

The Secret Code Language of Bright Kids

One of the most enduring stock figures from the repertory company of science fiction is the Bright Kid. He may be only normatively bright, like the young hero of *E.T.*, or a full-fledged juvenile Einstein like the Wunderkind heroes of Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human* or John Hersey's *The Child Buyer*. The vicarious appeal of such a protagonist is not to be wondered at. Just think of the first time you beat a grown-up at chess or in some other way demonstrated that older and wiser don't necessarily come as a matched set. The Bright Kid as Hero is not, of course, confined to science fiction (think of Dickens and Twain), but he seems to have a natural tropism for the genre, perhaps because so much of the science fiction audience is comprised of Bright Kids or grown-ups wistful for their Orphan Annie years, when "Tomorrow" was a tune they could completely believe in.

In her first and notably successful science fiction book, *Xorandor*, the English avant-garde novelist Christine Brooke-Rose has created a pair of twin Bright Kids, Jip and Zab, who are among the most credible and engaging in the genre. As their co-star, in the title role, she has given us an Alien Invader (if that's what *Xorandor* really is) in the form of a sentient rock, whose name derives from computer programming language, a dialect of English that receives in this novel its first sustained literary treatment. Jip and Zab, even before they encounter *Xorandor* sitting on his cairn on the coast of Cornwall, have developed a private language that incorporates some of the shorthand concision and syntactical clarity that characterizes a language like Basic.

Readers with some knowledge of programming will undoubtedly derive an extra measure of pleasure from *Xorandor*, but computer literacy is by no means required. Basic is Greek to me, but I never felt taken out of my depth, never wanted to skim, never was bored. Miss Brooke-Rose's verbal pyrotechnics are deployed in the interest of heightening and enriching her story, which is always riveting, as sheer verbal tour de force. *Xorandor* is comparable to such polyglot marvels as Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* or Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, books that poach on the territory of poetry without waxing "poetical."

Review of *Xorandor*, by Christine Brooke-Rose.

The story is as old as the hills, and simple as ABC. Jip and Zab, the computer whiz kids, are sporting with their computer on a rock in Cornwall when the rock begins to talk to them, first on their computer's screen, then aloud. The conversations that ensue, and the twins' and assorted experts' efforts to analyze them and to determine the nature, origins, capabilities, and intentions of this sentient rock, are the story in its entirety. There is almost as little action for the human characters as for Xorandor himself, who sits on his cairn and thinks. Xorandor and his progeny are alpha-phages, or eaters of alpha radiation. The opening of a nuclear waste dump near Xorandor's cairn has stirred him from his centuries-long repose and enabled him to begin to breed baby alpha-phages, which, when they leave their nest . . . But to tell more would spoil a good story. Enough to assure you that as with so much science fiction, nothing less than the fate of the earth is at stake.

Often, when an otherwise seasoned writer has a go at science fiction, the result is a botch. The genre's toy box is raided for its gaudy tropes, and an instant universe is fabricated that glitters for a few chapters of surrealistic fun and games until the whole structure collapses from a lack of imaginative rigor. Christine Brooke-Rose, however, maintains that delicate balance between fertility of intervention and strict economy of means that is the science-fictional equivalent of "elegance" in mathematics. This is all the more remarkable an accomplishment in that such virtues don't particularly distinguish her earlier novels, which abound in the kind of Joycean vocalises that only very earnest Ph.D. candidates are likely to mistake for good prose. Coming to her previous novel, *Amalgamemnon* (1985), after *Xorandor*, I found it hard to believe that the same author could have written both books, the former so turgid (and never more so than when it is trying its hardest to be oracular), the latter so readable. Yet the same concerns are evident in both books, the same technophobic dreads, the same delight in the elaboration of a palimpsest text. How to account for the differences? Perhaps it's simply that Miss Brooke-Rose is a born science fiction writer.