



The Death of Grass

John Christopher, Robert Macfarlane (Introduction)

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The Chung-Li virus has devastated Asia, wiping out the rice crop and leaving riots and mass starvation in its wake. The rest of the world looks on with concern, though safe in the expectation that a counter-virus will be developed any day. Then Chung-Li mutates and spreads. Wheat, barley, oats, rye: no grass crop is safe, and global famine threatens.

In Britain, where green fields are fast turning brown, the Government lies to its citizens, devising secret plans to preserve the lives of a few at the expense of the many.

Getting wind of what's in store, John Custance and his family decide they must abandon their London home to head for the sanctuary of his brother's farm in a remote northern valley.

And so they begin the long trek across a country fast descending into barbarism, where the law of the gun prevails, and the civilized values they once took for granted become the price they must pay if they are to survive.

The Death of Grass Details

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From Reader Review The Death of Grass for online ebook

Mark says

A number of people have remarked at this novel's similarity to the novels of John Wyndham and I would agree up to a point. I have always loved the novels of Wyndham and all his chilling elements run rife here. That sense of 'Good grief, this could happen if such and such took place'. The disaster arising out of ordinary lives, the horrifying realization that this is happening to people who are only divided from me by a few decades, that it is therefore my society which is being torn apart not some foreign land or fantasy kingdom or distant planet or parallel universe, not orcs or vampires or superthugs or talking bears but normal, ordinary, happy, sad, whiney, moaney brits.

The arrogant dismissal by the powers that be of the virus which is killing off all the grasses of the world and therefore plummeting the whole of the planet into starvation and vicious life and death struggles is a very apposite and relevant one as our world inevitably has to face up to if not the imminent disaster of vegetation extinction then at least the reality of growing populations and the provision of adequate food and water. Thus as I read this book I was continually hearing distant echoes of questions being asked by our societies but not being answered. Of Governments of the world sticking their collective finger into the dam whilst new cracks and dangerous bulges signalled their appearance. It is a sobering book because it made me think not so much about the brutal nature of humanity losing its slight veneer of goodness and nobility in a future disaster but rather because it made me ask myself why do I not say more about the already massive difference in the scales of wealth and poverty, surfeit or absence.

The cold and unemotional account of a society's collapse into anarchy and ruin is extraordinary and the swift onset of marauding bands of brutalized murderers and petrified travellers is believable up to a point. However my difficulty was that Christopher appeared to equate might with right. Wyndham's characters fight for survival and kill when attacked, John Custance, Christopher's hero, leaps into violence and never seems to try to put a brake on it. The violence is constant and seemingly unthinking and I cannot help but wonder how those who make it through to their sanctuary will ever be able to step back from what they have done.

Wyndham's stories are about men and women fighting for survival in a hostile environment but ever keeping their eyes on the longed for prize of victory which restores humanity to a place of truth perhaps challenged and sobered but still recognizably caring and compassionate for the vulnerable. Christopher's human tribe has cast off not just suburban respectability but any semblance of collective responsibility for the weak or needy. Innocents are snuffed out simply because they live in a farm house, brash oafs and unfaithful wives haven't a hope. At one point one of the young boys collapses with an horrific blister having hobbled bravely for far longer than he ought without telling anyone. His reasoning when asked was 'If I couldn't walk - I thought you might leave me'. The irony of this statement is he is the son of the only couple who come out of the story with, it seems to me, the best chance of moving on into a new life where they will still be able to sleep.

The 'hero' is a complex and unattractive character but I think it is his wife who I find the most difficult to fathom. She encounters appalling hardship and suffering and some of her actions are perfectly understandable in their context but it is her reactions in the closing pages of the novel which I found most peculiar. Her mood changes and suddenly from nowhere she appears as a pale imitation of Lady Macbeth, not exactly egging on but justifying and standardizing the violence and refusing to take the responsibility for herself or her husband which might have signalled some sort of redemption.

The sequel, now that would be a book worth reading. The questions left unanswered in this story were too huge to be left unanswered. The leaders of this little band who had fought its way through to this sanctuary was far too bloodsoaked and had made far too many horrifying decisions or at least assumptions to be able to sink into rest and stability. The violence and bloodshed are a ticking bomb and it remains only superficially buried in the Cumbrian valley and it is this which negates Christopher's story and moves it to a 3.5 rather than a 4.

The book made me think and question and cringe and sharply breathe in and in a novel purporting to be exciting that cannot be bad. Violence and tyranny, questions of responsibility and the implications of leadership, the balance of Nature and the arrogance of misplaced science and human limitation. All good stuff and all wrapped up in a very exciting narrative. Well worth a read.

ps. Another character called Skelton. Adds to the shelf

Nikki says

There's a sense in which all post-apocalyptic novels feel the same. In all of them, we see society collapsing, torn apart by the pressure of finding a way to survive. The Death of Grass is no different, but it's very well written and well structured. There's a Chekhov's gun or two, a good structure which takes us from calm gentility to the feudal need to survive terrifyingly believably, terribly fast. It's horrible, but you can understand the characters, understand their decisions.

