



Trouble With Lichen

John Wyndham

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'Francis Saxover, a Cambridge scientist, hits on a discovery which, as he modestly remarks, is "in the megaton range". It is that SF favourite, an antidote to the old age, or "Antigerone", as its discoverer calls it, and it raises the expectation of life to between 200 and 300 years.

'But the lichen from which it is derived is scarce - only enough to preserve a few thousand people. Any announcement of the discovery would start a stampede like a gold-rush. So Saxover, in agonies of indecision, keeps his secret. But it is not his only. A former colleague has also discovered Antigerone...

'John Wyndham's marvellous sense of timing, as the story gathers way and then rushes headlong into its inconclusive but artistically valid conclusion, is a sheer delight' -
Michael Maxwell Scott in the *Daily Telegraph*

In short, there's as much trouble with lichen as there ever was with *Triffids*, *Chrysalids* or *Cuckoos*.

'If even a tenth of science fiction were as good, we should be in clover' - Kingsley Amis in the *Observer*

Trouble With Lichen Details

Date : Published 1963 by Penguin Books Ltd (first published 1960)

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Author : John Wyndham

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From Reader Review Trouble With Lichen for online ebook

Arielle Walker says

3.5

I'm fast becoming a fan of Wyndham's works. This is a lot more thought provoking than Day of the Triffids, though I will confess to enjoying it far less. Though it comes across a little preachy at times, Trouble With Lichens is nonetheless interesting, funny (at times), relevant and thought provoking, and I can honestly confess that I did not see that end coming.

Nayra.Hassan says

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Lysergius says

Francis Saxover and Diana Brackley, two scientists investigating a rare lichen, discover it has a remarkable property: it retards the aging process. Francis, realising the implications for the world of an ever-youthful, wealthy elite, wants to keep it secret, but Diana sees an opportunity to overturn the male status quo by using the lichen to inspire a feminist revolution. As each scientist wrestles with the implications and practicalities of exploiting the discovery, the world comes ever closer to learning the truth. "Trouble With Lichen" is a scintillating story of the power wielded by science in our lives and asks how much trust should we place in those we appoint to be its guardians?

Ape says

Curious little tale from Mr Wyndham. Published in 1960, and sadly some of the social issues that come up in this book are still as relevant, if not more, 55 years on. I wouldn't say this is his best novel, in fact it felt very slow and meandering to start, and in someways is slow moving, told through people having conversations. And yet when it does get going, it is engaging.

This is the story of some Chinese lichen, that has the bizarre property of really slowing down the ageing process. To the point where it can be used for people to be able to live several hundred years. Young graduate Diana Brackley goes to work for Darr House. This is the bio-chemistry company set up by Francis Saxover. Whilst studying various lichens shipped in, Diana accidentally comes across the amazing properties of this plant-fungi. They independently research it and come to the same discoveries; Francis being a man and older is very cautious and doesn't tell anyone, aware of the global implications. Diana, young and female, continues onwards, seeing it as giving humanity the change to grow wise and change the world for the better. She leaves Darr House and sets up an exclusive beauty company, Nefertiti. Fourteen years later (I said this wasn't fast paced!), the truth starts to come out, and it causes uproar throughout the country. Women want to be young for ever. Then their husbands think it wouldn't be so bad either. Trade unions are dead set against it, fearing the lowly paid will be doing crappy jobs for three times as long, to keep the rich in the life of luxury for tripple time. There's panic on about world food shortages and over population; about the fact that the young won't be able to get jobs because the old will have to work longer (goodness, not heard that one before! =)) and the morticians are worried that business is going to dry up.

Diana is marked out as an oddball from the word go, making people uncomfortable. She is pretty with a sense of style. She is intelligent. But she's not interested in getting married and having children. Oh my god! And you might like to think this isn't a problem today in 2015 - certainly not to the same extent that attitudes would have been in the 1960s, but I think there's definately still an attitude with us today that all women must want a child! But Diana thinks women can achieve more than just being wives, just accepting things the way they are, and "diddling" through time without really thinking or wanting to change anything. She thinks in that extending women's youth, it gives them space to grow (the panic for marriage and children is put off if they wish), think and consider that society should be fairer, things can be arranged differently. And in some ways, although we've moved on since the 1960s, some of these issues still ring true. Here's Diana's thoughts:

"My great-aunt fought and went to prison several times, for women's rights; and what did she achieve? A change of technique from coercion to diddle, and a generation of granddaughters who don't even know they're being diddled - and probably wouldn't care more if they did. Our deadliest susceptibility is conformity, and our deadliest virtue is putting up with things as they are. So watch for the diddles, darling. You can't be too careful about them in a world where the symbol of the joy of living can be a baked bean." (p45)

Susan Budd says

For the past few years I have peppered my reading with rereads from my youth. It has been even more rewarding than I anticipated. So far, my rereads have all been books I enjoyed when I first read them. But this time I decided to reread a book I did not enjoy at all.

