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Arthur C. Clarke - Childhood's End.pdf

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Childhood%27s_End

Childhood's End is a science fiction novel by Sir Arthur C. Clarke, dealing with the role of Mind in the cosmos and the plausible implications of that role for the evolution of the human race. It was originally published in 1953 but first appeared as a 1950 short story titled "Guardian Angel" in Famous Fantastic Mysteries magazine. The original publication is the novel after the prologue, Earth and the Overlords, with some different text in certain places. A new first chapter was substituted in 1990 when the Cold War ended, making the original version an achronistic. Editions since have appeared with the original opening or including both alternatives.

Plot Summary

Childhood's End explores humanity's transformation and integration with an interstellar "hive mind" or Overmind. It touches on such matters as cruelty to animals, man's inability to live in a utopian society, and the apocalyptic concept of "the last man on Earth."

The novel's 1953 edition begins at the height of the Cold War, with the United States and Soviet Union racing to launch nuclear-powered rockets into space for military domination, threatening global catastrophe. The arms race is halted when huge spaceships position themselves precisely above Earth's great cities. After a week of tension, the aliens, in a worldwide broadcast by Karellen, the "Supervisor for Earth," announce they are assuming supervision of international affairs to prevent humanity's extinction. As the Overlords, they bring peace, but humanity is no longer independent and is barred from such activities as space exploration.

Some humans are suspicious of the Overlords' benign intent, as they never appear physically. Karellen speaks directly only to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Rikki Stormgren, but always from behind a screen. To ease such suspicions, Karellen vows the Overlords will reveal themselves physically, after humanity has matured and become comfortable with their presence, in 50 years. Stormgren, curious about the Overlords' appearance, smuggles a device onto Karellen's ship to see behind the screen separating them; years later he tells a reporter the device failed, concealing that he did see Karellen but agreed that mankind was not prepared.

Under the Overlords' mild rule, humankind enters a golden age of peace and prosperity, at the expense of creativity and freedom. After 50 years, the Overlords appear in person; they resemble the traditional human folk image of demons â large bipeds with leathery wings, horns and tails. Their resemblance to the devil is generally attributed to some racial memory of an earlier, unsuccessful encounter. Having come to trust the Overlords' good intent and recognizing their positive influence on human affairs, humanity accepts them with little fear and, under their stewardship, creates a Utopian world.

The Overlords are interested in humans' experience of the occult and psychic research; humans suppose this is part of their anthropological study of mankind. Rupert Boyce, who owns the world's best collection of books on the subject, refuses an Overlord request to borrow them for study but allows one, Rashaverak, to study them at his home. To impress his friends with Rashaverak's presence, Boyce holds a party, during which Rashaverak watches an Ouija board seance. All the board's answers can be traced to knowledge in participants' minds, but when an engi

neer, Jan Rodricks, asks the identity of the Overlords' home star, the board reveals a star-catalog number. The seance transcription vanishes, but Rodricks memorized the number; its position closely agrees with the direction in which Overlord supply ships appear and disappear. He devises a plan to stow away on one.

Although humanity and the Overlords develop peaceful, even friendly relations, the ban on spaceship travel beyond Earth's moon causes some to believe human innovation and independence are being suppressed and that culture is becoming stagnant. These groups establish "New Athens," an island colony devoted to creative arts. One colonist is George Greggson, whose wife Jean had fainted during the seance. The Overlords develop an interest in their children, Jeffrey and Jennifer Anne, and secretly protect them, a fact revealed as the Overlords intervene to save Jeffrey's life when a tsunami strikes the island.

Sixty years after the Overlords' arrival, starting with the Greggson children in New Athens, human children begin to display telepathic and telekinetic powers and become estranged from their parents. Karellen reveals the Overlords' purpose: They serve the Overmind, a cosmic intelligence amalgamated from ancient galactic civilizations, freed from matter's limits. The Overlords, who cannot join the Overmind, are charged with fostering other species' eventual merger with it; if they can learn how to achieve the same transition, this will be their reward. Karellen expresses envy of humanity.

Karellen announces that, for the transformed children's safety, they will be segregated from adult humans on a continent of their own, for only they will be able to merge with the Overmind. As no more human children are born, many parents find their lives stripped of meaning, and die or commit suicide. On agreement by its members, New Athens is destroyed by a nuclear bomb.