And if you can read it and say with assurance that you'd never even think of doing those things, I think you're probably lying to yourself. Personally, I doubt I'm capable of such ruthlessness, but I can't swear I wouldn't allow someone else -- say, my father -- to do it for me. It's easy to wring your hands and call your protector a tyrant, but not so easy to walk away from that protection.

So, yeah, well-written and definitely worth a read if post-apocalypse worlds or human nature are your interest.

Tfitoby says

The world-famous novel of the ultimate famine!

The Death of Grass by John Christopher

My rating: 4 of 5 stars

Essential Must-Read Seemingly Forgotten Dystopian Classic

Blurb: *The Death of Grass* is an entirely original kind of science-fiction - it is not about space-travel, time-travel, or mechanical men. It recounts the terrifying changes on the face of the earth when the balance of nature is upset - and it takes place not in the future but now.

The characters are middle class people who live serenely until the grass begins to die - upon which their personalities begin imperceptibly to change with the changes that creep over the landscape. The fearful national policies and immediate personal dangers they are faced with are horrible in their impact, and in the dangerous obstacle race for safety (and for life itself) the reader feels himself to be personally and desperately involved.

Thoughts: Recommended to me by the Goodreads recommendations engine during one of the brief periods when it was working, I was initially drawn to the wonderful premise of a simple "what if" science fiction question, namely in this case "what if a virus kills all forms of grass worldwide?" Grass meaning wheat et al not just the wonderful stuff used as a playing surface for **tennis, cricket and croquet**. It's a premise that would also later go on to form the basis of the brilliant award winning dystopian post-(post?)-cyberpunk thriller *The Windup Girl*.

But this is very definitely a post-atomic approach towards the genre, with a message that could be picked up by Greenpeace and hippies the world over even today and used as a warning against the way we are destroying our planet. **This novel recounts the terrifying changes on the face of the earth when the balance of nature is upset - not at some nebulous date in the future but right now** or the now of 1956 at least. Perhaps a re-issue from Al Gore on 200% recycled paper is required?

The story starts off with a global disaster and slowly becomes more and more personal, with a denouement focussing on one barricaded village and a handful of people. The characters are normal people, described in the blurb as middle class, with peaceful lives until the virus begins to take hold and food becomes scarce. In the beginning they make a point of being proud of the British attitude towards hardship, the famous Dunkirk spirit etc, but the predicament slowly changes all of them in irrevocable ways. They must undertake a journey of ever increasing hardships as society falls apart thanks to weak governments (things haven't changed much since 1956 huh?) and the panic of the masses leading to riots (as seen in London just last year but with the desire for new shoes and TVs replaced by a need for food.) And as a reader you can't help but take the journey alongside them thanks to the quality of the writing. Sure it's easy to judge these people for the decisions they make but there's a power at work in Christopher's writing that puts you in the band of survivors and suddenly it's harder to disagree with the man leading you to safety.

I'm not sure how much it actually helped me to enjoy the book but *Brief Encounter* is one of my favourite movies of all time, being able to imagine Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson as the protagonist Johnny and his wife Ann was an excellent bonus, even if just as a way to understand the speech patterns peculiar to the British middle classes of the era.

It's easy to imagine the stark landscape shorn of all grass, not least because of the volume of post-apocalyptic movies that have been released in recent years. *The Book of Eli* has an overall colour tone perfectly suited to a grass-free planet but features human atrocities in explicit detail, something Christopher only hints at in this book. It's much better for that too, bad things happen but the prose only really "arrives" in the aftermath and studies the reactions of these ordinary decent people to extraordinary events.

I'm left thinking about *The Road* and how bleak it was, John Christopher comes close but without being so overt and rubbing your well-fed, happy face in to it. In comparison you don't need to feel bad for being content and living a peaceful existence after putting this book down.

Powerful, thought provoking stuff, despite its content a highly enjoyable read and at under 200 pages not bloated, not rushed but perfectly paced. **I give this book my highest recommendation.** And shall finish with a transcription from the blurb on the front of my beautiful 1st edition Penguin:

An unusual and absorbing piece of science-fiction about the relentless transformation of England when the balance of nature is upset.

'The Death of Grass sticks with commendable perserverance to the surface of the earth we know...John Christopher has constructed an unusually dramatic and exciting tale.' **DAILY MAIL**

Originally posted at blahblahblahgay

Petra X says

Another post-apocalyptic novel. The story is always the same, some agent, natural, military or even supernatural, causes the end of civilization-as-we-know-it. People in the know have stockpiled supplies, guns and a remote place that is hopefully impregnable by the starving hoardes. There is always at least one person with some technical knowledge. Finer feelings disappear, violence, theft, rape reappear. Men dominate, women cook. In the group the book identities as heroes, they are always disturbed and sad, at least at first, that they have to kill, the hoardes are much more ruthless and always include one or two people, usually girls who will defect to 'our' side. The man with technical knowledge is killed.

