



The Hopkins Manuscript

R.C. Sherriff, George Gamow (Introduction), Michael Moorcock (Introduction)

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In The Hopkins Manuscript we watch through his eyes as the moon veers off course, draws slowly closer to the earth, and finally crashes into it on May 3rd 1946. Because it falls into the Atlantic much of humanity survives – only to generate new disasters. But this is not science fiction in the mode of H G Wells's The War of the Worlds; it is a novel about human nature.

The 'manuscript' was named after its 'author', a retired Hampshire schoolmaster whose greatest interest in life is his Bantam hens; rather self-important and lacking much sense of humour, Edgar Hopkins nevertheless emerges as an increasingly sympathetic and credible character, the ordinary man with whom we very much identify as Sherriff describes the small Hampshire village trying to prepare itself in its last days. In Journey's End he evoked the trench experience as he had lived it; in The Hopkins Manuscript he describes the catastrophe as he might have lived it.

The Hopkins Manuscript Details

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Author : R.C. Sherriff , George Gamow (Introduction) , Michael Moorcock (Introduction)

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From Reader Review The Hopkins Manuscript for online ebook

Andy Phillips says

This book was originally published in 1939 and features fictional events that took place in the 1940s (as the story is all told from Hopkins' perspective many years later). Although some of the phrasing and perspectives look a bit strange now, the story is still as valid now as it was then and that's all part of the charm.

The book begins with the Hopkins Manuscript being discovered in the ruins of London by an expedition of the Royal Society of Abyssinia. The Western world had been destroyed centuries before and this is the only intact record of the period when the disaster occurred. The rest of the book is a reproduction of the manuscript.

Unfortunately for the expedition, the story is told from the perspective of a retired middle class teacher who lived in a small Hampshire village, and is of little scientific or historical value for study. However, that's exactly why the story is interesting to the reader. It tells how a fairly average and unimportant man discovers, through his membership of the British Lunar Society, that the moon is going to crash into the Earth in a few months. The way in which he, and the rest of society, deals with the expected end of the world is fascinating. Obviously the world doesn't totally end, given the beginning of the book. The other reviews here go into more detail about how Hopkins handles the crisis, so there's no need to repeat it here.

A great piece of apocalyptic fiction dealing mainly with the forthcoming end of the world, but also with the aftermath. A very interesting perspective due to the age of the story.

Helen says

This marvellous, disturbing novel is very different from what one might call the 'typical Persephone' title. Indeed, had it not been published (re-published, rather) by Persephone, I might not have read it, as science fiction isn't one of my favourite genres.

First published in 1939, the story is narrated by 53-year-old Edgar Hopkins, a rather pompous ex-schoolmaster. Content to spend the rest of his life in the small village of Beadle, breeding poultry, he is stunned to say the least when he learns that the moon is drawing gradually nearer to the earth, and in fact it is estimated to strike the earth in seven months' time.

Because of the way the book is structured, we know that the world is not destroyed in 'the cataclysm' - we know that it survives for at least another seven years. The people of Beadle react in a way that anticipates what would later be called 'the spirit of the blitz'. In London, on the other hand, there existed 'no such bond of community life' - looting, suicides, and violent mobs marred an otherwise calm populace, but the heart seemed to have gone out of the place and the people.

Although 'the cataclysm' devastates the earth, it is the man-made disaster some years later that really seals the planet's fate. The original, 'natural', disaster did not destroy the world. What no one anticipated was that the real danger lay in the fact that 'human nature' - the desire for wealth, for land, nationalism - remained unchanged.

Joseph says

Another win for London's clever little bookshop/publishing dynamo, Persephone Books! I thought it might be old-school science fiction, spread into some good drama (sans melodrama), and it was. Actually, it's more like good drama in the vague shape of science fiction, but the introduction sells it as this, and the effect still works.

I was most pleased by how Sherriff managed to get the reader back and forth between rooting for the title character, Hopkins, and also irked by him, too. He's not really a nice man, yet the triumph of this novel is how you can laugh and enjoy and even care about his perspective despite his [many] absurd annoyances.

