

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 85

J. G. BALLARD

The son of an English businessman, J. G. Ballard was born and raised in Shanghai. For the past twenty-odd years, he has lived more or less anonymously in Shepperton, a dingy, nondescript suburb of London lying under the approach to Heathrow Airport. Ballard's writing is so often situated within the erotic, technical, postholocaust landscape, and so often concerned with the further reaches of postmodern consciousness, that it is inevitably rather droll to come upon the man himself. On first meeting, Ballard is standing somewhat shyly in the doorway of a modest two-story dwelling similar to all the others on the block; one would take him as a typical suburban lord of the manor. He is wearing a brown sweater over his shirt, protected against the faint chill of a summer afternoon.

Inside, two shiny silver palm trees, bending amiably over a reclining aluminum lawn chair, inject the only note of fantasy into an otherwise quite normal-looking household. Until a few years ago, Ballard, a widower, raised his three children here as a single parent.

We sit down in his study, which appears to have once been the living room. Ballard works at an old dining table against the wall,

upon which sits his middle-aged typewriter, surrounded by fairly tidy stacks of letters, books, and papers. The bookshelves are overflowing, packed every which way with an odd collection, including a thick, illustrated anatomy text called *Crash Injuries*, the complete Warren Commission Report, the collected works of Shakespeare, and many books on surrealism, dadaism, futurism, and Pop art.

An extremely articulate and wide-ranging conversationalist, Ballard expresses his ideas, speculations, and concerns with considerable force. A serious sense of humor is also evident, and one often has the feeling that he is continually amused, or at least bemused, by the sheer fact of existence.

At the time of this interview, Ballard had just finished the first draft of his latest novel, *Empire of the Sun*, which was published in October 1984 to great acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. "It's my first good review in the States in fifteen years," comments Ballard, referring to the generally indifferent reception his books have received here to date. This is a situation that has long been puzzling to Ballard, who consciously draws on specifically American iconography in much of his work. Yet, within just a few weeks of publication, *Empire of the Sun* has already become his most commercially successful work. This "nonfiction" novel—a great departure in subject matter for Ballard—details his own adolescent experiences, first in war-formed Shanghai as the son of a British merchant, then, after Pearl Harbor, as a fugitive-then-prisoner-of-war in the Lunghua Assembly Center. "I assume that it took me a long time to forget, and then a long time to remember," Ballard recently told an interviewer who asked why he had only now attempted this reconstruction.

After an hour or so of talk, Teacher's Scotch and sodas are served, and Ballard discourses briefly on the virtues of Shepperton water (several low-lying reservoirs are nearby). While the sun is setting in the shady green backyard, visible through French windows, a moment of suburban quiet prevails. "I don't know why I ended up here, really . . ." Ballard comments. "Actually, the sub-

urbs are far more sinister places than most city dwellers imagine. Their very blandness forces the imagination into new areas. I mean, one's got to get up in the morning thinking of a deviant act, merely to make certain of one's freedom. It needn't be much; kicking the dog will do."

—*Thomas Frick, 1984*

INTERVIEWER

Are you ready to risk the fate of the centipede, who, when asked exactly how he crawled, shot himself?

J. G. BALLARD

I'll do my best to examine my hands in the mirror.

INTERVIEWER

So, how do you write, exactly?

BALLARD

Actually, there's no secret. One simply pulls the cork out of the bottle, waits three minutes, and two thousand or more years of Scottish craftsmanship does the rest.

INTERVIEWER

Let's start with obsession. You seem to have an obsessive way of repeatedly playing out permutations of a certain set of emblems and concerns. Things like the winding down of time, car crashes, birds and flying, drained swimming pools, airports, abandoned buildings, Ronald Reagan . . .

BALLARD

I think you're completely right. I would say that I quite consciously rely on my obsessions in all my work, that I deliberately

set up an obsessional frame of mind. In a paradoxical way, this leaves one free of the subject of the obsession. It's like picking up an ashtray and staring so hard at it that one becomes obsessed by its contours, angles, texture, etcetera, and forgets that it is an ashtray—a glass dish for stubbing out cigarettes.

