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On the Beach

by

Nevil Shute

1957



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Patricia Lee M. Vaughan

<http://monkeynote.stores.yahoo.net/>

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting for *On the Beach* is primarily smaller towns and rural locations near Melbourne, Australia and Port Phillip Bay, in southern Australia, and the city of Melbourne itself. Part of the book takes place aboard a nuclear submarine, the *U.S.S. Scorpion*, which makes two voyages of exploration, mostly submerged, north from Williamstown, outside of Melbourne. The first voyage is to northern Australian port.....

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes - of the Royal Australian Navy: probably in his middle to late 20's; a devoted husband and father, diligent and dutiful naval officer living in the small town of Falmouth, which is on the beach close to Melbourne, nearly the southernmost part of Australia. Peter is posted to....

Mary Holmes - Peter's wife: twenty-something, a naval officer's daughter born in England, a true "domestic goddess" whose life is happily devoted to her infant daughter, Jennifer, immaculate

Commander Dwight Towers - United States Navy: thirty-three years old, captain of the U. S. nuclear submarine, *Scorpion*. Dwight is a quiet, competent, simple man who follows U. S. Navy regulations by the book to the end. Though objectively he knows that his wife and children, in.....

Moira Davidson - an attractive, outrageous, outspoken twenty-four year old country girl who graduated from college with honors in history; friend of Peter and Mary. Moira has been drowning her disappointment at the end of the world and her life, before she's had a chance to realize her dreams of

John Osborne - late twenties; a civilian scientific officer with Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (C. S. I. R. O.) "Very tall and thin. Mousey sort.....

Minor Characters

Lieutenant General Sir Douglas Froude - cheerful, well-informed sixty-something; John Osborne's great uncle; retired, but still with military bearing, white hair, and red face. He is dealing with impending doom by going to the Pastoral Club in Melbourne three times a week, trying his best to.....

Mr. Davidson - Moira's father: a grazier, or cattleman. Hard-working, hospitable, gets along well with Dwight Towers. Like Mary Holmes, Mr. Davidson continues to plan several seasons ahead for improvements to his farm, and to work on them when he has time, knowing that he will not.....

Yeoman First Class Ralph Swain - a young radar operator on the *Scorpion*. During *Scorpion's* primary reconnaissance mission to the area around Seattle, Washington, the sub passes Ralphie's hometown, and he jumps overboard and swims to shore. He refuses Dwight's order to.....

Jennifer Holmes - Peter's and Mary's infant daughter. She is apparently around six to nine months old, since she is just beginning to crawl and to pull herself up and suck on things she....

CONFLICT

The **protagonist** in *On the Beach* is the human race, especially as personified by Peter and Mary Holmes, Dwight Towers, and Moira Davidson. The **antagonist** is doom, that is, premature, recognized, sure death by radiation sickness. All of the characters, including all the unnamed inhabitants of Australia who are described in the story, struggle to understand and accept the fact that they know when they will die, and it will be soon. Not only do they know when they will die, plus or minus a few months, the

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

On the Beach opens with Peter Holmes preparing to report to Australian navy headquarters to receive his next assignment in the Royal Australian Navy. At the interview with his superior officer, Peter is informed that he has been assigned as liaison officer aboard the *U. S. S. Scorpion*, an American nuclear submarine. The sub is one of only two useful vessels working with the Australian fleet. Both are American nuclear submarines, which happened to be south of the Equator when a quick, confused nuclear war annihilated human life in the northern hemisphere. They are useful because they do not require petroleum based fuel, which before the war was imported to Australia from north of the Equator. The Australian navy has experimented with converting some of its fleet to coal powered, with unsatisfactory results.

After determining what had happened in the war, the scattered remnants of the American navy have been commanded by their ranking officer to put themselves under command of the Australian navy, which is now using the two subs to assess conditions in the war zone. It seems that they can safely navigate into the area if their supply of uncontaminated air is adequate, and if they remain submerged. Like its sister sub, the *U. S. S. Swordfish*, *Scorpion* is to use its periscope and loud hailer (loudspeaker) to determine if there is anyone left alive in its area of exploration, and to measure radiation levels going north from Melbourne, the southernmost city in Australia.