The story always ends with the group now much enlarged, being led by a 'decent' man who will elect a committee to run things in the tribe. They will plant, chop, spin with their own hands and look to build a future through living in the traditional way. There is a feeling of hope that the purity of this life will lead to a better future.

If the plot and main characters are always the same, the only real difference can be the writing - how the characters are drawn, the weight given to various elements of the story, how the writer can lead from one element to the next with some feeling of surprise rather than inevitability. There are no real surprises in these stories and therein lies the problem - the ending is likely to be disappointing because it's more or less the same one in every book.

I enjoyed this book, the apocalyptic factor a virus that kills all grass and cereal crops was quite a good one, but there is no getting away from it, there was nothing original about it at all. So three stars, a good read.

Martin Belcher says

This is the "grandfather" of post apocalyptic novels, written in 1956, it tells of an environmental disaster which seems all to real and just as relevant now as it may have seemed in a different post second world war 1950's world. A virus which attacks all strains of grasses (grass, wheat, barley, rye) begins to ravage Asia there seems no cure to it. First wave hits China and South East Asia hard, wiping out all grasses including rice, mass food shortages and panic and riots take hold ending in massive populations dying. A smug Europe

looks down on it all thinking it can not happen to them but the following Spring it arrives and takes hold. Britain circums fast causing massive food shortages, rioting and anarchy on the streets. John Custance and his family battle their way out of London heading for his brother, David's small holding situated in a geographically isolated valley in the remote hills of Northern England. David had prepared for what was coming and erected a stockade and ripped up his wheat crops and planted potatoes instead. Can John and his family and a group of individuals following him reach the farm before chaos overtakes the land? A brilliant read, fast (at just under 200 pages) quite tense and shocking in places and definitely a novel before its time. Highly recommended.

Rebecca McNutt says

This book offers a frightening prospect, as well as an eye-opening view of human nature and a post-apocalyptic environment. *The Death of Grass* was well-written, vivid and haunting, with complex characters and a strange, original plot.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"Pity always was a luxury. It's all right if the tragedy's a comfortable distance away--if you can watch it from a seat in the cinema. It's different when you find it on your doorstep--on every doorstep."

Red Rice Field

It was called the Chung-Li Virus and first appeared by destroying the rice crops in China.

"That is too bad, those poor Chinese."

"What did you think of the coffee today wasn't it bold? It is from somewhere in Africa. We'll have to get more of that."

"I hear the Americans are sending some cargo ships of food to China."

"Terrible about the rioting and the killing. I've heard as many as two million are dead already."

"So are we still on for tennis tomorrow?"

"You don't suppose that problem in China is going to become an issue for us?"

"The Americans say they have a line on it. Hopefully the whole frightful mess will be cleared up by spring."

"What did you think of that kid from Liverpool last night? That goal he made was nearly impossible."

"A long time ago. I came to the understanding that all men are friends by convenience and enemies by choice."

When the grass turns brown you might think to yourself...damn my lawn looks like crap quickly followed by

woohoo no more mowing...followed by wait don't cows eat grass?...followed by, but I like cheeseburgers.

Of course as the landscape continues to turn brown you might start to become more educated about grass. It isn't just the green stuff we cultivate all summer. In my case, due to frequent drought I water, cut, water, cut (sort of ridiculous if one gave it much thought), and I do this because green grass looks pretty. Grass happens to also be the stuff we eat. Rice, Wheat, Barley, and Corn all evolved from grass. Humans found these tiny seeds tasty. Instead of slogging all over the place and finding them by chance they decided to start growing these grains closer to where they lived. They kept the sweetest tasting kernels to plant the next year, slowly evolving each crop into the best grain to fit their palates. These grasses were not having to fight for survival any more. They had convinced humans to be their caretakers.

It was a fiendish plot of survival that worked extremely well.

Now there is a city girl getting prepared.

Eventually this all leads to more and more people having time to do other things instead of spending all day trying to find something to eat. This brings us to John and David, grandsons of a farmer. In the not so distant past both boys would have been needed on the farm. In fact it would have been helpful if their mother had conceived a brood instead of a duo. In 1956 only one is needed on the farm, and the other is allowed to pursue his dreams in London as an engineer.

The grass turns brown all over England and suddenly China isn't this distant land with terrible problems. It is now on England's doorstep. All the staple crops turn brown. Civilization, so carefully conceived from our brilliant nurturing of our food supply, teeters, and falls practically overnight. The powers-that-be, governments, police, elected officials only have power as long as we let them. Suddenly everyone is a government of one.

A grass virus is very, very bad.

So who do you save?

John has an ace in the hole. He still has direct ties to a farm. His brother David will take him and his family in, but who else? To reach the farm, John is going to need friends and form alliances with people he doesn't know. He is going to have to make choices about who he will save and who he can not. He will have to do things he never even in his darkest nightmares ever thought he would have to do. As he amasses more and more people who turn out to be essential for actually achieving his goal of reaching the farm he is creating a new problem.