Why would I do such a silly thing with my limited reading time? Well, let's say it was an experiment. The only things I remembered about *Trouble with Lichen*, besides the general premise and a few random details, were that I didn't like it, didn't understand it, and couldn't wait for it to be over.

It was mainly the fact that I didn't fully understand it that made me curious to reread it. As a child, I was an above average reader, but naturally my reading skills continued to develop through adulthood as well, so the way I read now is obviously superior to the way I read decades ago. I wanted to see if I would like the book now that I could fully understand it.

As it turns out, I am in agreement with my younger self about how tedious this novel is. If this had not been an experiment, I would have abandoned it after the first chapter or two. But I wanted to carry out the experiment, so I persevered. Once my younger self's taste was vindicated, I focused on putting my finger on why it was so boring to me both then and now.

I know one of the factors in my earlier dislike of the novel was that I was expecting something quite different from what I got. That of course is not a factor in my current dislike. I have learned not to evaluate a book based on what I thought it would be rather than what it actually is. This is a lesson I try to impart to my students (and anyone else who wanders past my soapbox while I'm pontificating).

If I order minestrone for dessert because I think it sounds like the name of a pastry, I'm going to be disappointed. But I shouldn't pronounce it a bad dessert. It's not the soup's fault that I was expecting pastry. It might be a perfectly delicious soup that I would have enjoyed as an appetizer had I known what it was. And so it is with books.

My younger self's lack of understanding was likely due to an inability to let go of my expectations. But even if I had let go of those expectations, there was still the other factor in my dislike: the novel itself. Reading it with an open mind this time, I felt that the writing style was painfully didactic.

"After an hour and a half, and a good luncheon, Francis, quite restored, led them back to his study to continue his disquisition" (57).

At least the characters being subjected to this disquisition got a good luncheon. I got nothing. I think I at least deserve some avocado toast (and maybe a cup of minestrone) for having put up with this book.

As much as this novel was a chore to finish, I will give Wyndham credit for two things. I do like the premise of the story. I think it was poorly executed, but I can see what drew me to the book in the first place. I also appreciate his feminist message, although it was heavy-handed and downright preachy at times.

And what of my experiment? Unfortunately, rereading this did not help me connect with my younger self the way some of my other rereads did. I thought that perhaps even if I disliked the book the second time around, the experience of rereading it would stir up something meaningful like a memory or an insight, even a vague one. But it didn't really do anything.

Nevertheless, no experiment is ever really a failure because even without producing the desired results, something is learned and what I learned from this reread is that even though I have grown up and my reading skills have grown with me, I'm still that same girl who was fascinated by the idea of a longevity drug and the philosophical implications of such a discovery.

Philip says

'Who wants to live forever?' Freddie Mercury once asked, well it turns out John Wyndham asked the same

question years earlier, and the answer isn't what you expect.

Of course the knee-jerk position is to say Yes, of course I want to live for 200 years (as the rare form of lichen discovered in this book would allow you to do), but Wyndham takes the opposite view. When I gathered what the gist of this book was going to be, I assumed the rest of the narrative would be concerned with various governments and wealthy individuals killing each other to gain the secret of this plant's life-extending properties, but no. Wyndham looks at the whole situation with much more insight.

For example, if you were in a job you hate, barely scraping by on the wages you make, would you want to stay in that job for 150+ years? And what about your children? How are they going to make a living if the previous generation don't vacate their jobs? What if you have a painful and debilitating disease? This lichen doesn't heal all illness; it just slows your metabolism slightly so you live 3-4 times longer. You can still get sick. You can still get hit by a bus. And what about overpopulation and food resources? How are you going to feed and house all these people if everyone lives two centuries? The author addresses these and many more social concerns of extended life for the masses.

My one qualm, and it is a minor one, is the title of the book, which put me off for a while. It's not very dramatic, considering the huge subject it tackles. Perhaps it's just that Wyndham was part of that modest generation who invented British understatement. You can imagine someone similar saying: 'This Hitler chap is causing a bit of trouble,' during World War II.

Once again Wyndham has delivered a highly intelligent novel with a compelling theme and addresses it in an interesting and unique way.

Havva says

Read this 13 years ago, only finished it due to lack of alternative reading material. Disliked it enough that it stuck in my memory, although details are fuzzy. Didn't realize it was the same author as 'Day of the Triffids'.