Their mission is to determine the accuracy of conclusions that radiation fallout from the cobalt bombs used in the war has killed everyone in the northern hemisphere. Furthermore, contrary to.....

THEMES

The most pervasive theme is that life should be lived as well as one knows how, regardless of impending doom. Several of the characters note the fact that everyone will die. This is nothing new; they simply know when they will die, and it will be about the same time everyone else does. Although the characters discuss the end and its implications, making plans for how they will shut down their lives when the time comes, they spend much more time making plans for the future beyond the time when there will be a.....

MOOD

You would expect the mood of *On the Beach* to be somewhat like the mood of T. S. Eliot's poem, *The Wasteland*, part of which is quoted on the title page, and from which the book derives its title:

"In this last of meeting places

We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river . . .

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

*This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper."*

The mood is actually much less somber than the mood of Eliot's poem. As the characters grope together in the last large city on earth, on the beach of the tumid river Styx (the passageway to Hades, the place of the dead in Greek mythology), they may speak little, but it's because they are busy living to the last moment. Most of them talk of their impending doom and the end of life on the planet as if it.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Nevil Shute Norway (who wrote using only his first two names as a pen name), like the character Mary Holmes in *On the Beach*, was born in England, but emigrated to Australia as an adult, and lived there until the end of his life. He was born in Ealing, Middlesex, England, and educated at Hammersmith, Shrewsbury, and the Balliol College of Oxford. At age eleven, Nevil ditched school at Hammersmith to spend days wandering through the model aircraft in the Science Museum, trying to understand the engineering subtleties of craft that interested him. This gave evidence of what was to be a lifelong love affair with aircraft and aeronautical engineering, and caused his parents to send him to the Dragon School in Oxford.

During World War I (in which Nevil's brother was killed), Nevil passed into the Royal Military Academy, hoping to be commissioned into the Royal Flying Corps, but he failed the medical exam because of a severe stammer. (Later friends and associates in Australia would say that notwithstanding the stammer and a natural reticence, Nevil was charming, entertaining company, and an excellent storyteller.) He was able to gratify his passion for aviation during his college years at Oxford, when he worked unpaid for the Aircraft Manufacturing Company at Hendon. In 1922, after graduating third in his class at Oxford in engineering science, Nevil Shute Norway took a job as an aeronautical engineer specializing in Zeppelins, at the de Havilland Aircraft Company. He also realized his lifelong dream of learning to fly, and gained experience as a test observer.

In 1924 Norway went to work as Chief Calculator to the Airship Company, a subsidiary of Vickers Ltd., on the Rigid Airship R100 project, one of the last of the British airships. (Bear in mind that at that time in history, before electronic calculators or computers, engineering data was "calculated" by small armies of mathematically skilled engineers. Nevil Shute Norway's 1954 autobiography, *Slide Rule*, is named for a manual calculating device used before the advent of electronic intelligence.) This was to prove a formative experience. The R100 was private enterprise's answer to a British government developed airship, the R101. Norway took several voyages in the R100, including visits to the United States and.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The following timeline of events precipitating the Cold War and the Atomic Age explain the historical context of the time in which *On the Beach* was written, as well as why the novel and the movie had such impact:

August 6, 1945: The atomic age begins when the U.S.A. drops an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima, Japan, ending World War II in the Pacific theatre. There had been a race to develop atomic weapons which accelerated when German scientists working on such development were "liberated", some to continue in the service of the U.S.'s European ally in the war, Russia and the former Soviet Union, and some to the United States.

1946: Julius Robert Oppenheimer, one of the lead physicists on the top secret Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, and later one of the most prominent of a group of scientists who opposed proliferation of nuclear weapons, tells.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES / ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

Summary

Chapter 1 establishes the state of the world and two of the primary locations in Australia where most of the book's action takes place. It also introduces the four major characters, and reveals what their activities will be for the next several months, the main framework of the plot.

