Return to Earth  
*John Christopher*

**Introduction**

The concept which drives the book, however, is telepathy. Although this idea too has a long history, it does not cease to grow in popularity as a subject for books, television plays and films, particularly for young people. A similarly graphic contemporary treatment of the same theme is in T. H. White’s *The Master* (1957).

Telepathy is the direct transmission of messages, emotions or other subjective states from one person to another without the use of any sensory channel of communication. Although it can help to make a good story and although many people make strong claims to have had some kind of telepathic experience, it is important to remember that most of the extensive research carried out by parapsychologists in this field, has so far failed to prove conclusively that telepathic communication can take place consistently and predictably between human beings.

Christopher imagines that a world of telepaths would be a terrifying and loveless one. He also imagines how it might come about. The generators in space might not in themselves be very convincing but the picture he paints of a small group of people (the scientists working on Project X) taking a unilateral and secret decision, after a minimum of thought or research, which results in the destruction of the human race, may also have resonance for a generation exposed to rumours about the possibility of AIDS – generated and BSE-generated epidemics.

**The story**

It is the year 2029, and Harl is leaving on a long space journey. When he comes back, he will be eight years older, but people on Earth will be a hundred years older. Ellen refuses to go with him. She says that when he gets back, the world will be completely different because humans will be telepaths.

She has been working on Project X: a secret project to produce telepathic human beings. There are now generators in space which will turn everyone into telepaths at the same time: the Project X scientists believe it has to be done like this to avoid problems between telepaths and non-telepaths. Harl and Ellen part.

Much later in 2129, the spaceship *Astronaut* returns to Earth. As the space travellers approach, they are surprised not to see any sign of life. They land on a deserted airfield.

The nearby city of Detroit is deserted too. They search the rest of the planet in a smaller spacecraft and find no-one. In Rome they see lions herding wild pigs: if carnivorous animals are telepathic too, they would only be able to catch food by co-operating. The spaceship crew still do not understand why there are no people until a very old man arrives. He was born in the year the *Astronaut* left, and has stayed alive long enough to tell them what happened. Most telepaths died or committed suicide during adolescence because reading the innermost thoughts of other humans was too unbearable. The old man wants the travellers to start human life again: he knows there are two women on the spacecraft. Harl tells him they are too old to bear children.

**Background to the story**

John Christopher wrote this story in 1954, seven years before the first cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was launched into space. But people have always dreamt of flight and of space travel as the story of Icarus demonstrates, and even the idea of travelling through time, another idea presented in the book, had been anticipated by H. G. Wells in *The Time Machine* published in 1895.

The concept which drives the book, however, is telepathy. Although this idea too has a long history, it does not cease to grow in popularity as a subject for books, television plays and films, particularly for young people. A similarly graphic contemporary treatment of the same theme is in T. H. White’s *The Master* (1957). Telepathy is the direct transmission of messages, emotions or other subjective states from one person to another without the use of any sensory channel of communication. Although it can help to make a good story and although many people make strong claims to have had some kind of telepathic experience, it is important to remember that most of the extensive research carried out by parapsychologists in this field, has so far failed to prove conclusively that telepathic communication can take place consistently and predictably between human beings.

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Pre-reading activity

Match the words with the pictures

1. Harl caught Ellen’s arm. ‘Come with us!’ he said.
2. ‘There’s a tree out there on that airfield which is forty years old, if not more.’
3. ‘Our journey through space will take eight years.’
4. The buildings were silent and empty.
5. ‘They could see, hear, feel everything, every minute of their waking lives.’
6. Harl smelled the autumn leaves and the soft warm wind.
7. ‘Drewitt did a lot of experiments with monkeys.’
8. They watched for the lights of the moon’s Tycho City, but the place was dead.
9. It was a man; strange-looking, but a real living man.
10. The green thing still looked like a tennis ball.

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the setting
Time: 10–20 minutes
Organization: Give one copy of the worksheet to each student or to each pair of students. Ask the students to match the picture with the correct caption. When they have matched the pictures and the captions, ask them who the different people in the pictures are and what the relationships between them are.

After this ask the students to look again at the pictures and put them in the order as they think they occur in the story (tell them that picture number 1 is also first in the sequence), and to predict the story from the pictures. There is no right or wrong answer to this activity. The stories need only be plausible.

Key: 1f, 2j, 3d, 4e, 5c, 6b, 7i, 8a, 9g, 10h. The order of pictures in the book is: 1, 5, 9, 8, 2, 10, 6, 3, 7, 4
Return to Earth

While reading activity

Whatever next?

It is now the year 2129. Harl and the other travellers can see no sign of life on Earth. Choose the best descriptions of what they will find. Give reasons for your choice.

1. All the humans on Earth are dead. The generators did not work properly and so some people became telepaths and some did not. The two kinds of people began to fight each other and everyone was killed.

2. The animals became telepaths too, so humans could not catch them. So the humans died because they had nothing to eat.

3. Everyone became a telepath, but life was terrible because everyone could read the bad thoughts of everyone else. Love died. Many people killed themselves, many others just died, until no humans were still alive on the planet.

4. Everyone became a telepath but pollution became so bad that people had to live under the ground. This is why there were no radio signals to the travellers, and why there were no lights.

5. Everyone became a telepath and life became beautiful. Soon people did not need their bodies any more and only their minds lived. Harl and the other travellers make contact with these ‘people’ without bodies and learn how to become telepaths too.

To the teacher

Where: At the end of Chapter 3
Aim: To focus on making predictions about the development of the story through the remainder of the book
Time: 15–30 minutes

Organization: Give students the worksheet or show it on an overhead projector and ask them, in pairs or groups, to predict what they think the travellers will find when they return to Earth.
## Return to Earth
### After reading activity

**Who said what?**

*Complete the table.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUOTATION</th>
<th>WHO’S SPEAKING?</th>
<th>WHO TO?</th>
<th>WHEN?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  ‘When I get back, I’ll say hello to your great-great granddaughter.’</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2  ‘To the people of 2129, you will be stranger than a wild animal in a zoo.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>3  ‘But how can you do a thing like that, after only three experiments?’</td>
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<tr>
<td>4  ‘We have to change everybody all at the same time.’</td>
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<td>5  ‘If she said it was possible to do it, then I believe it was possible.’</td>
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<td>6  ‘I’m going to open the last bottle of whisky.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>7  ‘We saw a whale in the river under Brooklyn Bridge . . . ’</td>
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<tr>
<td>8  ‘... when you have an x and a-y, you always try to make them-into an equation, just like 3x4 = 2x6.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>9  ‘Some of them shot themselves or jumped off buildings . . . ’</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>10 ‘Mary is fifty-two years old and Lucy is fifty-four.’</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### To the teacher

**Aim:** To develop a feel for character and dialogue  
**Time:** 10–15 minutes  
**Organization:** Give out the worksheet which can be done alone or in pairs. Check the answers as a class and then invite feedback from the whole class when they have finished on other things the characters are actually quoted as saying in the book or might have said.

**Key:** Harl to Ellen, Ellen to Harl, Harl to Ellen, Ellen to Harl, Harl to Rennis, Awkwright to the other travellers, Harl to Awkwright, Rennis to Harl, The old man to Harl, Harl to the old man