INTERVIEWER

So you rely on the magnetism of an obsession as a way of proceeding?

BALLARD

Yes, so the unity of the enterprise is forever there. A whole universe can be bounded in a nutshell. Of course, why one chooses certain topics as the subject for one's obsessions is a different matter. Why was I obsessed by car crashes? It's such a peculiar idea.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, why were you?

BALLARD

Presumably all obsessions are extreme metaphors waiting to be born. That whole private mythology, in which I believe totally, is a collaboration between one's conscious mind and those obsessions that, one by one, present themselves as stepping stones.

INTERVIEWER

Your work does at times seem to possess a sort of prophetic quality. Are you aware of this as you write?

BALLARD

It's true that I have very little idea what I shall be writing next, but at the same time I have a powerful premonition of everything that lies ahead of me, even ten years ahead. I don't mean anything too portentous by this. I suppose people—certainly imaginative writers—who consciously exploit their own obsessions do so in

part because those obsessions lie like stepping stones in front of them, and their feet are drawn towards them. At any given time, I'm aware that my mind and imagination are setting towards a particular compass point, that the whole edifice is preparing itself to lean in one way, like a great ramshackle barn.

INTERVIEWER

Has this manipulation of your obsessions come to feel at all mechanical over the years?

BALLARD

I do exploit myself in a calculated way, but there again one has to remember the old joke about the laboratory rat who said, "I have this scientist trained—every time I press this lever he gives me a pellet of food."

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps it's a symbiotic relationship.

BALLARD

I take for granted that for the imaginative writer, the exercise of the imagination is part of the basic process of coping with reality, just as actors need to act all the time to make up for some deficiency in their sense of themselves. Years ago, sitting at the café outside the American Express building in Athens, I watched the British actor Michael Redgrave (father of Vanessa) cross the street in the lunchtime crowd, buy *Time* at a magazine kiosk, indulge in brief banter with the owner, sit down, order a drink, then get up and walk away—every moment of which, every gesture, was clearly *acted*, that is, stressed and exaggerated in a self-conscious way, although he obviously thought that no one was aware who he was, and he didn't think that anyone was watching him. I take it that the same process works for the writer, except that the writer is assigning himself his own roles. I have a sense of certain gathering obsessions and roles, certain corners of the field where the next

stage of the hunt will be carried on. I know that if I don't write, say on holiday, I begin to feel unsettled and uneasy, as I gather people do who are not allowed to dream.

INTERVIEWER

I believe I once read—perhaps it was in connection with the *Vermilion Sands* collection—that you actually enjoyed the notion of cultural decadence.

BALLARD

Decadence? I can't remember if I ever said I enjoyed the notion, except in the sense of drained swimming pools and abandoned hotels, which I don't really see as places of decadence, but rather like the desert in that I see them merely as psychic zero stations, or as "Go," in Monopoly terms.

INTERVIEWER

But drained swimming pools, abandoned hotels—aren't you inviting the worst sort of psychoanalytic interpretation?

BALLARD

Ah, drained swimming pools! There's a mystery I never want to penetrate—not that it's of interest to anyone else. I'm never happier than when I can write about drained swimming pools and abandoned hotels. But I'm not sure if that's decadence or simply an attempt to invert and reverse the commonplace, to turn the sock inside out. I've always been intrigued by inversions of that kind, or any kind. I think that's what drew me to an interest in anatomy.

INTERVIEWER

The current notion of decadence is that it's merely a kind of guilty pleasure.

BALLARD

The guilty-pleasure notion isn't to be discounted either, the idea

of pursuing an obsession, like the black theme in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *A Rebours*, to a point where it is held together and justified only by aesthetic or notional considerations, beyond any moral restraints. A large part of life takes place in that zone, anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Like many novelists, you first studied medicine. Is that where you thought your future lay at the time?