I found it an unexpected bonus, too, that this fits into a narrow window of 20th century Western fiction where the Threat of War (WW2) looms, but the History isn't there trumping all other emotion. This isn't due to Sherriff's skill so much as the timing it falls in, but viewed in retrospect, it's a rare and wonderful gem of tension.

Finally, if you get a thrill from Apocalyptic Catastrophe Fiction, you'll be happy (as I was) to learn it's far older and wider-spread than this young American thought. I'm so glad it's down to better minds than Michael Bay and his ilk.

Michael Bully says

Before reading 'The Hopkins Manuscript' I had seen R.C. Sherriff's World War 1 trench play 'Journeys End' , and read the charming novel 'A Fortnight In September'. Was equally impressed by 'The Hopkins Manuscript' .Evidence of how diverse this writer's talent was.

There are so many great elements to this story; starting with the notion that Britain's former civilisation being studied by Abyssinia (Ethiopia) revealing the manuscript itself. The horrendous inner tension experienced by the lead character, being a member of a tiny elite who are party to knowledge of an impending catastrophe, not revealed to the mass of the population gets the reader squirming in sympathy. The collision with the moon and the post-apocalyptic age which emerges full of promise only to be eroded by another catastrophe, the greed and obsessive ambition of political leaders,in Europe, then a new threat appears from the Eastconstruct a great novel. It's noticeable that R C Sherriff's pessimism concerning human nature was restrained enough not to turn 'The Hopkins Manuscript ' into a simplistic morality tale.

What helps the novel work so well is having the tale written in the first person, and from the perspective of a middle age bachelor whose main interests are chicken rearing and astronomy, living a quiet life in rural Hampshire. The threat and then the reality of calamity makes him start forging relationships with a few other individuals.

Overall a great and quite an unusual read.

An added bonus is having Space Fantasy luminary Michael Moorcock writing an introduction, and the scientist George Carnow presenting an afterword from the scientific perspective.

Donna says

I know that this wasn't really meant to be a *science fiction* tour de force, but that part of it was so comically bad that it was hard not to be distracted by it. Plus at one point the protagonist gives one of his friends a book on poultry raising in the hopes that he might read it so that they would FINALLY have something interesting to talk about. Hard to have sympathy for a character who is that condescending.

Susann says

Finished on the plane from Palm Springs to San Francisco. One of the few (only?) science fiction Persephone books. It gives us 1940s England without WWII. Instead, the moon is moving ever closer to the Earth and will soon smash into it. The first half of the book is pre-cataclysm and the second half is the aftermath. Of course, the story is really an examination of human nature. Sherriff purposely made Hopkins a bit of a drip, but the character eventually grows on you until you appreciate him for his true and strong spirit. Some very funny lines throughout and one of the best opening lines ever:

"I am writing by the light of a piece of string which I have pushed through a fragment of bacon fat and arranged in an egg-cup."

Philip Jackson says

RC Sherriff's lasting legacy is, of course, his remarkable play *Journey's End*, but Sherriff wrote several novels (as well as screenplays for such films as *The Invisible Man* and *Goodbye Mr Chips*). This one is something of an oddity, a work of science fiction which nicely bridges the gap between HG Wells and John Wyndham.

As the title implies, the book takes the form of a journal kept by Edgar Hopkins. As there is a preface detailing the discovery of this manuscript, it is known from the outset that things don't turn out well for the human race in the ensuing story.

Hopkins is a fussy little man, early retired, and passionate about his chickens and his stamp collecting. A sudden interest in all things astronomical leads him to joining the British Lunar Society and so becoming one of the few people in the country to learn of an impending ecological disaster. The moon has veered from its usual orbit of the earth and is now headed on a crash course for the planet. Sworn to secrecy to avoid a global panic, Hopkins tries to maintain a normal routine in the face of his awful knowledge.

Within months however, the secret is out, as the growing size of the moon in the night sky becomes increasingly apparent, and Hopkins observes the plans which are put into action in an attempt to save humanity.

