

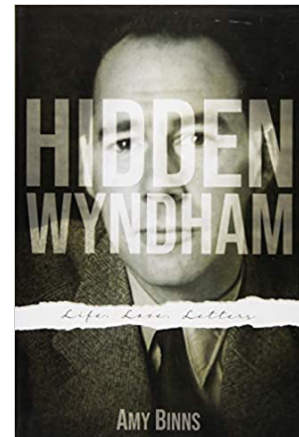
### *Hidden Wyndham: Life, Love, Letters,* by Amy Binns



Dennis Wilson Wise

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At this point, it seems almost obligatory for anyone who mentions John Wyndham's life to begin by quoting his reputation as science fiction's "invisible man." Although not as mysterious as Elena Ferrante, nor as reclusive as J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon, Wyndham nonetheless let personal reticence become a defining feature of his public identity. In fact, his best comparison is probably to C. S. Lewis. For most of Lewis's life, the Oxford fantasist cohabitated with a woman two decades his senior, the mother of a friend who died during the First World War, and neither friends nor his brother Warnie (with whom Lewis was quite close) ever knew the precise nature of their relationship.



Considering Wyndham's deep-set disdain for religion, this comparison with Lewis would probably have irked him. It remains apt, though, and so his "hidden" life thus forms the main subject for Amy Binns's snappy new biography, *Hidden Wyndham*. For the most part, her research derives from the Wyndham Archive at the University of Liverpool. Among other documents and paraphernalia, this collection holds over 350 private letters between Wyndham and his long-term partner Grace Wilson. In addition, Binns puts her journalistic training to good use, especially when studying the earlier portions of Wyndham's life. For example, she supplements her biography with primary source material from newspapers and court cases; these documents detail the bitter, contentious, and distressingly public legal wrangle that embroiled Wyndham's self-destructive father George Harris against his (then) wife's upper-middle-class family of "new money" industrialists. To this traumatic and shameful scandal Binns attributes much of Wyndham's extreme personal reserve.

Overall, Binns's biography paints a compelling picture. As much as newspaper gossip about familial conflict may have affected the young Wyndham, she also chronicles his equally traumatic education in the British public schooling system. After her divorce, Wyndham's mother Gertrude spent her life living in hotels, and she consequently shunted her two sons—Jack and Vivian—through a series of boarding schools where pervasive bullying made their young lives almost unbearable. The only exception for Jack was Bedales, a "school for snowflakes" as Binns calls it (45), but still a desperately needed safe haven. While not terribly good at providing its students a quality education, Bedales created precisely the sort of nurturing, stable environment that

Gertrude's two children otherwise wholly lacked. This school would have a lasting influence on Wyndham. As Binns notes, the last name for the character Michael Beadley in *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) was created when Wyndham conflated the name "Bedales" with that of its visionary and highly progressive headmaster, J. H. Badley.

After her account of Bedales and a series of desultory and quickly abandoned careers, Binns then chronicles Wyndham's move into the Penn Club at London—basically, a "slightly more adult version of Bedales" (65). There, Wyndham retained just enough money from his mother's inheritance to drift along aimlessly as he tried, with mixed success, to break into the American pulp SF market. At the Penn Club in 1930, however, Wyndham also met Grace Wilson, a teacher and a major source of interest for Binns. The famous secrecy of Wyndham, says Binns, stems from more than just a scandalous family history—it also stems from the unusual nature of Wyndham and Grace's relationship. Before marrying in 1963, they'd already been secret lovers for over a quarter century. As a teacher, Grace was legally barred from marrying until 1938, but neither person much respected the institution of marriage anyway. Wyndham in particular believed marriage had "a crippling effect on women's personalities" (72), enforcing a dependency on men that was entirely anti-feminist. As proof, Binns points to Gordon Zellaby from *The Midwich Cuckoos* (1957), numerous short stories such as "Dumb Martian" (1952), but also to Wyndham's mother Gertrude. For most of her life, Gertrude rotated between male protectors—from father, to husband, to father again—without once accomplishing anything worthwhile with her privilege. In fact, although "Jack never breathed a word against" his mother in hundreds of letters, Binns argues with some (though not complete) convincingness that Wyndham's novels "tell a different story" (136)—namely, that Gertrude's absenteeism explains the dearth of quality maternal figures in Wyndham's work.