Too many mouths to feed.

So who do you save?

Wheat Field

I was watching this show the other day about this guy who bought this old cold war missile silo in the middle of Kansas. He has built a premium self-sufficient shelter against the next insert name disaster. He is selling suites of rooms in this structure for \$2million each. He has a fence. He has state of the art filtration system.

He has retired navy seals. He has hydroponics, but you better like fish...a lot. I came away with two questions.

First how are these A-Listers going to make it to Kansas to survive the next plague? This book explores that very concept and it turned out to be an excellent choice of reading after seeing this show.

Two, I personally am not sure that I want to survive the next epic disaster. Surviving for what? And what will I be forced to do to survive? Who will I become to survive?

Civilization, as creaky as it seems at times, is a wonderful, wonderful thing.

So when you shell out \$2million for your deluxe apartment underground in Kansas you can bring nine people with you. If you really want to scare yourself sometime sit down and put together your list. Think about all the people you care about and also the people that you feel could be essential to your future survival. Weight and measure all of them and for just a moment play **GOD**.

Who do you save? Maybe the person you don't save is yourself.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>
I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Bark says

This was a little bit of a slow starter but once I could see where things were heading every sentence was laden with a sense of dread and impending doom.

A widow leaves a dreary London behind and returns to her girlhood home along with her sons. She is anxious to reunite and repair her strained relationship with her dad and share the joy of a hillside surrounded by lush green pasture with her boys.

25 years later John has taken to life in the city and fathered two children; David has devoted his life to the farm and remained a bachelor. All seems idyllic but then they start speaking of the rabbit plagues in Australia and a virus attacking rice crops in Hong Kong and millions starving and resorting to cannibalism. When David removes a patch of pesky rice grass and discovers it is diseased things start to take on bleak outlook and he tells John to return to the farm before things get desperate. John returns to his life in the city unwisely waiting far too long as things begin to take a turn towards the bleak.

Thus begins a nicely detailed onset of the apocalypse and a tale of greed, morality and the breakdown of civilization. The most disturbing thing about this story was just how quickly the darker instincts bubbled to the surface of the characters when they were faced with their own mortality and forced to protect those they loved.

This book focuses strongly on the breakdown of society and it is effectively chilling in its portrayal of the desperation for all involved. It truly is survival of the fittest and gets pretty brutal, pretty quickly. Our stubborn city boy is now on a road trip through hell with his young family and some friends, picking up guns and stragglers to strengthen their numbers and attempt to find safe haven. But, really, will anywhere be safe?

This was very disturbing read considering the background for this apocalypse, that it affects major food systems and that when the story takes place half the food consumed was imported from other countries. It would be so simple to have a food breakdown nowadays. How many of us are even somewhat self-sufficient? Where would we begin?

Some of the most blood chilling quotes for me:

“Things will be hard, but it may not be a bad life. It will be up to us what we make of it. At least, we shall be our masters. It will no longer be a matter of living on the sufferance of a State that cheats and bullies and swindles its citizens and, at last, when they become a burden, murders them.”

“The country’s food position is desperate. No more grain, meat, foodstuffs of any kind, are being sent from overseas. We have nothing to eat but what we can grow out of our own soil, or fish from our own coasts.”

Shudder, I don’t want to ponder on this too long when I should be building my chicken coop out back!

Erin says

This was not good. This was, in fact, dreadful. The writing was crap, the characters were all unlikable, it was racist and misogynist, and the plot was incredibly boring. That's right, a book about people trying to survive an apocalypse was *boring*.

So, I guess, good job on that, John Christopher. You wrote a shitty, boring book about an apocalypse, which is kind of difficult to do.

ETA: I think what makes me the most angry about this book is that there are plenty of ways to write about how thin the veneer of civilization is and how quickly man would turn to monster in the event of a worldwide food shortage and facing imminent starvation. There are plenty of ways to show a person making that descent. And everyone told me this book was a classic so I was really excited to read it!

And he managed to take all of those interesting things and suck all of the interesting out of them to make it a dry, boring, incredibly shitty book. It could have been *so good*. And it just wasn't.

Stephen says

It's a depressing **sack of sadness** that this **exceptional** post-apocalyptic story is not more widely read...**534 ratings** as of the time of this review...a **travesty**. I'm going to try and spread some **love** and hopefully find this wonderful book some more friends with whom to spend the holidays.

The **central theme** of the novel: How delicate and fragile is the veneer of civilization and how quickly the survival instinct can subdue, handcuff and gag the better angels of our nature.

Written in the 1950's, this novel contains one of the starkest depictions I've encountered of the rapid breakdown and collapse of societal norms and common decency in the wake of a global catastrophe. It's

portrayal of people struggling to survive in the aftermath of a world-wide calamity is exemplary and worthy of being granted status up with the big boys of the genre like *Earth Abides* and *Alas, Babylon*.

