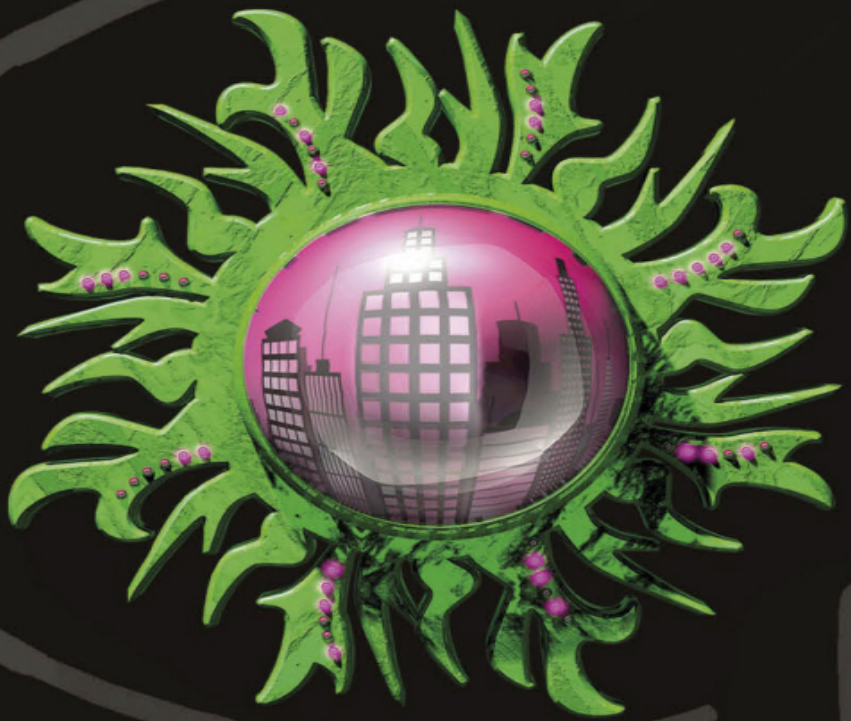
JOHN CHRISTOPHER

TRIPODS



CITY OF GOLD AND LEAD

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About the Book

Will Parker and his friends have escaped the mind-controlling alien Tripods, and found sanctuary in the White Mountains – but when an opportunity arises for them to infiltrate a Tripod city, they realise they have a chance to strike back against the invaders. What they learn there may hold the key to liberating humanity – if they can survive the beauty and terror of the City of Gold and Lead.

THE TRIPODS

THE CITY OF GOLD AND LEAD

JOHN CHRISTOPHER

RHCP DIGITAL

To Rose, Liz, and Nick,
With love

Preface

WRITERS ARE BORROWERS and thieves. Computer analysis has recently revealed that the best of us all, William Shakespeare, based two of his early plays on works by his then more distinguished contemporary, Christopher Marlowe. Because he *was* Shakespeare, his versions turned out far better than anything Marlowe could have achieved. And as Shakespeare's genius matured, he no longer had a need to borrow; other writers borrowed from him instead.

It wasn't quite like that in my own case: I stole from a much better writer than myself. All I can offer by way of extenuation is a) I didn't know I was doing it and b) I did my best to add a little something of my own.

I'd written *The White Mountains* in a spirit of venturing into new and uncharted territory. I was far from sure it would prove acceptable, even to the English publisher who'd asked me to write it; let alone to a wider audience. I also realized that, if it was approved, I was going to be leaving loose ends which would need another book to sort out, although I had no notion of having embarked on a trilogy.

The chief loose end lay in the nature of the Tripods: Were they intelligent machines, or awe-inspiring carriers of mysterious aliens? I had actually used Tripods before in an adult science fiction story (thankfully forgotten), without even wondering where I'd got them from. I now realized where I'd picked up the idea: H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*.

This was an almost incredible example of amnesia. As a boy, I had been fanatically devoted to science fiction –

principally through the medium of American pulp magazines, but I had also worshipfully devoured all the scientific romances of the great H. G. Wells, of which *The War of the Worlds* is among the most notable. And possibly the most famous: in the thirties Orson Welles made extraordinary use of the book to terrify radio listeners across a large tract of North America into thinking the story was real.

If I *had* understood the source of the Tripods earlier, I would never, of course, have used such a device; but with *The White Mountains* finished and on its way to publication, I realized I was stuck with the borrowing. So I started trying to make it my own.