Although the plot sets this book very firmly in the genre of science fiction, Sherriff is most interested in examining the effects an enormous peril has on human nature, rather than considering the technical accuracy of the effects of the moon crashing into the earth. It takes a lot of suspension of disbelief to accept the outcome of events. However, he nicely contrasts the ordered calm of village life with the anarchy and looting which Hopkins witnesses in London.

There is a deeply ironic twist in the latter third of the novel which takes the narrative in an entirely unexpected direction, and reinforces many of the themes Sherriff raises in *Journey's End*.

While the book is somewhat ponderous in places, it's still a great read, and it is a testament to the wonderful work of independent publishers Persephone, that this quirky little read is now back in print.

Bryan says

I shouldn't have been surprised, but this is about THE HUMAN CONDITION and not really about the moon crashing into the Earth at all. Definitely a good story-though oddly paced. The choice of lead character was interesting and it was hilarious that he spent as much time worrying about his stamp collection and prized chickens as he did the end of the world. I wanted to know more about what was going on in the world, but I respect the author's decision to keep the scope so limited.

Ali says

The Hopkins Manuscript is a brilliant imagining of the moon's collision with the earth, and the eventual end of western civilisation. Sci-fi novels vary in type, and I have read only a few over the years, but the only kind of Sci-fi I have any interest in, is the type which is set in a recognisable world, where unexpected, unworldly or fantastic events impact seriously upon that world and the people in it.

The novel opens with a foreword in which an Abyssinian scientist explains how the Hopkins Manuscript was discovered inside a flask by explorers examining the ruins of Notting Hill; working to understand the last days of that dead western civilisation. The document was written in the days before the death of that civilisation, and hidden away for men of the future to discover.

The Manuscript begins seven years after the cataclysm; the world of Western Europe is dying.

Full review: <https://heavenali.wordpress.com/2015/...>

Rose Ann says

I did not finish this book, I was about halfway through it when I stopped because it was very disturbing and depressing to me. This poor, self-absorbed narrator just broke my heart, but I also wanted to slap him sometimes! But mostly it just made me want to cry. I have read "Earth Abides" and "Alas Babylon." I have even read "When Worlds Collide"! But the deeply depressing world this author brings to life was just too much for me.

Adam Stevenson says

I'm not sure if 'The Hopkins Manuscript' is a really, really great book or if it just happens to be a book I really, really like.

I would sum this book up by describing it as 'Mr Pooter verses the apocalypse', it's a glorious tightrope walk which hovers over narrow-minded absurdity but it manages not to fall into it by surprisingly astute psychological understanding.

Mr Hopkins is a small, fussy man, full of his own self-importance. His big interests are poultry breeding and discussing lunar science in a smart club. Having accidentally promised to pay for an observatory for the Lunar club, he is justifiably worried when called to an emergency meeting of the club. So worried is he about this financial observation, that he is relieved when told that the moon is going to crash into the earth. When this sinks in, his main observation is that not as many cream eclairs have been eaten as usual, because that's the kind of cake you can only eat with a calm and steady hand.

The members of the club have been pledged to secrecy about the approaching collision, so that governments can make preparations to deal with panic. Although he does occasionally think about the awfulness of apocalypse, he mainly wonders around feeling smug that he has a really great secret, and feels huge urge to tell everyone. The introduction describes Hopkins as irritating but I find something endearing in his clinging to the rules of the poultry society (and buying the vicar a book on poultry 'to make him more interesting') just as the world is ending. As he says, the end of the world is too big to apply 'normal common sense'.

Eventually, the rest of the world find out about the impending disaster and Hopkins' main feeling is disappointment that people aren't as impressed with him as he hoped. This disappointment comes out in bitchy arguments about the quality of snowdrops in the garden.

The government sets towns and villages the challenge of creating 'moon-proof' bunkers, mainly as something to keep people busy but also on the outside chance that they might work. Hopkins begins to join in and enjoys the camaraderie. That said, he daren't let anyone call him by his first name, just in case the moon didn't crash and they wouldn't call him sir afterwards.