PLOT INTRO:

A virus originating in China attacks and destroys all grain-based crops. This includes everything from wheat, barley, rye, rice and all forms of grass (hence the appropriate title for this story). Despite the ~~best~~ ~~mostly~~ ~~best~~ efforts of the world's nations, no viable counter-virus can be produced and it quickly mutates and spreads to blanket the globe. What follows is a brief period (from the story narrative standpoint) of extreme (and often brutal) measures on the part of the fragile governments which include rationing, martial law and, finally, forced population reductions (i.e., mass executions). Eventually, the food scarcity becomes too pronounced and governmental control completely breaks down...

...this is where the proverbial **Cah Cah** bangs into the fan and things get serious.

The above all happens within the first 50 pages of the novel and provides the reader with a chance to get to know the main characters, John Custance and his friend Roger Buckley, together with their respective families. We get to see them in "normal" times and then as they witness the fall of civilization which allows us to peg them as good, decent people...just like us. This ability to relate to them makes the events they subsequently endure and, more importantly, their actions and decisions in response to such events, significantly more impactful and emotionally affecting to the reader.

THOUGHTS:

As mentioned above, the central premise of the story is to how our decency is fragile and quickly becomes burdensome baggage that we unload when faced with extreme circumstances. Put another way, the novel's heart is showing us how quickly we rationalize losing the ability to use ours. *The Death of Grass* deeply unsettled me with how plausibly it portrayed this rapid ripping away of the layers of kindness, compassion and empathy from seemingly normal people once day-to-day survival becomes the primary motivator.

John Christopher's ability to authentically show this brutal and unvarnished view of humanity is what makes this story so effective and sets it apart from other books of its type. Despite the heinous and despicable actions of previously "good" individuals, I never found myself having "that couldn't happen" thoughts as I read. That is what I found most unnerving.

At one point in the story, our survivors invade a home and kill a mother and father in front of their child in order to steal their food. I was watching these people that I previously related to suddenly thrust into situations where they would do something like that and I was confronted with that horrible hypothetical mirror questioning me saying "What would you do?"

This book left my emotions chapped and longing for something cozy and happy to replenish my parched faith in humanity. I can't call this a "fun" read, but it is superbly written and a memorable experience.

4.0 stars. **HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!!**

Simon says

I don't know who it was that said we're only ever three meals away from revolution but this book brings that phrase to life by showing that, no matter how civilized we think we are, however stable our society seems to be, we are never that far away from barbarity.

This book may have been more aptly named had it been called "The Death of Civilization". Yes, a virus does emerge that attacks all forms of grass and spreads virulently across the globe defying mankind's attempts to halt it in its tracks but really that is just a vehicle for the author's exploration of how quickly and completely civilization might collapse and how completely previously mild natured and morally scrupulous people may be forced to change.

At the start I could not help but compare John Christopher to John Wyndham as another British writer writing about 1950's Britain facing apocalypse and focusing on middle class protagonists. But as the story developed, a clear difference began to emerge. Wyndham has been accused of writing "cosy catastrophes" and this story is anything but. Horrible and harsh things happen to the protagonists that are quickly forced to set aside their qualms in order to survive. It is one thing to deliberate on rights and wrongs and genteel behaviour when one is far removed the threat of annihilation. Although they agonise over whether the ends justify the means, they are forced to confront the fact that only those that say they do have a chance of being around to discuss it afterwards.

A short novel at less than 200 pages but it doesn't feel rushed. I felt it was perfectly paced in fact. The narrative style felt a little dry and stuffy initially but no longer felt that way when the story really took off. Not far short of being a masterpiece in my opinion.

Mark says

The republishing in the UK of this classic, long out of print, is an unexpectedly good read, though its content is very, very bleak. Now perhaps in these days of global warming, Asian bird flu and genetically modified crops, it is perhaps time for a revaluation.

The story begins with the announcement of a virus, the Chung-Li virus, appearing in Asia wiping out grass and members of the grass family species. Though the announcements are made, little change is noticeable to John Custance and his family in London. Food supplies still appear from the British colonies and life pretty much goes on as normal with a slight tightening of belts and that British philosophy of 'making do'. But then, when the virus appears in England, it is realised that the extent of the problems in Asia have not been fully explained. The consequential breaking down of society leads to John being involved in a struggle to escape to safety, to his brothers' farm in the Lake District.

Reading this book was a shock. Originally published at about the same time as John Wyndham's much more famous novel, *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Death of Grass* looks at similar catastrophic themes to Wyndham, but with a much bleaker outcome.

Strangely, though over 50 years old, I found that many of the themes are prescient to today's society, the reliance on other countries for food, the 'carry on as normal against adversity' attitude, though there are important differences. There are, perhaps less surprisingly, elements of the novel that are in tune with the society of the 1950's yet strikingly out of step with today. Perhaps most anachronistic is the role of women portrayed here, with the female characters very much taking a backseat whilst the men sort things out. It is a surprise what Christopher managed to pass by the publishers in the straight-laced context of the day, however. Rape is implied here, though without too much detail, unlike the surprises of murder, revenge killing and mercy killing reflected here. The book is shockingly logical and cold in its portrayal of such horrific events and that makes its effects so much the more effective.