On the face of things, tripods do not seem a particularly sensible way of getting around. They are large and they stand awesomely tall, but they're clumsy and relatively slow-moving as well. I thought about my illustrious predecessor, and realized that he too had been struck by the visual image – undeniably a powerful one – but had not given much thought to more practical considerations. His tripods had been vehicles for intelligent, spiderlike Martians. But why on earth would an arachnid species use something so improbable, and so impractical? They would have done better, for instance, if they had replicated their own body structure and deployed eight-legged, crawler-type vehicles in their invasion of planet Earth.

And why would they develop these stiltlike vehicles on a planet which astronomers had assured us was desertlike and largely flat? It made no sense. But then I recalled that there had been something that was reminiscent of Tripods in our own history: the stilt men of Landes.

Landes is a region of southwest France fronting the Bay of Biscay, now drained and cultivated but before the nineteenth century a marshfilled swampy region. Sheep grazed there on the hummocks of grassland between the swamps, and their shepherds needed a better way of

looking after them than by trudging around in the muddy wetlands. So they developed stilts, on which they could stalk about tending their flocks, carrying long sticks to reach down to the ground below (the third leg of the Tripod?). Even today, at the town of Dax, famous for its mineral springs, there are annual demonstrations of stilting – not just walking on stilts, but dancing and engaging in sporting events. Stilt walking was also developed in Belgium, and in the Marquesas islands in the South Pacific.

So perhaps, I speculated, these aliens had come from a swampy planet. And perhaps, unlike Wells' Martians, they *had* been into the idea of body replication. They had invented Tripods rather than stilts . . . because they themselves were three-legged? I was beginning to get a grip on things.

How would a Tripod move – which leg went first, and which followed? Try it yourself, walking three fingers across a table: it isn't easy. And it was a question that cropped up seriously in 1983 when the BBC made a television series based on the books. The producer, Richard Bates, put the problem to me, and I airily told him not to worry. A revival of the MGM movie based on Wells' book was to be shown on television the following week; all we had to do was watch that, and find out. But when we did, we found that the film producers had chickened out of the difficulty – instead of tripods they featured flying capsules, supported by invisible force beams. So I handed on the problem to Arthur C. Clarke (before he became Sir Arthur). He said that while it was indeed difficult, there should be a solution, but it would be a pretty abstract one, involving the utilization of higher mathematics.

Daunted by this, I went back and took another look at *The White Mountains*, only to find that I'd actually already worked it out for myself but forgotten about it. The only reasonable means of progress for a Tripod is by way of a twirling motion, a kind of spiraling advance. So if Tripods

twirled, maybe so did the three-legged Masters. And perhaps they had three eyes, to take in a continuously shifting perspective – two more steps on the road to getting things right.

Coming from a hot steamy planet, the aliens would want to maintain a similar environment in their citadel strongholds on Earth. In addition, the massive scale of the Tripods suggested that their planet was larger than ours, with a higher gravitational force – they would need to reproduce that, too. I was beginning to envisage what their headquarters might look like: a walled, domed city with a gleaming gold exterior and an artificial gravity within that would relentlessly wear down any humans brought inside. A city of gold and lead.

John Christopher, 2003

One

Three Are Chosen

EVEN WHEN WE first came to the White Mountains, in summer, the upper reaches of the Tunnel looked out over fields of snow and ice; but at the lower end there were rocks and grass and a view of the glacier, stained brown with mud and dripping into rivulets that ran down to the valley, far far below. In September there was a fall of snow which did not lie, but in the early days of October the snow came again, more heavily, and this time remained. The grip of winter tightened around us, and it was to be more than half a year before those white bony fingers unclenched.

Preparations for the siege had been made long before. Food had been stored, cattle and winter fodder taken into the inner recesses of the mountain which sheltered us. We did not need a great deal by way of heat, protected as we were by dozens, hundreds of yards of solid rock. Cool in summer, our deep caves were warm, by comparison, in winter. We wore furs when we were outside, but the rest of the time our normal clothing was enough.

Our lives were confined, but by no means idle. Reveille, for those of us in the training cadre, was at six, and was followed by half an hour’s brisk exercise. After that came a simple breakfast, and then the first study period of the day, lasting three hours. There were more exercises before the midday meal, and in the afternoon exercise and instruction in our particular sports. If the weather were fine, this took

place outside in the snow; otherwise in the Great Cavern. There was a second study period before supper, and afterward generally there was discussion among our seniors, to which we listened but in which we did not presume to join. It had one subject – the Tripods – and one purpose: their overthrow.

