

Brian Aldiss, Arthur Clarke and J.G. Ballard were three of the leading British SF writers that I read early on. They opened my eyes not only to the vast perspectives available ‘out there’ in space, but also to the equally vast perspectives available ‘in here’ in the world of the mind, feelings and imagination. In time I had the chance to meet all three, especially Aldiss, who was happy to turn up to SF conventions when invited. Clarke, who died in 2008, was more stand offish and, I think, regretted going to the convention in Brighton where he was clearly uncomfortable with the attention. Ballard, who died in May 2009, was more reclusive and I only had the chance to meet him in 1991. At the time I was freelancing for an Australian magazine called 21C – which may well qualify for the best quality futures-oriented magazine ever - now sadly defunct. Ballard had just published *The Kindness of Women*, a largely autobiographical book that revealed much about the author’s later life. I took my son, Rohan, with me to interview Ballard in the foyer of a Manchester hotel and the result was subsequently published in issue 5 of the magazine, Autumn 1992, pp 78-81.

I missed some of Ballard’s early work when he was an unknown writer struggling for recognition in the pulp magazine market. But I still remember the impact that the short stories that were later collected in a volume called *Vermillion Sands* had upon me. It was not until much later that I understood why the all-but deserted seaside resorts with their empty swimming pools, strange inhabitants and entropic atmospherics had such an impact upon me. The novels of his middle years (*The Drowned World*, *The Wind from Nowhere*) dealt with the same issues but on a larger scale. Then his focus moved to the ways that the mythologies of high tech penetrated the everyday world (*Crash*, *High Rise*). I did not like the later work as much but when I heard of his death I recalled that interview and the pleasure of meeting him back in 1991.

I will, in due course, make the full interview available. But, in the interim, here is a lightly edited version of the introduction that I wrote for 21C in 1991.

Introduction to Interview With JG Ballard

J.G. Ballard is a gentle, courteous man with a soft, southern English accent. Yet he has a vision of startling originality. His fiction, which explores our hidden obsessions with media, technologies, landscapes, has gained him a solid international readership. Perhaps more than any other, Ballard has drawn our attention to some of the new - often powerfully subversive - ways that mainstream cultures can be undermined by the very tools and innovations that appear to sustain them. This ambiguity drives the mythologies that emerge in his work.

Ballard gained his reputation by treading new ground. While his early novels are located near climactic upheavals, even there the dominant landscapes are internal. He is, perhaps, more interested in dreams, myths, psychology, the personal and social constructions of reality, than in technology *per se*. In his universe such elements are all inextricably intertwined; fiction and reality are not separate.

Some of the early work remains highly regarded today. For example, *Vermillion Sands* (1971) is often placed among the finest imaginative literature of the time. Similarly, in *Crash* (1973), Ballard took our obsessions with the motor vehicle to an all-too-logical extreme. It's fair to say that the full implications continue to elude us. His later work explores the media landscape, high-rise tower blocks and the like with an almost nightmarish intensity. Ballard's restless vision seems to probe more deeply than many into the overlooked crevices of 20th century life. It is not a comforting picture, but since it resonates so strongly with dreams, feelings and intuitions, we know that something significant is being said.

The publication of *Empire of the Sun* (1984) brought Ballard fame and was a revelation to his existing readers. For in the war-torn city of Shanghai an entropic vision of the world was forcefully impressed upon the consciousness of a young boy. The creative turmoil that resulted has come close to being a cultural force in its own right. The images of ruined airfields and empty swimming pools have contributed toward the iconography of an age because they echo our secret fears about the risks involved in the over-extension of humankind upon the earth. A second semi-autobiographical novel *The Kindness of Women* (1991) followed the child from war to a kind of unsettled peace and, finally, to late middle age. What makes these books significant is that, in their own way, they are chronicles of our time, not merely autobiography. Ballard's success is founded upon the fact that he speaks not just for himself, but also for some wider constituency founded in the collective unconscious.

I spoke with Ballard in the comfortable lounge of a hotel in Manchester. The hotel was, in its way, a constructed reality scripted and choreographed like a film set, a construct standing in stark contrast to the chaos of large-scale road works outside. Such "nested environments" are second nature to Ballard, to whom, perhaps, the whole world is a fantastic stage. He was certainly at ease in a role he knew well. Despite the self-revelation inherent in his work, he is, nevertheless, a private man, not often seen in public. Yet his cordiality and unhurried manner, his direct gaze and ready conversation made for an easy rapport.

(To be continued.)