Jan Rodricks, having stowed away on an Overlord supply ship, arrives on their home planet, which orbits a star of the Carina constellation 40 light-years from Earth. Rodricks knows of the relativistic twin paradox; the Overlords' ships travel at nearly the speed of light. The round-trip will take four months in his personal time-frame, but the elapsed Earth time at minimum will be 80 years. While on the planet, the Overlords permit Rodricks a glimpse of how the Overmind communicates with them.

When Rodricks returns to Earth, he finds an unexpectedly altered planet. Humanity as he had known it has died; he is now the last man alive. About 300 million naked young beings, physically human but otherwise having nothing in common with humans, remain on the quarantined continent. They are the final, physical form of human evolution before merger with the Overmind. All other life on their continent has been destroyed and the old cities are empty.

Some Overlords remain on Earth to study the children from a safe distance, and tell Rodricks that humanity is the fifth species they have supervised. When the evolved children mentally alter the Moon's rotation and make other planetary manipulations, it becomes too dangerous for the Overlords to remain; they offer Rodricks the option of leaving with them, but are pleased when he chooses to stay, witness Earth's end and transmit a report of what he sees.

After the Overlords leave Earth, Rodricks describes a burning column of energy or matter ascending from the planet, and a sense of profound emptiness as "They" depart for their unknown future. Earth's gravity decreases, the atmosphere escapes into space and material objects seem to dissolve. He reports no fear but a sense of accomplishment and completion, then a flash of light as the Earth evaporates, a metaphorical seed pod providing energy to the evolved beings. Mankind's offspring thus reach a higher existence, requiring neither body nor place; it is the end of humanity's childhood.

Karellen looks back at the receding Solar System, which shows no hint that one of its planets has disappeared. He gives a final salute to the individual humans he has known and to humanity as a whole. He ponders whether guiding them through their passage has edged his own species any nearer a similar advance, then turns away to await the Overmind's next order.

Similar themes in other literature

The idea of humanity reaching an end point through transformation to a higher form of existence is the main idea behind the concept of the Omega Point and of the technological singularity. The idea of self-transcendence also appealed to devotees of psychedelic mind expansion, and Tom Wolfe would offer a quote from the novel at the conclusion of his LSD-soaked memoir *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. It is also reminiscent of the belief held by some Christians in the "Rapture". The concept has been used in a number of science fiction works written since *Childhood's End*, the most famous being Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, based partially on a short story, "The Sentinel", by Sir Arthur C. Clarke. Other examples include *Blood Music*, *Darwin's Radio*, and its sequel *Darwin's Children* by Greg Bear, *Sideshow* by Sheri S. Tepper, the Vernor Vinge novels incorporating the "Singularity", the pre-1950s author Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* (1937), the sublimation which advanced civilizations may undergo in Iain M Banks' *Culture* novels, *Instrumentality* in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, and in Julian May's *Galactic Milieu Series*. David Brin refers to it as stepping off in his *Uplift Universe* novels. Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Galapagos* represents an antithesis of *Childhood's End*'s central theme; in Vonnegut's book, humanity evolves into an unintelligent species of aquatic mammals, albeit without the intervention of aliens.

Arthur C. Clarke said of Stapledon's 1930 book *Last and First Men* that "No other book had a greater influence on my life ... [It] and its successor *Star Maker* are the twin summits of [Stapledon's] literary career". Both of these books, along with *Odd John* share some similar themes with *Childhood's End*, such as mass minds and human evolution.

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Childhood's End, Unabridged By Arthur C. Clarke
Narrated by Eric Michael Summerer, Robert J. Sawyer

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Audiobook (Fiction)

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7 hrs and 47 mins

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Publisher's Summary

The Overlords appeared suddenly over every city - intellectually, technologically, and militarily superior to humankind. Benevolent, they made few demands: unif

y earth, eliminate poverty, and end war. With little rebellion, humankind agreed, and a golden age began.

But at what cost? With the advent of peace, man ceases to strive for creative greatness, and a malaise settles over the human race. To those who resist, it becomes evident that the Overlords have an agenda of their own.

As civilization approaches the crossroads, will the Overlords spell the end for humankind...or the beginning?

BONUS AUDIO: Includes an exclusive introduction by Hugo Award-winning author Robert J. Sawyer, who explains why this novel, written in the 1950s, is still relevant today.