The Tripods had been rulers of the earth for more than a hundred years. They governed simply and effectively, by dominating the minds of men. This was achieved through the Caps, meshes of silvery metal which fitted closely around the skull and were woven into the very flesh of their wearers. Capping occurred in one's fourteenth year, marking the point at which one ceased to be a child and became an adult. It was taken for granted, an expected, looked-for thing, attended by feasting and celebration.

A few months earlier I had seen my cousin Jack, a year older than myself, go through the ceremony, and had noticed the change in him afterward. I was to be Capped the following year. I had some misgivings, but I kept them private – no one talked much about Tripods and Cappings and, of course, no one ever queried the rightness of these things. Not, that is, until the Vagrant, Ozymandias, came to the little village where I lived.

The Vagrants were those for whom Capping had not worked properly. Their minds had refused to accept the conditioning of the Tripods and, in refusing, had been broken. They wandered from place to place, never resting long, and were looked after but pitied and disliked by normal Capped men and women. Now, though, I found myself more interested in them; particularly in the one who called himself Ozymandias, a big, red-haired, red-bearded man who sang strange songs, and spoke lines of poetry, and mixed sense and nonsense when he talked. Defying my parents, I invited him to come to the den which Jack and I

had made just outside the village. He told me a strange story.

He was, in the first place, not really a Vagrant, but posing as such so that he could travel through the land, unchallenged and unremarked. The Cap he wore was a false one. He explained that the Tripods were enemies of men, not benefactors, invaders, perhaps, from another world, and how, through Capping, minds which were just beginning to think for themselves were subdued and harnessed to the worship of their oppressors. He told me, too, that although the Tripods ruled the planet, there were a few places where free men survived, and that one of these was among the White Mountains, across the sea from England far to the south. He asked me if I would be willing to make a difficult and dangerous journey there, and I said I would.

He himself travelled on in search of more recruits, but I did not go alone. Another cousin of mine, Henry, an old antagonist since before our schooldays, saw me leaving the village and followed me. We crossed the sea together, and in the land called France found a third, Jean-Paul – whom we named Beanpole. Together we made our way south. It was as difficult and dangerous as Ozymandias had promised. Near the end, we fought a battle with a Tripod and, by luck and a weapon of the ancients which we found in the ruins of one of the great-cities, destroyed it.

So, at last, we reached the White Mountains.

There were eleven of us in the training cadre, being prepared for the first move in the counterattack against our enemies. It was a hard schooling, in body and mind alike, but we knew a little of the task before us, and how heavy the odds against success were. The discipline and hardship we had to endure might not shorten those odds by much, but every bit counted.

For we – or some of us – were to conduct a reconnaissance. We knew almost nothing of the Tripods –

not even whether they were intelligent machines or vehicles for alien beings. We must know more before we could hope to fight them successfully; and there was only one way to get that knowledge. Some of us, one at least, must penetrate into the City of the Tripods, study them, and bring back information. The plan was this:

The City lay to the north, in the country of the Germans. Each year some of the newly Capped, chosen in different ways, were brought there to serve the Tripods. I had witnessed one such way at the Château de la Tour Rouge, when Eloise, the daughter of the Comte, had been made Queen of the Tournament. I had been horrified to learn that at the end of her brief reign she should want to be taken to be a slave of the enemy, and go gladly, thinking it an honour.

Among the Germans, it seemed, there were Games each summer, to which young men came from hundreds of miles away. The winners were feasted and made much of after which they, too, went to serve in the City. At the next Games, it was hoped, one of us might win, and gain admission. What would happen after that was unknown. Anyone who succeeded would have to rely on his wits, both in spying on the Tripods and in passing on what he had learned. The last part was likely to be the hardest. Because although scores, perhaps hundreds, went yearly into the City, not one had ever been known to come out.

One day the snow was melting at the foot of the Tunnel where we exercised, and a week later it lay only in isolated patches, and there was the green of grass, dotted with purple crocuses. The sky was blue, and sunlight flamed from the white peaks all round, burning our skins through the thin pure air. During a break we lay on the grass and looked down. Figures moved cautiously half a mile below, visible to us but taking cover from those who might look up from the

valley. This was the first raiding party of the season, on its way to plunder the fat lands of the Capped.