When the moon eventually crashes, most of the village go in the moon-bunker but Hopkins stays in his house. It's evocatively described, strange and psychedelic. The rush of the moon that brings a dusty whirlwind and even the Atlantic Ocean spreading out into the Hampshire valleys. He emerges and is (mostly) a new man. The need to rebuild the world gives Hopkins more to live for, he even fulfils his dreams and becomes an important man.

These are my favourite chapters, I love the feeling of rebuilding a new world from the ashes of the old. Hopkins is so into this new egalitarian mood that he can talk to a plumber 'as if he was an equal'. Of course, all things end and this period of new growth is crushed by politics. I wasn't surprised, the author was a WWI veteran writing in 1939 - what else could it be.

This book is historically interesting in seeing how a man in 1939 imagines how Britain will bear under a cataclysm. He imagines London not to have strong enough communal ties but that the countryside will be able to keep going - he was to be proved wrong by London's 'blitz spirit', which despite a massive rise in crime stands in the city's memory as being the time of greatest community.

Other than that, the book is funny, full of excitement, mystery and the intricacies of poultry-fancying.

Patrick says

Persephone Press mostly publish novels by women which are out of print or less well known today, but there's a few interesting novels by men in their catalogue too. One of these is *The Hopkins Manuscript* by R.

C. Sherriff, who is probably best known today for his screenwriting: he wrote a good number of notable films, including *The Dambusters* and *Goodbye Mr Chips*; in his own day he was best known for plays including *Journey's End* (which has just been made into a new film). Most of his novels now seem to be out of print, but I don't know whether he ever wrote anything quite so strange as this.

The Hopkins Manuscript purports to be a set of diary pages found in a thermos, sealed up inside a brick wall, written by a man named Edgar Hopkins. He is writing in the ruins of London after an apocalyptic catastrophe: the moon has crashed into the earth, wiping out the vast majority of the population of Europe. What follows is a lengthy and detailed explanation of the events leading up to and following this horribly implausible disaster.

Hopkins, we soon discover, is an incurably small-minded pedant. He is careful, cautious, and though not shy, he is extremely anxious about the way he is perceived. He belongs to that certain class of men who might once have been called a confirmed bachelor. Prior to the moonstrike he lives alone with only his housekeeper and his hens for company. His prize chickens are the only thing he cares for in the world. But he also belongs to an amateur astronomical society who are amongst the first to discover the truth about their impending doom; as such, for some months he's one of only a handful who know what is about to happen.

This phase of the book is cause for much existential gloom, some of which is fiercely overwrought. At times Hopkins seems to see the moon swollen and bloated beyond all possibility in the sky: '*...I sat there quivering – waiting for the end: waiting for a rending crash in the beech trees – earthquake – tumult – blackness – eternity!*' Strange, then, that once the news of earth's impending destruction becomes public, his mood (and the mood of the book) relaxes entirely. This second part of the book is oddly peaceful. An initial fear that society will descend into chaos in the knowledge that everyone is possibly going to die proves to be unfounded. The British band together out of a common sense of national duty – and, perhaps, more than a little naïve ignorance as to the real nature of what they are facing. Hopkins maintains his preoccupation with the outcome of the next hen show right up to the end.

This book was published in 1939. This being the case, we can safely assume it is not really about the moon crashing into the world, nor is it just a social satire about how a petty individualist collapses under the pressures of society. This is a novel written by an author who served in the First World War which looks forward with dismay to the prospect of another war, unwanted and misunderstood by the population but somehow inevitable despite that. It's rare to encounter this perspective today, when the Second World War is still depicted as an enormous extended exercise by virtuous powers against an evil monolith. This is, by comparison, a conservative novel with a small 'c'. It's disdainful of nations, leaders, politics; it finds happiness in the small things. Family. Food. Digging holes in the ground. Cricket. Chickens.