The book begins with Peter Holmes awakening at home in Falmouth, on the beach near Melbourne, one of the southernmost locations in Australia. The geography is significant, because we soon learn that there has been a one month long nuclear war in the northern hemisphere, and after massive seismic activity, loss of radio contact, plus some observations of "dust" clouds and high radiation levels above the Equator, naval personnel and authorities below the Equator have concluded that everyone in the northern hemisphere is dead of radiation sickness due to cobalt bomb fallout. Furthermore, as the seasons change and the Pressure Equator shifts (it

moves, unlike the geographic Equator), the winds of the northern hemisphere are blowing radioactive particles, heavy and light, through the atmosphere of what later is the southern hemisphere, when the Pressure Equator shifts. That means that winds full of radiation fallout are working their way south toward Antarctica throughout the earth, and when they arrive in a location, the inhabitants all contract fatal radiation sickness, and die within a month or so at the most. People living near Melbourne will be among the last human inhabitants of the earth to go.

At the beginning of the chapter we only know that Peter awakens with a sense of pleasurable anticipation. Is it Christmas day? No, as he wakes up he remembers stringing colored lights on an evergreen in his yard to echo a larger Christmas tree near the town hall in Falmouth, and having some friends to his home for a barbecue, swimming, and sailing on the beach Christmas day. His wife Mary wakes up and they discuss the fact that they are both sunburned, as is their infant daughter Jennifer, and they should both cover up with shirts today and keep the baby off the beach. (At this point readers from the northern hemisphere remind themselves that the seasons are reversed in the southern hemisphere, so that Christmas comes in the middle of summer in Australia.) Peter finally realizes that this is the day he has an appointment in Melbourne at the Navy Department, the Second Naval Member's office. This means a new assignment from the Navy, seagoing if he is lucky, for Peter longs to go to sea again. The navy has retained him on full pay since he was promoted to Lieutenant Commander in August, fortunately for his family, but times are so uncertain that he hasn't worked for seven months, and there's no telling how much work will remain to do, for how long. When he went to bed the night before, Peter was happy considering the prospect of doing the work he loved again, and this hints at a major theme that recurs throughout the book: life, certainly with death looming at a reasonably predictable time, is more bearable, satisfying, even joyful, with work or some purposeful activity to give us reason to live.

As Peter proceeds through the activities of his day, we get a clearer picture of his world. Peter and Mary were married in 1961, six months before the catastrophic nuclear war, which has been over for some months or a year by now, and they have Jennifer, who is at least old enough to sit up, but who cuts her first tooth before the book ends, so is probably six to nine months old. *On the Beach* was published in 1957, and in this post 1961 Australia, television is not yet a factor. There is a serious paper shortage, so there are no more newspapers. The people get their news and information solely from radio. Peter looks at his small Morris Minor car, his very first car, in which he courted Mary, parked in the garage of the flat he rents in a large house that has been divided into apartments. He thinks of how he returned home from sea after the war and drove the Morris, using up most of the gas in it, plus part of a refill, before he and everyone else in Australia realized that all oil came from the northern hemisphere, and there wouldn't be any more coming in. Most of the gasoline in Australia at that point was restricted for use in essential governmental functions, such as some of the Australian Navy's activities. The rest was hoarded and hidden by private citizens, to be used at some later time of greater necessity, closer to the end. Peter and Mary run their errands on bicycles, transporting Jennifer and carrying items in a trailer that Peter has made using two bicycle wheels. Their only problem is a long hill going up to their house from Falmouth. Peter rides his bike with the trailer to a dairy farm outside town to buy milk. (There are no more milk trucks, and the routes are too far-flung to be covered by horses or other pack animals.) The dairyman, Mr. Paul, asks Peter if he can get Mr. Paul some bicycle wheels, so that Mr. Paul can make a chair trailer for his wife, and take her into Falmouth twice a week for an outing, since she's isolated out in the country now that there's no gas. Some people have taken the windscreens (windshields) off their cars and converted them to wagons or carts pulled by bullocks, but they move very slowly. The businessmen going to catch the train to Melbourne from Falmouth ride horses from their homes to the station, then stable the horses in what used to be garages or tie the horses to what used to be gasoline pumps. There's not a huge rush, because many businesses and people have given up their former workaday routines. Mr. Paul offers to take milk to Mary in Falmouth while Peter is at sea, if Peter can get Mr. Paul those wheels to make a trailer with.

