... then a few google searches later I discovered the Wyndham archive was only an hour’s drive away in Liverpool, with 350 undigitised love letters to his future wife. I couldn’t resist....

John Grayshaw: What did you research for the biography? Did you have access to Wyndham's personal papers, Manuscripts, Correspondence?

The Wyndham archive included his correspondence with various publishers, agents, a few fans, plus hundreds of letters and poems to his girlfriend. It also has many unpublished short stories (some of these are incomplete) and versions of manuscripts, and some audio tapes sent to his brother. His brother’s archive is there too, with some interesting material about their lives together.

There are still a few people who remember him, so I did some interviews and went down to the school, Bedales, which had such an impact on his life and ideals.

Eva Sable: Was there anything about Wyndham's life or work that you were genuinely surprised to learn?

I was amazed to find how close he was to the intense fighting in Normandy. I don’t know much military history, so I had few preconceptions or background knowledge when I read his letters to Grace, which came at roughly week or two/three week intervals. He talks about missing her, the food, pottering around in campsites with the other men etc, his struggles with his conscience. Of course he can’t say much about his work because of the censorship. It was only when I started investigating where his unit was in between those letters, and reading the Times newspaper reports, that I realized he was one of

the units surrounding the Falaise Pocket, where thousands of German soldiers were trapped and killed. The stench was so bad, pilots flying over were nauseated by it.

John Grayshaw: What were some of the most interesting things you've found in your research of Wyndham?

His war experiences, above, but also his extraordinary childhood. His family were involved in a very strange court case, which meant a lot of personal details about his parents' marriage were written up in newspapers now available online. His mother left his awful father (who routinely groped the servants) and went back to her wealthy family. His father then attempted to sue his in-laws for "custody, control and society of his wife and children".

John Grayshaw: What are the funniest things you've found in your research of Wyndham?

His family were so awful they were kind of funny. His mother and brother barely worked through their lives, they just existed on family money and charm.

He also wrote one serial about a trip to Mars, Planet Plane, with a young woman heroine (Penguin now sells it as *Stowaway to Mars*). It was sold as a serial in *American*, then in the UK to a boy's magazine called *Modern Wonder*. They changed the heroine Joan to a hero John in the first instalments – apparently they hadn't read to the end. Joan falls in love with a Martian and gets pregnant. John Wyndham got a frantic appeal for a re-written last chapter.

John Grayshaw: What were some of the challenges you had researching and writing the biography?

Well, I have a day job and two kids, so I suppose combining them all is one challenge! But actually, it's been a joy. I really miss it. I miss Wyndham himself. He was such a nice guy, and despite his difficulties things turned out well for him, so I loved living inside his life. I am wandering vaguely around the house at weekends, bored and fretful, not sure what to do with myself.

Martin Dudley: What was your decision process about imagining and describing scenes from his life, rather than just "reporting"? I must admit it put me off a bit.

It was a difficult decision as I am a journalist by trade, not a fiction writer. Most of the book is straight biography. I imagined scenes twice: prologues to part one and part three. Part Two starts with the letter he wrote the day war was announced.

I re-wrote the first chapter at least a dozen times. I do believe his experience of his parents' difficult marriage was a major influence on his life, so I wanted to give a lot of detail about their differing backgrounds, how they met, how their relationship developed. But then the first chapter of the biography about John Wyndham was barely about John Wyndham!

The scene with the sherry drinking was so bizarre and cruel that it had to be a significant part. It's so indicative of both his father's manipulateness and his mother's ineffectual behaviour. I didn't want to just bury it somewhere in the first chapter – but there are only a few lines in Viv's memoirs about it.

So then I started thinking about looking at the situation from his point of view... we as adult readers can make judgements about what is going on, but we see only what he sees. This made the start of the book firmly about Wyndham. In film terms, he's right there centre stage in the opening scene.

I took inspiration from master biographer Claire Tomalin, who regularly does this – starts with a bold attention grabbing scene and extrapolates. This allowed me to “picture the scene” and then take the rest of the chapter in a more conventional biographical form.

I did the same thing at the start of Part Three for more or less the same reason. Essentially, the book – and Wyndham's life – is starting again. So we set the scene again.

John Grayshaw: Why did Wyndham use “John Wyndham” after the war when he published Triffids? He had been using other names previously. Did he see it as an opportunity for a sort of rebirth?

Yes, definitely. He felt his previous bylines were seen as dated and belonging to the pulps. He was quite old as a writer – 48 when the Triffids came out – and he wanted a fresh start.

