

dear colleagues,
this talk is to introduce, or perhaps re-introduce, the author John Wyndham. he is known chiefly for his works of fantasy or science fiction; he has been in my mind since the beginning of the pandemic, because he has a gift for introducing his stories by describing a setting of pleasant, ordinary scenes of daily life. the terrifying Thing manifests itself gradually, and people are slow to realise what is happening ... i can think of no other writer who is able to create this kind of calm prelude to disaster. i am going to talk about *The Kraken Wakes*, probably one of his best-known. 1953, reprint penguin 1976.

in the spring of 2020, as the pandemic took hold, people talked of the Black Death ... and i was thinking that the young people of the *Decameron* were lucky their exile lasted only ten days. had it gone on for eighteen months, just think what a huge volume of stories there would have been!
but i felt, as no doubt many did, that our smiling english countryside was somehow poisoned with menace - remember what a beautiful spring we had?

on another topic that urgently concerns the world today:
at the end of *The Kraken Wakes*, the story is frighteningly like predictions of what will happen as climate change takes hold and the waters rise all over the world. one thing that will happen, as we know, is panic-buying (it does in the book)!
there may, for all i know, be a conspiracy theory out there that we should be blaming the kraken and not mankind's own stupidity.
you first heard it here!

the scene, at the beginning of the section called Phase Three, is chilling: the narrator and his wife try to win through to cornwall in a tiny boat, but they fail. this short and understated account, given without prior explanation, is later extended into the final part of the story.

conspiracy theories also feature in this book, dished up by our couple's friend tony: she embodies all conceivable tabloid rubbish in her talk.
however, my talk is not about what wyndham thinks of our modern civilization; i am focusing on the book as fantasy not as science fiction.

let me begin with the legend, although i'll not attempt to trace every mention of the kraken in english (let alone world) culture.
as far as i can discover, the monster called kraken was thought to be malicious and aggressive. it attacked ships at sea in the form of an enormous squid, big enough to wrap its arms around the vessel and drag it into the deep. it belonged to northern folklore, and goes back to the thirteenth century (or earlier).
given the prediction of water-levels rising, as a result of polar ice melting, that i mentioned earlier, i can't resist adding the names of two sea-monsters, found in the late-thirteenth century version of the Old Icelandic Saga: `hafgufa', perhaps to be identified with the kraken, means `sea-fog', and this is how the phenomenon manifests itself in the book - the mysterious deep-sea menace succeeds in multiplying and then melting ice-bergs, resulting in great blankets of fog.

the other one, 'lyngbakr' may be identified with a giant whale, and one cannot help remembering Tolkien's Fastitocalon - which is hostile - as well as Brendan the navigator's friendly whale-island.

it is interesting to note that Tennyson's kraken is dormant; it will arise only if warmed by 'the latter fire', and come to the surface only to roar and die. there is no suggestion that it will attack mankind.

there are any number of sea-monsters in literature, and i'm sure they have all been thoroughly studied. but before i go on, i will just mention Kipling's sea-monster, in his story A Matter of Fact: here the creature is thrown up by a volcanic eruption, and dies under the sorrowing gaze of its mate. on the ship, the narrator and his journalist colleagues watch incredulously. the story is so fantastic it cannot be sent to the newspapers; it can be published only if it is recast as fiction, which is what Kipling as narrator does with it.

the other thing Kipling does, is to make us feel overwhelmingly sad at the sight of its terrible death.

his story has been admired as a precursor of English science fiction.

[in Many Inventions]

we are not supposed to feel sorry for the kraken in Clash of the Titans, however! some of you may be familiar with Natalie Haynes, in which she Stands Up for the Classics? her programme is much to be recommended; Clash of the Titans is a film she favours, introducing her talk on Medusa with enthusiastic references to it, in spite of the way it unblushingly rewrites Greek mythology.

for a start, there was never a titan called kraken! nobody has suggested that Oceanus, one of the twelve titans according to Hesiod, was called kraken.

in the film, kraken is said to be the last of the titans ... my point is that Jupiter orders the kraken to be released, so as to punish the heroine's mother for blasphemy against the gods. but here, luckily, Perseus is at hand with the head of Medusa, to turn the monster to stone.

are the gods (whether Greek or Roman) releasing the kraken, in Wyndham's novel, to punish the presumption of mankind? judging by the author's ferocious satire on world politics (Jupiter), propaganda (Mercury), and military establishments (Mars), the answer may be yes.

it is interesting that not only Mars but also Jupiter are mentioned or invoked by the characters; and - perhaps significantly - Diana, just before the narrator's wife Phyllis herself is attacked.

Dr Bocker, whom Phyllis calls her 'favourite ologist', is almost the only sympathetic scientist (or authority figure, come to that); he suggests at one point that the planet Neptune - or, god of the sea - is the most likely source of the invasion.

the name kraken is never used of the creature or creatures.

the opening scene of the novel introduces us to the narrator and his wife, an affectionate couple who tease each other and instantly endear themselves to the reader.

at the beginning of Phase One, Phyllis says 'Mars is looking pretty angry tonight, isn't he?'

but even before this ominous moment, phyllis and nick are looking back and discussing how they are going to write the book. phyllis cites an imaginary author whose lines (from the 'pink nursery book') she would use as her epigraph:

But Mother, please tell me, what can those things be

That crawl up stealthily out of the sea?

this nursery lore sounds just about as suitable for small children as edward gorey's wuggly ump, or struwwelpeter.

given the terrible things that are going to crawl up out of the sea in the novel, i'm definitely with phyllis on this one; but nick wins the argument: tennyson's poem, not the nursery book, prefaces Phase One as the story begins.

phyllis is definitely the brains of the outfit, and her vision - and visions - must be wyndham's own. both husband and wife are highly intelligent and cultured, so it is not surprising that any number of literary references are scattered through the book, mostly in their conversation. nick is much teased because of his name, which is watson; we are indirectly reminded that conan doyle wrote fantasy novels - including a story about Marie Celeste (which is several times mentioned, among other aquatic mysteries such as the loch ness monster).

given the situation, it's to be expected that these references are to figures such as King Canute, Cassandra, and T S Eliot (the world ends ... not with a bang but a whimper). Ex Africa semper aliquid novi is from Pliny the Elder, probably based on a Greek saying. Jules Verne is here, and so are Somerset Maugham on life in the tropics, and the fictional Hornblower, as well as Coleridge's sacred river and kipling's Recessional. religion gets the briefest look-in, as somebody is likened to Elijah, the invaders are pronounced to be devils, and the kraken is identified with Leviathan. but wyndham seems to have his work cut out describing the antics of the establishment all over the world, and his side-swipe barely mentions the antics of what he - or rather, nick - calls 'the more classically-minded citizens'.

the 'science' aspect of this book, considered as science fiction, is about the exploration of deep oceans in search of the menace and hypotheses about its identity; different strategies are attempted to protect ships, defend the coasts, attack the invader. the end happens off-stage, as it were, when phyl and nick learn that a successful weapon has at last been developed and deployed, so that human life on earth can begin to rebuild itself.

much academic ink has been spilt over the question of genre, and deciding whether this book is science fiction or fantasy is in my opinion not important - because i read it as fantasy! many of the greatest works of 'science fiction' have at least one powerful myth underlying their story. wyndham has invoked a fantastic supporting fabric of literature and legend to create a classic novel out of what would otherwise be a tale of stark horror.