But before we get too carried away in emphasising the book's prescience, there are places that bring us down to earth and remind us that this is a product of half-a-century ago. Because this book's context is the England of the 1950's, there are societal differences that remind us that there are differences between now and then. Most obviously, communication is not what it is today. In *Death of Grass*, people predominantly listen to the radio for information, rather than watch the television. Perhaps more noticeably different, radio news broadcasts by the BBC are trusted by the masses (at least initially) as logical, sensible and unbiased. (How different from some of the views of today!)

Similarly, entertainment has clearly changed. In *Death of Grass*, it is a little jarring to find that an evening's jollity depends upon the middle classes playing bridge for entertainment rather than trawl the Internet, slump in front of the gogglebox or play on the Wii. On a wider scale, travelling between countries is more by boat than by aeroplane. Diplomacy between countries reflects this limitation in communication also. As the Cold War was distinctly chilly at this point, the problems are made worse by countries refusing to talk to each other until it is perhaps too late. (And perhaps that is another situation that has come around again to bite us.)

The book also reflects some of its contemporary concerns - a nation with its adults coming to terms in the aftermath of war, with the need for rationing accepted for the good of all suddenly reverting to a 'what's mine is mine' philosophy when the situation becomes critical.

What is perhaps most shocking is, once it does happen, how quickly normal life deteriorates. Within the space of days, the characters go from upright members of the middle-classes (civil servant, ex-military soldier) to civilians shooting policemen, doling justice to criminals and killing people who get in their way in their escape from the big city. This must have been an eye-opener in the disciplined 1950's.

Less convincing, though perhaps understandable in the context of the times, are the actions of the politicians in the tale. Clearly reflecting both the lure and the fear of technology in a globe firmly entrenched in a Cold War in the 1950's, the government's final solution is that in order to avoid the future horror of overpopulation (in the light of rapidly reducing food resources) they must order the atom bombing of Britain's big cities, so that the survivors have enough to live on/with. They also then, rather conveniently,

leave to set up a provisional government in Canada (not too far-fetched, that, as would the British government had the Germans invaded England in World War Two.) This seems a little too incredulous today, yet understandable when compared with the Australian rabbit-proof fence policy or the farming analogy of wiping out all traces of disease in order to ensure the survival of the main plant.

What struck me most about this book was that if elements of the book are shocking now, in the context of when it was first published, this must have been an appalling book. More than his contemporary John Wyndham's 'cosy catastrophe', this is a catastrophe clearly on the edge. Written in a lean style, pared to the bone, the story is exposed as even more shocking in its matter-of-fact delivery. There are no safe answers here, no truly happy ending, though the last words are weakly optimistic. What this book does is highlight to the reader of 2009 that, if nothing else, the breakdown of society it portrays is perhaps more relevant and more possible today.

On finishing the book, I realised that, if anything, we are less self-sufficient as a nation now than we were in the 1950's. And that is a frightening thought, in these days of global corporations and universal credit crunches.

Recommended: though easy to scorn fifty years on, *The Death of Grass* is a sharp reminder of how thought-provoking British 1950's SF could be.

Robert says

There's a good introduction in this edition that discusses, among other things, how this work compares with John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. In that analysis *Day off the Triffids* comes off badly.

The reason for the comparison is obvious: both are apocalyptic SF novels where plants are at the root of the problem (*Ducks flying rotting vegetables in response to that pun. Oops, another one slipped out...*) set in Britain by British authors writing in the same period of the 20th Century. The introduction is very dismissive of Wyndham's effort, basically because the book is more optimistic than Christopher's, which is unremittingly grim, right up to the last sentence. However, my feeling is that there is not much difference in their view points about what would happen in the case of the total break down of society; in Wyndham's case there just happens to be a place where that hasn't happened. The conversations characters have about women, work, education and marriage reherse exactly the same arguments and attitudes, but Wyndham's heroine has the most progressive attitude of any of the people in either book. She was a gal ahead of her time.

Where Christopher is more successful than Wyndham is in his basic scenario, plot construction and braver characterisation. The idea that a virus could wipe out all species of grass is a lot more plausible than that of herds of sentient, mobile plants on the loose...the journey to re-unite family and find a safe refuge in the face of national or world disaster is now the stock of an entire sub-genre of Hollywood films...but neither Wyndham, nor Hollywood (most of the time, anyway), takes as protagonist a man who is willing to consider

any action in order to save his family, or what real psychological pressures of that kind might do to him when he adopts a leadership role. This latter is what really makes *The Death of Grass* stand out - and what calls to mind *Lord of the Flies*. The difference there is that *Lord of the Flies* examines the process of establishing leadership by contrasting two characters; one the most likely to get everyone through their ordeal safely, the other, the naturally charismatic leader with a will to power. Christopher instead shows an evolution of character in his main protagonist from Piggy to Lead Choirboy (whose name I can't recall). (This analogy works in approximate terms, only.)