Later, in Melbourne at the Second Naval Member's office, Peter receives his new assignment. He accepts the new posting for the first two of several contemplated cruises, or five months, because of the uncertain

circumstances in their world. He wants to be at home, not at sea, to help Mary with the baby when the end comes. He is to be Australian liaison officer aboard the *U. S. S. Scorpion*, a nuclear submarine. What's left of the American Navy, ships that were south of the Equator at the end of the war, have reported to the Australian Navy command. *Scorpion* is the only useful vessel in the combined fleet, since nuclear fuel can be prepared for it, while the other ships run on gasoline. In later chapters we discover that a sister sub to *Scorpion*, the *U. S. S. Swordfish*, has done some reconnaissance of global damage and reported to the Australian command, but none of the characters will ever encounter *Swordfish* or its crew, except by cable and radio contact. Peter goes to see his new captain, Commander Dwight Towers of the U. S. Navy, and they discuss *Scorpion's* missions, which will be to go as far north as possible while submerged and evaluate conditions in places of interest, mostly harbor cities in the Pacific and on the west coast of the United States. They will look through the periscope and call through the loud hailer, a kind of loud speaker, for survivors. Possibly they will put a man on shore in a radiation protective suit, decontaminating him when he returns. They may go near Seattle, Washington, from whence occasional radio signals, mostly gibberish, but infrequently broadcasting a whole recognizable word, are being intercepted. This is a matter of curiosity, since scientists and other experts have concluded that everyone above the Equator is dead.

On impulse, Peter invites Commander Towers to come to Falmouth and spend the weekend with Mary and him. Dwight Towers considers this thoughtfully. There is a huge breach between the northern and southern hemisphere natives living in Australia. The Australians know that the Americans and others have lost their families, their homes, and their countries. The sympathy is so uncomfortable as to be almost intolerable. Still, Dwight thinks that some change from rattling around in his cabin on the *Scorpion's* mother ship, the Australian aircraft carrier *H. M. S. Sydney*, all weekend, would be nice, and in the line of duty, it might be well to see what kind of man his new liaison officer is. So Dwight agrees to meet Peter at the train station in Falmouth on Saturday. When Peter tells Mary, she worries that Dwight will find being in someone's home, with nappies (diapers), bottles in pans of hot water, and other evidence of a baby and domestic life too much of a reminder of what he's lost. This has happened before when they had guests from the other hemisphere. An R. A. F. (English Royal Air Force) squadron leader had broken down in tears. Another weeping man had gathered Mary's friend Moira Davidson in his arms, telling her that she reminded him of his wife. Mary calls Moira, a live wire, and asks her if she will come help entertain Dwight. Moira thinks the whole idea sounds grim, but promises to see that there is never a dull moment in the American's weekend.

Two days later, Peter goes to the train station in Falmouth, where he is met by Moira Davidson. Moira has driven from her father's cattle farm in the country in a salvaged buggy, drawn by a spirited gray mare. She is wearing a red shirt and red slacks, with lips, fingernails and toenails in the same shade of red. They meet Commander Towers's train from Melbourne, the Commander and Moira go to a hotel in Falmouth for drinks, and Peter goes home to help Mary. Moira and Dwight spar over their liquor, he suggesting that she do something with her time besides drink, she suggesting that he is making up for lost time with his drinking. (It is a great curiosity to the Australians that American naval personnel do not drink alcohol on board ships or when they're in uniform, while the Australians drink like fish on board ship *and* everywhere in uniform.) Later Moira and Dwight sail Peter's boat in a race at the small yacht club he and Mary belong to. Moira contrives to get herself knocked off the boat by part of the rigging and takes off the top of her bathing suit. Then she teasingly accuses Dwight of ripping it off, and asks him to tie it back on. Never a dull moment! That night several couples join the others at the Holmeses' house for a small party, and they dance to phonograph records and drink until 11:30 at night. Mary brings a tray of tea, hot buttered scones and cakes, a universal signal in Australia that the party's over, and all the guests except Moira and Dwight go home after tea. The house is hot and full of cigarette smoke, so Moira and Dwight talk for awhile on the verandah outside. Moira is drunk, and bursts into tears after talking about the trip she'd had planned to England, Europe and America, and how now she'll never make it outside of Australia, and even if she got married tomorrow, she wouldn't have time to have a baby. She notes that she is doing just what she was afraid Dwight would do when Mary asked Moira to come and help entertain him. Dwight goes inside and asks Mary to comfort Moira and put her to bed.