John Grayshaw: Who are some of the writers that influenced Wyndham?

The big one was HG Wells, he read his books at one of his boarding schools. But he also admired John Collier. He read hugely. He bought 1984 the day it came out and thought it brilliant.

John Grayshaw: What was his relationship with Fred Pohl like?

He liked Pohl very much and was friends with him for a very long time. It was Pohl who sold the Day of the Triffids to Collier's, which was really the making of Wyndham. Pohl's life was very dramatic and chaotic compared to Wyndham's, and he failed to pay over quite a lot of money for years – Pohl had all kinds of financial difficulties. But Wyndham never fell out with him about it. He turned down offers from other agents and stuck with Pohl until Pohl decided to give up being an agent.

John Grayshaw: Was he friends with other science fiction writers?

Yes, many, but he was a very genial acquaintance and drinking buddy rather than a friend. He used to go most Thursday evenings before and after the war to a pub which was taken over once a week as a sort of magazine swap market. Lots of sci fi writers and editors went. Arthur C. Clarke wrote a series of tall stories which he supposedly heard there in Tales from the White Hart. Wyndham features in it.

John Grayshaw: Did he have favorites of his works?

I would love to know, but I don't. He spent a very long time over Chocky, his last book, and I think maybe it was closest to his heart. But he was disappointed with everything he wrote. Even of Chocky he wrote: “But nothing happens!”.

Francois Leblanc: So I've never read any Windham yet. When I meet authors at cons I ask them this: "Look, I don't have time to read every book by every science fiction author so if I were to read just one book by you which one would you want it to be?" In this case I can't ask him so I'm asking you what you think his answer would be.

I don't know which his favourite was. But if you want just a tiny taste, I would try this, Dumb Martian, from Galaxy. It's a satire on racism, and about the slavery of marriage.

<https://archive.org/details/galaxymagazine-1952-07/page/n49>

John Grayshaw: What are some of your other favorites of his novels and/or short stories?

My own favourite novel is the Chrysalids. It astonished me when I first read it; I had no background information so it took me ages to work out that it was a post-nuclear dystopia. Essentially I learned at the same rate as the hero, which I think is the best way to read a novel. Favourite short stories: I probably like the lighter ones: Chronoclasm with the magnificently self-centred heroine, Stitch in Time, Una (Perfect Creature). Survival horrified me but I could quote whole chunks.

John Grayshaw: What are some of his works that aren't as well known today, but deserve to be?

I guess his novels are remembered at the expense of his short stories, which are fantastic. Not much hard sci-fi, just brilliantly funny, perceptive tales. There are still three anthologies in print. They are all good but I think Seeds of Time is my favourite.

John Grayshaw: What movie adaptations of Wyndham's work would you like to see?

The Chrysalids. It is my favourite Wyndham and it has never been filmed.

John Grayshaw: What did Wyndham think of the 60's movie version of Triffids?

He thought it was better than he had expected, which is a bit "damning with faint praise". He went to see it with his friends and said at least there weren't any "horse laughs" from the audience when the triffids loomed on screen. He was VERY modest. I don't think he saw his own work as being that important or likely to be remembered, so he wasn't particularly precious about what other people did with it. He was just pretty glad of the money after so many years' struggle.

John Grayshaw: What did Wyndham think of the 60's movie version of Midwich Cuckoos? And what do you think he would have thought of the 90's version?

He thought the Village of the Damned was amazingly well done. He had thought it unfilmable because of the numbers of doubles required, so he was very impressed with the film-makers solutions. I don't know what he would have thought of the 90s versions.

John Grayshaw: What were some of Wyndham's hobbies other than writing?

He loved to tinker – converting a stove top kettle into an electric kettle for example, modifying a reel-to-reel tape recorder, making a lovely leather case for a gadget. When he was at war in France he wrote about making a guitar out of a bit of fencing, and it turning into a ukulele because he couldn't find the right wire. Stuff like that.

John Grayshaw: Did he have a writing routine that he stuck with?

Yes, he was pretty disciplined. When he was at his friend's house in Steep, he would write through the morning into early afternoon, then break off. He used both a typewriter and longhand. The typewriter is in the Liverpool archive.

John Grayshaw: What do you feel is his legacy?

He was a big part of the movement towards human-centred science fiction – what he preferred to call speculative fiction. He made science fiction inclusive, instead of being for a little club of aficionados. He made a huge number of people think about the consequences of the world that was being created – that vital “what if?” question. He was a major influence on Margaret Atwood and Alex Garland.