Still, Binns saves her most ambitious claim for the end of her book—the idea that Grace Wilson served as the inspiration for all of Wyndham's pro-active, feminist heroines. On a rhetorical level, this reserve by Binns represents an interesting choice. I suspect it betokens her awareness that such a rigid, one-to-one biographical correspondence might strike some readers as a reach—a largely intuitive leap from the available evidence rather than a concrete, uncontested fact. Yet, because she saves this claim for the end, readers need not trip themselves up with this claim as they're reading. Nonetheless, the Grace thesis structures the entirety of *Hidden Wyndham*. As Binns's subtitle indicates, her book focuses on "life, love, letters." Although Binns cannot avoid discussing the novels and short fiction, literary criticism takes second stage to Wyndham's long, monogamous romance with Grace. For instance, long portions of Part Two, which covers the years 1939–1945, are only reprinted extracts from Wyndham's war letters to his lover, almost as if to demonstrate through an abundance of reproduced primary source material that Grace *did*, in fact, shape and center Wyndham's emotional life. Indeed, much as with Binns's belated forays into literary criticism, Part Two focuses less on the Second World War itself, which Binns avoids contextualizing or describing in detail, than on revealing the painful separation inaugurated by

that war between Wyndham and Grace—an anguished, painful time for them both. Yet as the letters show, Grace undeniably served as Wyndham’s main psychological support.

Now, though, is probably a decent time to mention the elephant-in-the-room of Wyndham scholarship. Within SF circles it’s long been known that David Ketterer, an academic, has been writing a biography of Wyndham since the mid-1990s—in fact, the entry on Ketterer for *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* even drolly observes that this “full study is awaited with impatience” (Nicholls). Yet, throughout the entirety of *Hidden Wyndham*, Binns applies a certain cautious circumspection in regard to her fellow biographer. On one hand, she mentions Ketterer explicitly in her acknowledgements, citing his “excellent research” and his graciousness in allowing her to read “some” of Grace Wilson’s personal diaries (284; see also 79, n. 24). On the other hand, Binns cites relatively little of that “excellent research,” and when she does, she generally limits herself to purely factual details. The most glaring silence concerns Ketterer’s almost 9,000 word article on Wyndham for *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Any direct comparison between that article and *Hidden Wyndham*, however, quickly reveals why: Binns devotes large sections of her biography to challenging many of Ketterer’s key interpretations.

The most obvious sore point involves the status of Grace Wilson herself. For Ketterer, she and Wyndham were merely “good companions,” and he firmly denies that Grace was the love of Wyndham’s life. His main evidence stems from a comment in one of Wyndham’s rare interviews. In 1961, when asked why he has remained a bachelor so long, the author replied that although he’d met the right person twice, each time the lady had met someone “righter.” Ketterer takes this statement at face value, so he attempts to identify (however tentatively) those two “Mrs Rights.” Binns, however, considers Wyndham’s statement a red herring, a classic case of misdirection. After all, why would Wyndham blurt out the truth to a reporter after concealing it for decades, and when publicly revealing their unmarried relationship would cost Grace “her job and reputation” (218)? To my mind, the more plausible interpretation lies with Binns, but her disagreements with Ketterer hardly stop there. At one point, Binns admits to submitting Wyndham’s birth certificate to a professional genealogist, who verified its authenticity (36, n. 11). With deliberate vagueness, her footnote merely mentions that “another researcher” has questioned its validity, but she is clearly referring to Ketterer here, who asserts in his revised *Literary Encyclopedia* article that “90-something-per-cent proof” exists for Wyndham being born out of wedlock; a later article in the journal *Foundation* presents Ketterer’s reasoning in fuller detail. Obviously, Binns finds this reasoning unsubstantiated by the evidence.

From my outsider’s perspective, Binns’s need for critical discretion in *Hidden Wyndham*—her dancing around any direct challenge to Ketterer—recalls a little something of A. S. Byatt’s novel *Possession* (1990), a book that depicts the hotbed of tensions and jealousies that can sometimes arise between literary biographers. Notably, although Ketterer permitted Binns to read *some* of Grace Wilson’s diaries, he uncharitably refused her access to the entire collection. One can only hope that if Ketterer ever publishes a rebuttal to *Hidden Wyndham*—and I myself would consider a second biography worthwhile—that rebuttal would not avail itself, even partially, of information

denied to Binns by Ketterer himself. In any event, *Hidden Wyndham* remains an edifying, highly readable account of one of British SF's major 20th-century writers, and Binns does an admirable job in conveying the inner life of someone cagily reticent about that inner life. Even if the usefulness of a strict identification between Grace Wilson and Wyndham's most ardently feminist heroines can be debated, especially in terms of literary criticism, Grace's central importance to Wyndham himself seems undeniable. All told, any scholar interested in Wyndham's work should be glad to have this valuable biography by Binns as a resource.

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