Notes

While you would expect the tone of a book about the end of life on this earth to be hyperbolic (think of almost any disaster movie and its special effects!), *On the Beach* is remarkable for its quiet understatement. There is some matter of fact description of people's reaction to the news that the end is near. There are a few more drunks lying in the streets of Melbourne, for instance, and the policemen simply look to see if they're physically alright and leave them there, instead of arresting them. Later in the book there is a somewhat horrifying look at death and destruction during the preliminary races of the Australian Grand Prix, where participants and crews are callous about fatalities because they're all going to be dead in a couple of weeks anyway. But in most of the book, even as Dwight and his crew survey the aftermath of the war in some North American locales (the closest we ever come to the nuclear holocaust), the striking surreality is how *normal* everything looks and seems.

Maybe it's the character of the Australian people, or maybe it's the author's view of humanity, but notice as he describes the adaptations people have made to life without motorized transportation: there are no accounts of rioting or violence at fuel storage installations, no stories of looting of abandoned stores, or of violence for the sake of obtaining provisions that are in short supply. People simply find ways to make do, and when possible help others to do the same. When Peter goes into Melbourne and leaves his bike in the train station, it is always still there waiting for him when he gets back to Falmouth. If I were waiting for the end of the world after a nuclear war, this is the way I'd want it to be.

One subtle way the author conveys the sense of impending doom without hysteria is a phrase used four times in conversations by characters in this chapter. The phrase is, "...there's not so long to go..."

In this chapter the characters also begin to reveal to us their life view, and we get some notion of how they will handle their own deaths and the end of the world. One of the major characters, the youngest, Moira, will change her life view radically before the end comes. We see that Peter does not philosophize or express any belief concerning the purpose (or futility) of life, the possibility of life after death, or any position about the fairness or unfairness of what has happened. He simply goes about his life, thinking and preparing as well as he can to take care of his wife and his daughter until the end. Mary understands what the northern hemisphere imports to Australia are going through, but she does not relate what's happened to herself or her life. Her concerns are the everyday ones of a young mother nurturing her first child. Dwight has already lost all that's dearest to him, and he is simply trying to do his best for the rest of his life. Once he thinks of his red Oldsmobile in the garage of his home in Connecticut: "It must be still in the garage...untouched perhaps, with all the other things he'd schooled himself not to think about. One had to live in the new world and do one's best, forgetting about the old; now it was push bikes at the railway station in Australia." Moira is defiant and furious, drinking and running wild with no job and no purpose, not because she's afraid of death, but because of all the things she'll miss, like seeing the Rue de Rivoli in Paris. Dwight explains how the winds will bring the radioactive air slowly to the southern hemisphere, where there was no war, and Moira angrily asks if there is nothing scientists can do about it. "You've got to take what's coming to you and make the best of it," Dwight replies. "...It's just too big a matter for mankind to tackle." Moira says she wishes she were dead now.