Jessica says

This was AMAZING! I love John Wyndham, but my problem with him was that his books always came across as sexist and racist. Though this book is still massively problematic in Wyndham's understanding of feminism, it's at least an understanding and frankly it's a pretty good one! He seems to have a good understanding of the binary between the public and domestic spheres and how that works in gender, and frankly, it was just well-written and exciting!

My new dream is to find a lichen that starts a feminist revolution. This book is beautiful.

Nikki says

Trouble with Lichen didn't strike me as quite as readable as Wyndham's other books, but the prominence of female characters/concerns was a welcome surprise. The plot is a bit different to Wyndham's other books,

too. You might be excused, knowing Wyndham's other books, for thinking that this is a book about lichen taking over the world, but this isn't one of his post-apocalyptic efforts.

If you've enjoyed Wyndham's other stuff, this is a bit different, but equally enjoyable, I think. The science isn't too stunningly out of date or anything like that; Wyndham's writing is perhaps a little more stilted here than I remember it being in other books, but I enjoyed his hold on characters and relationships more.

Cheryl says

Definitely not 'gay' (as in cheerful) satire. Not even all that satirical, really. Social commentary, yes. An awkward exploration of how 'women' and 'men' and 'the rich' and 'the working class' and 'the religious' will diversely react to the news of a longevity treatment. Needed more individual people, not types. Interesting and entertaining enough, but if you've read or watched any SF, or philosophy, or have even dreamed yourself, you have your own ideas, and Wyndham's are, well, odd. If you've never thought of the idea, read Tuck Everlasting and watch some Twilight Zone... don't bother with this.

Shannon says

This book was written by the guy who wrote Day of the Triffids, and we should all know what I think of that book by now [it's awesome to the power eleventy billion]. I was expecting something along similar lines – an out of control plant species runs amok, humanity is threatened, and we are forced to face the moral questions that come along with fighting for survival in an increasingly cruel world.

That's not what Trouble With Lichen is about at all, though I did keep imagining this silent creep of green mossy evil, slowly enveloping humans like a oozy blob, because it's a funny mental picture.

One of my major complaints regarding classic-era science fiction is the dearth of female characters with responsibilities that go beyond making tea. I was a bit concerned when one of the first characters introduced was a woman named Diana Brackley, who was described as beautiful and well dressed. Bad sign. However, it was soon conveyed that Diana was weird. Extremely intelligent, Diana receives a scholarship to Cambridge and becomes an extremely gifted biochemist. While working at a research facility, she discovers a plant with the power to slow cell growth by a factor of three, effectively cutting the aging process by a factor of three. With no side effects!

Wyndham is great at exploring the moral and social fallout of great change. Most of this book is a dialog between Diana and the owner of the research facility, Francis Saxover, who also independently discovered the life-extending properties of the lichen. I really enjoyed reading Diana Brackley and loved that she was always about four steps ahead of everyone else in the book. The other characters were a little one dimensional, but that's what happens when a story revolves around the actions of one particular person. Also I'm pretty sure she never made tea.

This book isn't as good as Day of the Triffids, but nothing is. I liked it more than The Chrysalids, and think it's a great example of what John Wyndham's work. I'm going to pass this along to a few people I think would enjoy it.

This was a bookstravaganza book where only one person voted on the books. Cathey suggested I read this with a glass of Wyndham Estates Bin #999 and I think that's a great idea. Wine + books = win!

David (???) says

This John Wyndham book, did not really contain anything that made me feel awesome (or even great or wonderful, for that matter), and as a result after loving his books like *The Day of the Triffids*, *The Chrysalids* and *The Midwich Cuckoos*, having read through the years, this one was very much near to boring, and even skippable I should say, much like how *Chocky* was just prior to this about four years ago. In fact *Chocky* was slightly better than this!

However, still, the idea of not ageing, being the main theme of the book, is put through well enough with its socio-political implications. But more could have been crept in. Barely a paragraph was observed with religious thoughts, and some more of it could have become interesting. Eventually I ended up thinking it was an alright-of-a-read, and was happy that it was only 200 pages long!

Jordan Thomas says

More like a 3.5, but I have bumped it up simply for my love of Wyndham. A very interesting look into the huge responsibility that comes with scientific discovery.

Robert says

I read several Wyndham novels when I was 12 or 13 - this was one of them. My recollection of those novels was that they were enjoyable but tended to have poor endings, as if Wyndham had said what he wanted, got bored and just stopped. The exception was *The Day of the Triffids* which had a satisfactory ending. So how would I respond to re-reading *Trouble with Lichen*?