The book is well thought out, well constructed, well written, has a good ending and takes an interesting, not oft examined approach to moral questions that puts *me* in mind of Roger Zelazny's more extreme character arcs in *Jack of Shadows* and *Changeling* and...J.G. Ballard. It is perhaps this latter that makes me give *The Death of Grass* only three stars instead of four: I recently read *Rushing to Paradise*, which also examines the breakdown of society but is, somehow, a much more thrilling, frightening and gripping read.

Otherwyrd says

A disturbing and at times deeply depressing novel about how quickly the veneer of civilisation disappears when a catastrophe strikes. This book is widely regarded as a classic and is often compared with novels such as *Day of the Triffids* (which I read last year) and *Lord of the Flies* (which I really must get around to reading soon). However, I felt it also had a resonance with the recent film *Interstellar* - this is the part that the film never really got around to exploring, being too busy travelling in space and time (don't get me wrong, I **loved** the film). This then is the story of how our world dies and how we as people react to that death, given that we will likely die alongside that world.

The answer, according to this book, is not very well. While there is a slow build-up with the grass killing virus devastating the far east first, it takes a very short space of time when it hits the West (in the form of the UK) for our civilisation to collapse into murder, rape, looting and anarchy. Chief culprits seem to be our "heroic" band as they attempt to reach a possible safe haven, a farm in the Yorkshire Dales. There is a certain amount of racism in the first part of the book, as our end of Empire heroes criticise the less civilised countries (like China and India) who cannot beat the virus. This is wholly justified as it lays out in the latter parts of the book that we are no better than our yellow, brown and black cousins when it comes to eliminating a virus that kills the most important food crops on the planet, thus causing millions to starve to death.

The sexism in the novel is harder to stomach. Written as it is in the 1950s, women have yet to enjoy many of the freedoms of the sexual revolution in this story, yet even these limited freedoms are quickly swept away as people rapidly revert to a more primitive state of being, one which regards women as chattel. It might have helped if there was a strong female character to protest these changes more strongly, but the only woman who might have fit this bill, a sexually liberated woman is (view spoiler).

This is a book that I must have read as a young teenager though I can't remember any details about it, except one. In an idle moment, when thinking about a catastrophe befalling us and how I might survive, my mind tends to drift towards a farm in an isolated valley somewhere in the Northern fells, with steep cliffs all round and a narrow entrance that can easily be defended. It seems that this novel is where I got that image from, and it's a powerful one to have survived nearly 40 years in my mind.

Veeral says

How many pages are absolutely necessary to tell a gripping, frightening story? 50? 200? 400? 1200, in case your editor died? Editors are extinct anyways.

My favorite is the shortest science fiction story written by Fredric Brown called “The Knock”, only two sentences long and as it happens; has fewer words than this paragraph. Here it is, in its entirety:

“The last man on earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door....”

17 words. And yet it implies toward innumerable possibilities, each and every one of them terrifying. The deeper you think, the chillier it gets.

Of course, Fredric Brown explained his story.

The Death of Grass, even though just about 200 pages long, packs a real punch which it delivers right to the reader's gut. This is not one of your cozy catastrophes but is in fact the darkest, grimiest post-apocalyptic fiction you will ever come across. It's really sad that this book is not mentioned in the same vein as other grim PA books of the era and is generally ignored and forgotten.

Human empathy flourishes only as long as the civilization prevails. Once the norms are changed, only one thing matters – survival. At all costs. The book is unapologetic, brutal and devoid of any conscience. One thing you might have noticed in most PA fiction is that that despite facing myriad of odds, the protagonists remain self-conscious. Not in this case.

And that's what makes this book different and in some ways, better than other post-apocalyptic novels.

Read this work, ye mighty, and despair!

Lorenzo Berardi says

What? Only three stars?
Am I sure? Did I give this rating by mistake?

Yes, yes. And no, I'm afraid.

Don't get me wrong, folks.
For 'The Death of Grass' is a good novel. Well, actually a very good novel. And I do believe that you should give this book a chance and read through it from page 1 to page 194.

It won't take that long. You won't get bored. But, nonetheless...
Oh well, I don't want to spoil your expectations any longer.

This book was out of print for many years, but the Penguin fellows have recently reprinted it. In a paperback edition. With a fancy gloomy cover. And even a foreword.

So, what are you waiting for?
Go and get it.

See you later for the review.

Got it? Did you read it?
All very well.

Now, tell me, did you really like this?
Because I did and yet I did not.

Let me explain this, if you don't mind.

Unlike other British sci-fi novelists (Shiel, Wyndham), the author here does a good job investigating on the psychology of the main characters, wondering about the moral dilemmas they have to face when struggling for survival.