"It's like waiting to be hung." Dwight voices what we come to see is true for all the novel's characters: "Maybe it is. Or maybe it's a period of grace.".....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Lieutenant Commander Peter Holmes - of the Royal Australian Navy: probably in his middle to late 20's; a devoted husband and father, diligent and dutiful naval officer living in the small town of Falmouth, which is on the beach close to Melbourne, nearly the southernmost part of Australia. Peter is posted to the Australian naval installation at Melbourne. Because of his competence, and his willingness, even eagerness, to serve regular assignments in the Navy despite the uncertainty of the times and the general dissolution of the structure of Australian society as the end of life on earth approaches, Peter is assigned duty as a liaison officer between the

Australian Navy and the United States Navy on the U. S. Navy submarine *Scorpion*, commanded by U. S. Navy officer Dwight Towers (see below). Peter views the circumstances of life after nuclear war, and the impending doom of himself, his wife, and his baby (with the rest of humanity that is now alive in.....

Mary Holmes - Peter's wife: twenty-something, a naval officer's daughter born in England, a true "domestic goddess" whose life is happily devoted to her infant daughter, Jennifer, immaculate housekeeping in their small rented house, and gardening. Mary supports Peter's career, rejoicing for him when he gets the liaison assignment because she knows how much it means to him to go to sea again. She is.....

Commander Dwight Towers - United States Navy: thirty-three years old, captain of the U. S. nuclear submarine, *Scorpion*. *Scorpion* had been on patrol near Midway in the Pacific, and was approaching Manila, in the Philippines, when clouds of dust from the cobalt bomb explosions, plus a high radiation level, drove them south. The sub ended up in Brisbane, Australia. The senior officer among.....

Moira Davidson - a twenty-four year old country girl who graduated from college with honors in history; friend of Peter and Mary. She is very fair and petite, with straight blonde hair, a beautiful figure, and an outspoken, outrageous manner. Moira has been drowning her disappointment that she will not be able to take the tour of Europe and America she had been planning following her graduation (that in.....

John Osborne - late twenties; a civilian scientific officer with Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (C. S. I. R. O.) "Very tall and thin. Mousey sort of hair. Wears spectacles." Coldly emphatic about the approach of the contaminated air, and the fact.....

Minor Characters

Lieutenant General Sir Douglas Froude - cheerful, well-informed sixty-something; John Osborne's great uncle; retired, but still with military bearing, white hair, and red face. He is dealing with impending doom by going to the Pastoral Club in Melbourne three times a week, trying his best.....

Mr. Davidson - Moira's father: a grazier, or cattleman. Hard-working, hospitable, gets along well with Dwight Towers. Like Mary Holmes, Mr. Davidson continues to plan several seasons ahead for.....

Yeoman First Class Ralph Swain - a young radar operator on the *Scorpion*. During *Scorpion's* primary reconnaissance mission to the area around Seattle, Washington, the sub passes Ralphie's hometown, and he jumps overboard and swims to shore. He refuses Dwight's order to

Jennifer Holmes - Peter's and Mary's infant daughter. She is apparently around six to nine months old, since she is just beginning to crawl and to pull herself up and suck on things she.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

At the beginning of *On the Beach* an officer in the Australian navy, LCDR Peter Holmes, is asked to be the liaison officer to the American submarine, U.S.S. *Scorpion*. There has been a war among several northern hemisphere nations, including the USSR, China, and the USA. Nuclear weapons of mass destruction had been deployed in the war, and everyone in the northern hemisphere is presumed dead. Radiation levels are fatally high north of the Equator, and radio contact has ceased with all northern hemisphere bases. American naval vessels which were south of the Equator, or able to submerge and get out of the hot zone, have converged in Australia, where the ranking officer put them under the command of the Australian navy. That is why Peter Holmes is being assigned liaison officer to the *Scorpion*. *Scorpion* is important to the task of assessing damage and looking for survivors, because it can travel submerged, and its crew can avoid breathing contaminated air. It is also important because it is nuclear powered, and fuel can be prepared for it in Australia. Before the war, all crude oil was imported by Australia from the northern hemisphere, but that

THEMES - THEMES ANALYSIS

The most pervasive theme is that life should be lived as well as one knows how, regardless of impending doom. Several of the characters note the fact that everyone will die. This is nothing new; they simply know when they will die, and it will be about the same time everyone else does. Although the characters discuss the end and its implications, making plans for how they will shut down their lives when the time comes, they spend much more time making plans for the future beyond the time when there will be a future, and.....

