

Exploring Inner Space

WAR FEVER

By J.G. Ballard

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by David Foster Wallace

BRITAIN'S J.G. Ballard is not a great fiction writer, but he is an important one. If that seems like an inconsistent judgment, be advised that American readers who know Ballard only via his moving, Spielbergable memoir *Empire of the Sun* do not know the real J. G. Ballard. The real Ballard has since the early '60s been a pioneer of a certain sort of literary science fiction I like to call Psy-Fi. Psy-Fi, often parodic, surreal and grotesque, and almost always set in some near and recognizable future, seeks to explore the psychopathology of post-atomic life, stuff like high technology, mass-media, advertising, PR, totalitarianism, etc.

Ballard's 1973 cult novel *Crash*, a coldly theoretical fable about the eroticism of automobile accidents and the relations of violence to orgasm and deformity to celebrity, ranks with Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* as basically defining the Psy-Fi genre. And, forays into memoir and mass-market appeal notwithstanding, Ballard has toiled and produced his best work in the metal arbor of this weird allegorical techno-lit. His latest U.S. release, *War Fever*, a collection of short stories written between the mid-'70s and the late '80s, is vintage Ballardian Psy-Fi, and its most successful pieces show Ballard at his engaging, exasperating best. And Ballard at his best helps show why the Psy-Fi masters have had such a profound influence on contemporary American fiction writers, not only genre-restricted cyberpunks like William Gibson but serious postmodern artists like Don DeLillo, William T. Vollmann and Mark Leyner.

Clinical, dogmatic, relentlessly reifying and world-class imaginative, Ballard is really more a social critic than a storyteller. And, except for a couple of hard-core science fiction pieces like "Report on an Unidentified Space Station," all of *War Fever's* 14 stories grow out of the parodic expansion of some single angst-producing feature of modern social life. In "The Secret History of World War 3," Ronald Reagan is brought back from advanced senescence for a third presidential term in '92, and when the U.S. electorate, "Watching this robotic figure with his goofy grins . . . began to ask if the President was brain-dead, or even alive at all," Reagan's handlers begin releasing exhaustive reports on his health, updates and panel discussions that so mesmerize a nation of TV-watchers (for whom the President's EKG-trace is finally broadcast like stock quotations at the bottom of all programming) that the people ignore a spasmodic nuclear exchange with the U.S.S.R. in favor of expert analyses of presidential bowel-function and the First Lady's cosmetic tucks.

In "Dream Cargoes," a scuttled garbage barge spills toxic wastes onto the shores of a Caribbean atoll, spawning gorgeous new life forms and metamorphosing human consciousness into a kind of techno-mysticism until the Navy steps in with flamethrowers to stop the "pollution." In the collection's title story, the factional warfare in Beirut is revealed to be orchestrated by the U.N., which has been protecting 30 years of complete global peace by fueling paranoia and hatred among the Beirut combatants, using the fighting as a controlled experiment in mutating "the virus of war."

War Fever is an unusually tight, unified story collection, not only because its author has three or four basic Psy-Fi obsessions he simply works and reworks, but also because Ballard uses such a distinctive set of styles and techniques. Structurally, every one of this book's stories is exoskeletal: its symbols and meanings are right on the surface, right in your face; and they, rather than plot or character, provide the story's developmental drive. As is S.O.P. for Ballard, many of *War Fever's* selections are narrated in the first-person, with the narrator adopting this "I'm-the-last-and-only-person-who-can-articulate-what's-happened" tone so common to science fiction. And Ballard, as always, loves his formal fun. A diehard experimentalist, he has stories here in the form of an index to the autobiography of some eminent fictional 20th-century guy ("The Index," cute but slight, like a concrete poem), and, in the labyrinthine "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown," in the form of numbered scholarly glosses on a one-sentence fragment of an unfinished essay detailing a famous neurosurgeon's plunge into schizophrenia and murder. This last story, my favorite in the collection, is not only a Borgesian marvel of invention, it's an ingenious study in dissociation, in which the academic objectivity of the glosses and the pathological pathos of the notes' subject counterpoint and dance and finally marry in the creepy revelation of just who's authoring the glosses. One of Ballard's finest stories ever, "Notes Towards . . ." alone makes *War Fever* worth the purchase.

Yet another unifying feature of this collection is that here Ballard betrays all three of his biggest weaknesses as a Psy-Fi writer. The first is that his tone is so very cold. It's not an accident that most of *War Fever's* characters manifest dissociation's numbness and automatism, nor that Ballard's most effective narrative persona here is that of a detached clinical-report-writer (four of these stories are narrated by M.D.'s, with academics, surgeons, psychiatrists and scientists playing key roles in another six). The genre of Psy-Fi, postmodern to the quick, seems to demand this flat, scholarly narrative voice, an air of lab technicians looking at stuff under glass. But the poverty of affect here makes Ballard's stories at once creepier and empty of human quality; too many of the pieces seem loud but empty, like screams.

Another of this collection's troubles is

that Ballard's prose isn't all that great. His narrators have consistent penchants for stilted rhetorical questions, for clunky, bombastic pronouncements, and for rather clichéd descriptions.

Ballard's third and worst weakness is that he's about the least subtle major writer going. As do many Psy-Fi fictions, Ballard's stories wield their themes like black-jacks, rarely give their readers a chance to exercise discernment or insight. You never really get a chance to read Ballard. His narrators pontificate constantly, declaiming on the meaning of symbols, the irony of twists, the significance of everything even remotely significant. These lead-footed intrusions, together with the fact that Ballard's fictions are basically one-trick ponies, all working off some single surreal metaphor, can often leave the audience wanting less. Still, the stories in *War Fever* are surprisingly and consistently compelling. They're predictable and sometimes annoying, but they're usually under 10 pages; and Ballard's inverted, thoroughly post-industrial philosophy of fiction - which is basically that delusion, hallucination and rationalization are today's mediation, attempts to construct an inner psychic reality in the face of an empty, mechanized, mass-marketed and fictional modern world - has, since the '60s, been worth readers' attention.

The short story, a mode where Ballard can dispense with developed character and diachronic plot, and where he can use his great gift for formal ingenuity to afford the reader freshness and variety, seems to me to be J.G. Ballard's strongest form. Short, dense, vivid, hallucinatory, sometimes pompous, often truly disturbing, these pieces in *War Fever* are Ballard's Psy-Fi gems, and they have value.

David Foster Wallace's most recent books are the short-story collection *Girl With Curious Hair* and, with Mark Costello, *Signifying Rappers*, an essay about music and race.

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