I sat with Henry and Beanpole, a little apart from the rest. The lives of all those who lived in the mountains were closely knit, but this strand was a more tightly woven one. In the things we had endured, jealousies and enmities had worn away and been replaced by true comradeship. The boys in the cadre were our friends, but the bond between us three was special.

Beanpole said gloomily, ‘I failed at one meter seventy today.’

He spoke in German; we had learned the language but needed to practice it. I said, ‘One goes off form. You’ll improve again.’

‘I’m getting worse every day.’

Henry said, ‘Rodrigo’s definitely gone off. I beat him comfortably.’

‘It’s all right for you.’

Henry had been chosen as a long-distance runner, and Rodrigo was his chief rival. Beanpole was training for long and high jumping. I was one of two boxers. There were four sports altogether – the other was sprint running – and they had been arranged to produce a maximum of competitiveness. Henry had done well in his event from the start. And I myself was fairly confident, at any rate, as far as my opponent here was concerned. This was Tonio, a dark-skinned boy from the south, taller than I and with a longer reach, but not as quick. Beanpole, though, had grown increasingly pessimistic about his chances.

Henry reassured him, telling him he had heard the instructors saying he was coming on well. I wondered if it were true, or said for encouragement: the former, I hoped.

I said, ‘I asked Johann if it had been decided yet how many were to go.’

Johann, one of the instructors, was squat and powerful, yellow-haired, with the look of a bad-tempered bull but

amiable at heart. Henry asked, ‘What did he say?’

‘He wasn’t sure, but he thought four – the best from each group.’

‘So it could be us three, plus an extra,’ Henry said.

Beanpole shook his head. ‘I’ll never do it.’

‘You will.’

I said, ‘And the fourth?’

‘It might be Fritz.’

He did seem to be the best of the sprint runners, as far as we could tell. He was German himself, and came from a place on the edge of a forest to the northeast. His chief rival was a French boy, Etienne, whom I preferred. Etienne was cheerful and talkative, Fritz tall, heavy, taciturn.

I said, ‘As long as we all come through.’

‘You two will,’ Beanpole said.

Henry leaped to his feet. ‘There’s the whistle. Come on, Beanpole. Time to get back to work.’

The seniors had their own tasks. Some were our instructors; others formed the raiding parties to keep us supplied with food. There were still others who studied the few books that had survived from olden days, and tried to relearn the skills and mysteries of our ancestors. Beanpole, whenever he had a chance, would be with them, listening to their talk and even putting up suggestions of his own. Not long after we met he had spoken – wildly, as I thought – about using a sort of gigantic kettle to push carriages without the need for horses. Something like this had been discovered, or rediscovered, here, though it would not yet work properly. And there were plans for more remarkable things: making light and heat through something which had been called electricity was one.

And at the head of all the groups there was one man, whose hands held all the threads, whose decisions were unquestioned. This was Julius.

He was close on sixty years old, a small man and a cripple. When he was a boy he had fallen into an ice crevasse and broken his thigh: it had been set badly and he walked with a limp. In those days, things had been very different in the White Mountains. Those who lived there had no purpose but survival, and their numbers were dwindling. It was Julius who thought of winning recruits from the world outside, from those not yet Capped, and who believed – and made others believe – that some day men would fight back against the Tripods, and destroy them.

It was Julius, too, who had worked out the enterprise for which we were being trained. And it was Julius who would make the final decision on which of us were chosen.

He came out one day to watch us. He was white-haired, red-cheeked like most of those who had lived all their lives in this sharp, clear air, and he leaned on a stick. I saw him, and concentrated hard on the bout in which I was engaged. Tonio feinted with his left, and followed up with a right cross. I made him miss, hammered a sharp right to his ribs and, when he came in again, landed a left to the jaw which sent him sprawling.

Julius beckoned, and I ran to where he stood. He said, ‘You are improving, Will.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I suppose you are getting impatient to know which of you will be going to the Games?’

I nodded. ‘A little, sir.’

He studied me. ‘When the Tripod had you in its grasp – do you remember how you felt? Were you afraid?’

I remembered. I said, ‘Yes, sir.’

‘And the thought of being in their hands, in their City – does that frighten you?’ I hesitated, and he went on: ‘There are two sides to the choice, you know. We old ones may be able to judge your quickness and skill, of mind and body, but we cannot read your hearts.’

‘Yes,’ I admitted, ‘it frightens me.’