POINT OF VIEW

The point of view in *On the Beach* is one of benevolent neutrality. In the third person, the author gives a detached, spare, sympathetic account of circumstances and people, letting them flesh in the details by what they say and do. In describing the war, he calls it “bewildering”. The various crew members of the *Scorpion* try to piece together what happened from what they’d learned, with very little.....

QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

1. On the first voyage of the *Scorpion*, to northern Australia, the crew members talk about what they know of the nuclear war that will prove to mean the end of the world:

“ ‘ Good God! said the Australian. ‘So we bombed Russia?’

‘That’s what happened,’ said the captain heavily.

John Osborne said, ‘It’s understandable. London and Washington were out – right out. Decisions had to be made quick before another lot of bombs arrived. Things were very strained with Russia, after the Albanian bomb, and these aircraft were identified as Russian.’ He paused. ‘Somebody had to make a decision, of course, and make it in a matter of minutes. Up at Canberra they think now that he made it wrong.’

‘But if it was a mistake, why didn’t they get together and stop it? Why did they go on?’

The captain said, ‘It’s mighty difficult to stop a war when all the statesmen have been killed.’

The scientist said, ‘The trouble is, the damn things got too cheap. The original uranium bomb only cost about fifty thousand quid towards the end. Every little pipsqueak country like Albania could have a stockpile of them, and every little country that had that, thought it could defeat the major countries in a surprise attack. That was the real trouble.’

‘Another was the aeroplanes,’ the captain said. “The Russians had been giving the Egyptians aeroplanes for years. So had Britain for that matter, and to Israel and to Jordan. The big mistake was ever to have given them a long-range aeroplane.’....

‘Christ,’ said the American softly, ‘I don’t know what I’d have done in their shoes. I’m glad I wasn’t.’

The scientist said, ‘I should think you’d have tried to negotiate.’

‘With an enemy knocking hell out of the United States and killing all our people? When I still had weapons in my hands? Just stop fighting and give in? I’d like to think that I was so high-minded, but – well, I don’t know...If that situation had devolved on me, I wouldn’t have known how to handle it.’

‘They didn’t either,’ said the scientist. He stretched himself, and yawned. ‘Just too bad. But don’t go blaming the Russians. It wasn’t the big countries that set off this thing. It was the little ones, the Irresponsibles.’

Peter Holmes grinned, and said, ‘It’s a bit hard on all the rest of us.’”

Chapter 3, pp. 94, 95-96

2. On the same voyage, the men discuss the unreality of the situation:

“ ‘You’ve got six months more,’ remarked John Osborne. ‘Plus or minus something. Be satisfied with that. You’ve always known that you were going to die sometime. Well, now you know when. That’s all.’ He laughed. ‘Just make the most of what you’ve got left.’

‘I know that,’ said Peter. ‘The trouble is I can’t think of anything I want to do more than what I’m doing now.’

‘Cooped up in bloody *Scorpion*?’

‘Well – yes. It’s our job. I really meant, at home.’

‘No imagination. You want to turn Mohammedan and start a harem.’..

The liaison officer shook his head. ‘It’s a nice idea, but it wouldn’t be practical. Mary wouldn’t like it.’ He stopped smiling. ‘The trouble is, I can’t really believe it’s going to happen. Can you?’

‘Not after what you’ve seen?’

Peter shook his head. ‘No. If we’d seen any *damage* . . .’

‘No imagination whatsoever,’ remarked the scientist. ‘It’s the same with all you service people. That can’t happen to *me*.’ He paused. ‘But it can. And it certainly will.’

‘I suppose I haven’t got any imagination,’ said Peter thoughtfully. ‘It’s – it’s the end of the world. I’ve never had to imagine anything like that before.’

John Osborne laughed. ‘It’s not the end of the world at all,’ he said. ‘It’s only the end of us. The world will go on just the same, only we shan’t be in it. I dare say it will get along all right without us.’