Perhaps inevitably for a book about the fear of societal collapse, it isn't entirely sure what to do with itself once this collapse actually comes about. For a while things seem they aren't all that bad. This part of the book settles into a sort of cosy catastrophe which brushes over the sheer horror of what has just happened. In a strange way this seems entirely plausible; Hopkins, being always somewhat uneasy in the presence of other people, ends up quite happy with just a few young like-minded survivors. There's never any real risk of banditry or violence. If there is anything good that can come out of this, the book seems to be saying, it's that we might be able to return to a more communitarian, decentralised way of life.

But given the book begins at its ending in a kind of raw misery, we know this can't last. By this stage it seems inevitable that the author is about to make out the culprit will be government interference. It turns out that what saved the remaining population of the Earth from destruction was that the moon was entirely swallowed up by the Atlantic ocean on impact; it subsequently broke up and sank, forming a new kind of

continental landmass between Europe and the Americas. The problem is that once the nations were back on their feet, this land was discovered to be full of valuable raw materials. Inevitably, the complex negotiations descend into mud-slinging and (eventually) global war.

Some of this seems rushed, and more than a little ridiculous. It's inconceivable that only a few years after such a disaster, the remaining governments could even contemplate any kind of colonial exercise. A big part of the British political argument is the maintenance of its empire (as it was in the approach to WWII) but it's never explained how they could possibly have maintained the empire after almost being crushed by the moon. The novel also posits the risible and somewhat racist threat of a wicked Islamic alliance who will take the opportunity of a war between the European states to invade their old oppressors.

Still, it's in these late sequences that the novel's criticisms of international politics and the total disregard for the value of the individual become most pointed. Here is Hopkins, on learning that his young friend Robin is off to fight:

'You're a fool!...A senseless young fool! D'you imagine you're serving your country by walking out like this! You're not! You're just playing into the hands of a beastly crowd of money grabbers who don't care a damn for England or anybody else! One day when these upstarts have cut each other's throats, the world will turn to people like us and bless us for keeping a few corners of a madhouse free from lunatics!'

This isn't a subtle book. Like Hopkins himself there are many things about it which are essentially, proudly second-rate. Our narrator emerges as that essentially English archetype where the subject of his peculiarly narrow-minded obsessions becomes exemplified as all that is worth living for; he's both entirely ridiculous and a perfect model for humanity.

But you cannot imagine an earnestly anti-war passage like the above in any new depiction of the 1930s without the worst associations of pacifism. For the most part we would prefer to pretend that people like Hopkins didn't exist, and that this generation threw themselves wholeheartedly into the next War because it was perhaps the only really good War we ever fought. That is how we feel now, now that we are so far from having fought ourselves. But Sherriff fought. And I think his novel might be most valuable for the way in which it provides a snapshot of a way of looking at life in the pre-WWII world which we are not supposed to believe ever really existed.

Rosemary says

Persephone books are an auto-buy for me, but some don't please me as much as others. I loved R.C. Sherriff's *The Fortnight in September* so I had high hopes for this story where the moon crashes to earth, in the solid English tradition of *The War of the Worlds* and *The Day of the Triffids*. However, the scifi part of the story is completely ludicrous, and Edgar Hopkins, the survivor writing the account, is so pompous, I cringed over and over again. All the same, there is something horribly compelling about him, so I did enjoy it enough to give three stars.

It could be prescient in that the ending could happen without the moon hitting earth first. Otherwise Sherriff was way off the mark, but possibly he didn't care, since that is not the point. I think it is not intended to be believable scifi, but a novel of how an "ordinary" man, not at all hero material, responds to crisis.

Andrea Dowd says

What a totally different approach to apocalyptic fiction. The fact that "The Hopkins Manuscript" was written in the 1930s only makes it that much more awesome. As pointed out in my copy from the 1960s, Sherriff got the science of the "event" wrong. But who cares! Because who doesn't want to read how a middle-age gentleman from a tiny English hamlet would survive the end of his world as he knew it?

This book is out of print but it seems to be findable through a variety of online resellers.