First I found it a good deal more sophisticated than memory had led me to believe: The book is a feminist tract, following the career of a strong, intelligent, visionary biochemist who uses the discovery of a lichen with anti-aging properties to start a revolution in the prospects for women not seen since the movement for universal suffrage.

Second I found it technically distinctive: The narrative is fast-paced and driven largely by dialogue and fabricated quotations from newspapers and BBC broadcasts. Characters (often un-named) are left to discuss the evolving events as representatives of an entire social class or profession or sex, reminding me of the general passages in *The Grapes of Wrath* (such as the salesman who can't get enough jalopies to shift on to migrating Oakies). Telephone conversations between characters replace descriptions of action. That said, Wyndham does describe some of the most dramatic action directly.

Thirdly, the ending, though abrupt, was fairly satisfactory, after all: Many SF writers would be more interested in describing the social consequences of a drug that can extend the expectation of life tremendously but that is not Wyndham is after - he wants to suggest that women are not merely ornaments or baby factories and the beginning of a social revolution gives him plenty of space to do so. He did indeed say what

he wanted, then stop, but the resolution is fitting and pleasing.

Fantasy Literature says

Published in 1960, John Wyndham's *Trouble with Lichen* tells the story of Diana Brackley, a revolutionary, a feminist, and a scientist.

Diana is considered odd because although she is attractive, she does not want to marry. Instead, she is dedicated to her career in the lab, and it is there that she makes her amazing discovery: a type of lichen that slows the aging process. Diana decides to use the lichen to empower women, and she sets up a beauty clinic that caters to rich and influential women (more often, unfortunately, women who are married to rich and influential men). Her goal is to create a class of powerful women who will shield her project and her dreams against the public when it learns... Read More: <http://www.fantasyliterature.com/revi...>

shar zar says

7/10

I've been meaning to read a Wyndham novel. I found this and I was glad to finally be able to read one. Then I read the reviews and got the idea it wasn't the best one to start with but I read it anyways and I ended up really enjoying it ;D

Ah Med Yahia says

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Simon says

When I first saw the title of this book, I thought it would be about how lichen would somehow become a danger to mankind, pose a threat that might wipe us all out. But it's not like that at all. Rather lichen offers mankind the solution to one of it's oldest problems, but the two people who discover it fear the social ramifications of it getting out.

I'm not even going to talk about the nature of the benefits this lichen offers to mankind because it's not revealed until about 25% of the way through the book. Though if you happen to glance at the back cover, you'll learn about it right away. But I'm doing my review for people who like to leave as much as a surprise as possible and don't read the backs of books (a very hazardous practice indeed).

This is not a post-apocalyptic story, nor is it even apocalyptic, although it explores the trials and tribulations, moral dilemmas and philosophical discourses of the two main protagonists who semi-independently discover a rare strain of lichen that has the most unusual properties. Both realise that the effects on society could be earth shattering but both envisage different problems. First they wrestle with keeping the secret and when that proves no longer possible, they try to manage what happens.

It is certainly an interesting premise and quite well written (in Wyndham's usual English, middle class way). But I wonder whether this would have been best condensed to a short story? At only around 200 pages it could hardly be described as long but it still felt drawn out at times. Not the best of his books I've read but still worth reading.

Ellie Reynard says

This book is unusual and intriguing. Much more essay-esque than the rest of Wyndham's stuff, and perhaps that's contributed to it's comparable lack of popularity. On the other hand, this is an unusually feminist concept and execution from a white male in the 50s. Especially one who, as far as my limited research has found, wasn't particularly known for his feminist leanings.

Could this have effected the book's readership? Possibly. And for feminism it's a highly questionable form of it. Though the movement has evolved a lot since the 50s, I can't see the majority of yester year's housewives reacting at all well to their depiction within the novel.

But, as usual, Wyndham lays a very interesting suggestion at our feet. Is the suppression of women effected by our lifespan as well as (but not at all equally to) the patriarchy? Without the pressure of achieving a husband and respectable family within our short years, would women feel freer to achieve more? Would we be expected to?

However you react to his depiction I really do think *The Trouble With Lichen* makes an intriguing read. Agree, disagree - just don't leave it on the shelf. You can always toss it in the flames later. Unless you have a kindle.

Don't burn your kindle.

Eloise Newman says

Having read a couple of Wyndham's other books this is definitely not his best work. That being said I did enjoy it. It is different in the sense he tries to tackle and understand the (radical) feminism of the 60s and 70s and science fiction. I love how the main character, Diana, is both a villain and a hero. This was done really well and I'm still not quite sure. That is what is excellent about this book - the moral ambiguity of age, beauty and scientific discovery. All in all, if you like the blurb, read it.