The novel does have a slow kick off, but then it starts rolling smoothly without unnecessary detours and with a clear goal to reach: an almost mythical dale.

An Eden valley protected by a well manned and gun-machined palisade where a less wild bunch of human beings is likely to survive starvation thanks to potatoes, beetroots and unlimited fresh water supply.

The road trip of our heroes from London to the north of England, where the dale is located is hard and bleak enough, but left me with the impression that John Christopher forgot some practical details.

Ok, all grasses belonging to the gramineae family are suddenly dead. The soil is bare and the land is brown. And yet, what happened to the fruit trees and to the wildberries?

The death of grass struck England on springtime, but the author never mentions the possibility that people could scrap a living from fruits and berries. Where have they gone?

Or am I the ignorant one who needs to check if fruit trees do after all belong to the gramineae family?

Then Christopher tells us that all trains stopped running. Again, why?
Does coal belong to the gramineae family too? Oh wait, I bet it's just a sign (and an effect) of the social turmoil bringing England to its knees. All the same, the train empasse hasn't quite convinced me.

And don't let me even start with the way the author treats women in this novel: backwardish even for the 1950s standards.

The fight for survival bits here are convincing enough and quite realistic in their basic roughness.
I can summarize Christopher's post-apocalyptic gatherings with a quotation from the movie 'A Fistful of Dollars':

"When a man with a .45 meets a man with a rifle, the man with a pistol will be a dead man".

Aw, Charlton Heston and his lot would have loved this.

Not that this fire armed philosophy happens to be very different in, say, 'The Road' by Cormac McCarthy.

At least Christopher's survivors are still able to speak proper English in all of its local and class variations. And, to me, that's a very strong point. Okay?

Olivia says

Great premise: grass dying and hence our food, and a famine leads to the unravelling of society. It's been compared to Lord of the Flies and just like with Lord of the Flies I wasn't a fan of the execution.

It's a male power fantasy. Once laws are a thing of the past, the man is in charge and can kill his wife then take a teenager as his new wife the next day. Okay?

Everyone suddenly felt the need to randomly (and unnecessarily) rape and kill. Basically over night. I do believe society can unravel in days but I do think average people would try and hold onto "being good" for a bit longer than this book suggests.

Jennifer says

I am so angry with this book. I was drawn into the story, the first half was probably some of the more terrifying end of the world stuff I have read. Leave it to the English and the whole stiff upper lip and tightening of the belts. THEN it changed. I get things were going to get rough. But I began to have some major issues with how things were proceeding. I kept trying to say, Jennifer it was published in the 50's, but that just didn't work. I could not forgive it. I shall list the reasons why.

(view spoiler)

Those are but a few reasons why I am angry. I don't care how good or important this is considered.

Marvin says

Very good post-apocalyptic novel that realistically depicts the break-down of society in the wake of a global disaster. In this 1956 obscure but classic sci-fi thriller, the breakdown is caused by a virus that annihilates all grasses on earth. But while civilization devolves into dog-eat-dog, I couldn't help thinking how our protagonists were so damn polite about it. Every time they took a savage reaction they would verbally explain it to others. I guess that's the British for you. But seriously, I think we would have a compulsion to explain ourselves even in the midst of catastrophe. After all, civilization may go down fast but it doesn't go down easy.

Nonetheless, this is one of the earlier and best of the 50s post-apocalyptic novels. highly recommended. Three and a half stars.

???? says

I really wanted to give this book 4 stars as I was reading it - I found it incredibly engrossing and the character and situation they find themselves in are pretty believable and amazing all at the same time.

However, like Day of the Triffids, this one left me cold at the end. Where is the proper ending to this book? Surely that couldn't just have been it! But it was and it made me sad and hoping for a sequel- I read this in a matter of hours and that's rare.

So the book follows John Custance as he deals with the Chung-Li virus as it begins destroying every type of grass in the world. He is able to escape with his family and a friend's family and they try to make it to the valley his brother lives in. Cause, you know, he has a farm and farm means food.

Anyway, lots happen on the way. Obviously John Christopher, the author, wants the reader to imagine a certain level of barbarity that ensues quite soon after the rumours of the virus come out. And the whole book deals with that. The more miles they cover on their walk to the valley, the more extreme that barbarity becomes. John Custance uses the valley to convince people to join his group - strength in numbers and all that - saying that the valley will be a way to civilise the children and keeping themselves civilised among all the barbarity of the future.

And my issue and why the book gets discounted 1 star is that, well, I'd like to see how they'd be able to civilise anyone after they themselves have been driven, on their walk to the valley, to commit the most heinous crime known to humanity - the killing of another human being. And in their isolated little valley, what would stop anyone from being so civilised that they go full circle and become barbarians - I'd like to note some world history here; so many countries conquered (read took and pillaged) continents and called themselves civilised for it.

A great, quick engrossing read, but in need of a sequel. For sure. But a good one.