Gareth Evans says

I ordered this book because I very much enjoyed *A Fortnight in September* and without reading a review expected another slice of very gentle 1930s social observation. I was very disappointed to find a science fiction novel with a rather unattractive narrator attending meetings of the Luna Society. However my disappointment was assuaged by the excellence of Sherrif's writing (wonderfully clear and accurate) and his ability to tell a good story well. A post- (and pre-) apocalypse novel that really works. Throughly entertaining.

Sally says

'At midnight on the 12th February this year the moon had drawn nearer to the earth by 3583 miles, July 7, 2014

This review is from: *The Hopkins Manuscript* (Paperback)

I don't normally read sci-fi, but was tempted by this being a Persephone publication - and I really enjoyed it. Set in the 1930s, it's narrated by Edgar Hopkins, a pompous little ex-schoolmaster, whose life revolves around his poultry and membership of the Lunar Society. When he and a few select others are made privy to the fact that the moon is approaching the earth, and will collide in 7 months, life is set to change forever... The first half of the novel was to my mind the most interesting, covering the lead-up to the Event. When the government finally announce it to the population at large, there's a general sense of cameraderie and team-spirit, as people undertake the building of a dug-out - yet there's an underlying feeling that it won't be too dreadful, as shown in the debate on rules for the dug-out:

"A lady asked whether knitting or needlework would be allowed, and the Committee, after a brief discussion, agreed to the loose, handy type but forbade tapestry frames, etc"

What happens after the collision, and how the Earth rallies, forms the second half of the novel...

Very much influenced by world events at the time of publication (1939), this is extremely readable, entertaining, and quite scary at times:

'I thought of it no longer as the moon; it hung like a great amber pock-marked lamp above a billiard-table, so vast and enveloping that the little white-clad cricketers moved without shadows.'

Lucy Dean says

I loved this rather slow, dusty, mannered account of a future world where the moon has collided with the earth, connecting continents and bringing out the worst of the governments involved. R C Sheriff uses the backdrop of a cosy Shropshire retirement of a schoolmaster to set his scene, complete with social mores and etiquette of the period. The class system still manages to survive, despite the necessity to pull together but there are some lovely touches in the relationship between the teacher and his young neighbours. Written in the 30s but projected into the 40s, the book has the delicious irony for the reader as we compare what actually happened in that time frame with the fear of what might happen. I thoroughly recommend it and liken it to a dystopian Goodbye Mr Chips, with a few gardening and hen-keeping tips thrown in.

Karen says

I really like RC Sherriff's writing and as not many of his books are in print, I broke my rule about not reading dystopian science fiction to read *The Hopkins Manuscript*.

The writing did not disappoint; as in *The Fortnight in September* and *Greengates*, Sherriff is wonderful at depicting the lives of ordinary people. Mr. Hopkins, who tells the story, is not by any means a flawless hero; he's a bachelor obsessed with his poultry breeding and is somewhat of a set-in-his-ways, fussy, self-important person. But the events of the story do serve to change him and by the end of the book I did feel desperately sorry for him.

There are lovely moments in the book, and moments when it seems that things are going to be OK; but over the whole story there's the knowledge - stated right from the first page - that things have ended badly. So the whole interest in reading is in finding out just how things went so terribly wrong. It makes for depressing reading, no matter how well written.

J Anderson says

The combination of quaint English characters living through a sci fi experience works well for R C Sherriff. Superbly written in classic literature style. I loved it but can appreciate this style and voice is not to everyone's taste.

The main character is your ordinary, run of the mill, country fellow with some quirky interests that interface well with the possibility of a crashing moon. Well I had to keep reading.... I also found myself glancing up suspiciously at the big cheese in the sky.

Jen says

This was a long awaited read for me. I first heard of *The Hopkins Manuscript* last year but unfortunately it was out of print. I was so happy to finally find a copy on my visit to Persephone Books last week.

I loved the writing style of R.C. Sheriff and was pleasantly surprised by the hilarious humour in the book. The reader should not expect scientific fact from this book, it is more of a social statement. The story was very entertaining and definitely my favourite Persephone book so far.