Dwight Towers raised his head. ‘I suppose that’s right. There didn’t seem to be much wrong with Cairns, or Port Moresby either.’ He paused, thinking of the flowering trees that he had seen on shore through the periscope, cascaras and flame trees, the palms standing in the sunlight. ‘Maybe we’ve been too silly to deserve a world like this,’ he said.

The scientist said, ‘That’s absolutely and precisely right.’”

Chapter 3, pp.96-97.....

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLS

The style of *On the Beach* is matter-of-fact and straightforward. There is little symbolism. Perhaps the interaction of the characters with water (swimming at the beach, fishing on the river) could be seen as symbolic of their (and all mankind’s) relationship with death. As in the quote from T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* on the title page, and from which the book takes its title, the characters stand on the beach of the tumid river of death (Styx, the river you cross over into Hades, the place of the dead, in Greek mythology). They try to digest their sure knowledge of when death will come, and that it will be soon, in effect swimming in the river Styx, but not crossing over. They fish in the river, perhaps hoping for a reprieve. (The fish is a symbol of life and nourishment.)

At a stretch, you could view the Grand Prix race, won by John Osborne in his red Ferrari, as a metaphor for finishing the race of life, and winning the big prize (“grand prix” is French.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

- The book was published in 1957, in the height of the Cold War, amidst anxiety about the proliferation of nuclear weapons
- The book depicts the world after a nuclear war which has completely annihilated human life in the northern hemisphere.
- Radiation fallout from the war is gradually making its way into the southern hemisphere, and will eventually take all human and animal life.

- The book is set in Melbourne, Australia, because it is the southernmost major city in the world.....

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Why is *On the Beach* set in and near Melbourne, Australia?
 - a. Because it will be the last major city on earth whose inhabitants will die when the radiation fallout reaches there.
 - b. Because there are naval installations there, and it would be a logical place for a submarine to be berthed.
 - c. Because Australia is a country of highly educated, easy-going people who know how to enjoy life.
 - d. All of the above.
2. Why is there no petrol (gasoline) available in Australia?
 - a. It burned up in the war.
 - b. The enemy won't sell any.
 - c. Because it was all imported from the northern hemisphere before the war.
 - d. None of the above.....

Answer Key

1.d, 2.c, 3.a, 4.d, 5.c, 6.d, 7.a, 8.d, 9.c, 10.c, 11.c, 12.c, 13.b, 14.d, 15.d

ESSAY TOPICS / BOOK REPORT IDEAS

1. In an extract from the *Dictionary of National Biography 1951-1960*, a contribution by A. P. Ryan posted on the web site of the Nevil Shute Norway Foundation, <http://www.nevilshute.org>, the following opinion is offered of Nevil Shute's style: "His natural gift for creating briskly moving plots did not extend to the delineation of character in anything more than conventional terms. He retained to the last the outlook of a decent, average public-school boy of his generation." Is this criticism positive, negative, or neutral? Do you agree with the comment? Do you like Shute's spare characterizations?

The doomsday scenario is a staple of fiction in the second half of the 20th and the 21st centuries. Listed below are several books or movies, which are set in a world in imminent danger of annihilation, or after massively destructive global war. Some of these works, like *On the Beach*, were written during the Cold War, when fear of nuclear war was at its height. Some are more contemporary. Pick one of these works, and consider/answer the following questions: Compare/contrast this work to *On the Beach*. Which fictional situation seems more realistic or likely to you? If there is a significant difference in style, which version of doomsday do you prefer, and why? Do you prefer a low-key, realistic version of the world's end, like *On the Beach*, or something further over the top?

2. *The Sum of all Fears*, by Tom Clancy, book and movie, 2002: The device of mistaken identity is used here, as in *On the Beach*. In the movie version, neo-Nazis blow up a football stadium where the President of the U.S. is watching the Superbowl. The President escapes alive, but the CIA Director, played by Morgan Freeman, is killed. CIA specialist Jack Ryan, played by Ben Affleck, races to find who purchased nuclear bomb components from scavengers who found them in the Middle East. Tensions have been escalating with the former USSR, which is believed to be responsible, but Jack doesn't think so. He scrambles to buy time to prevent retaliation against Russia.....

END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS

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