BALLARD

Medicine was certainly intended to be a career. I wanted to become a psychiatrist, an adolescent ambition that, of course, is fulfilled by many psychiatrists. The doctor/psychiatrist figures in my writing are alter egos of a kind, what I would have been had I not become a writer—a personal fantasy that I've fed into my fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Your work also seems tremendously influenced by the visual arts.

BALLARD

Yes, sometimes I think that all my writing is nothing more than the compensatory work of a frustrated painter.

INTERVIEWER

You've written about Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst—and in particular the surrealists seem to have fired your imagination the most.

BALLARD

Yes, the surrealists have been a tremendous influence on me, though, strictly speaking, corroboration is the right word. The surrealists show how the world can be remade by the mind. In Odilon Redon's phrase, they place the logic of the visible at the service of the invisible. They've certainly played a very large part in my life, far more so than any other writer I know.

INTERVIEWER

How did this interest arise? Were you taken to museums as a child?

BALLARD

It has always puzzled me, because there were no museums in the Shanghai where I was brought up.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps Shanghai itself was a kind of museum?

BALLARD

I assume that I looked back on Shanghai and the war there as if it were part of some huge nightmare tableau that revealed itself in a violent and gaudy way . . . that remade world that one finds in surrealism. Perhaps I've always been trying to return to the Shanghai landscape, to some sort of truth that I glimpsed there. I think that in all my fiction, I've used the techniques of surrealism to remake the present into something at least consonant with the past.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps we can talk a bit about the spiritual mechanics of writing. At this point in your career, you must have evolved a generally clear sense of what the whole process of writing a novel is like.

BALLARD

Writing a novel is one of those modern rites of passage, I think, that lead us from an innocent world of contentment, drunkenness, and good humor, to a state of chronic edginess and the perpetual scanning of bank statements. By the eighteenth book, one has a sense of having bricked oneself into a niche, a roosting place for other people's pigeons. I wouldn't recommend it.

Empire of the Sun

(1)

The Eve of Pearl
= Chung T = Harbor

News came early to Shanghai,
overtaking each other like the tides,
that raced up the Yangtze and
returned to this gaudy city all
the coffins cast adrift from the
funeral piers of the ~~the~~ Chinese
Bund. ~~First~~

[Time had begun to dream of
war. At night the same silent
film seemed to flicker against the
wall of his bedroom in Amherst
Avenue, and transformed his sleeping

INTERVIEWER

How does a book take shape for you?

BALLARD

That's a vast topic, and, to be honest, one I barely understand. Even in the case of a naturalistic writer, who in a sense takes his subject matter directly from the world around him, it's difficult enough to understand how a particular fiction imposes itself. But in the case of an imaginative writer, especially one like myself with strong affinities to the surrealists, I'm barely aware of what is going on. Recurrent ideas assemble themselves, obsessions solidify themselves, one generates a set of working mythologies, like tales of gold invented to inspire a crew. I assume one is dealing with a process very close to that of dreams, a set of scenarios devised to make sense of apparently irreconcilable ideas. Just as the optical centers of the brain construct a wholly artificial three-dimensional universe through which we can move effectively, so the mind as a whole creates an imaginary world that satisfactorily explains everything, as long as it is constantly updated. So the stream of novels and stories continues . . .

INTERVIEWER

So it's more or less a continuous process?

BALLARD

Yes. Presumably, all along one is writing the same book. I'm just finishing the second draft of the China book, and although it's a radical departure in subject matter, the way it shaped itself for me and the process of writing it have been no different from anything else I've written.

INTERVIEWER

I'm curious to know how material from the "real world" comes to be incorporated into the rather enclosed spaces of books such as *High-Rise*, *Crash*, or *Concrete Island*.

BALLARD

Well, before starting *Crash*, for example, in 1969, I staged an exhibition of crashed cars at the New Arts Laboratory in London—three crashed cars in a formal gallery ambience. The centerpiece was a crashed Pontiac from the last great tail-fin period. The whole exhibition illustrated a scene from my previous book, *Atrocity Exhibition*,* where my Travis hero stages a similarly despairing exhibition. What I was doing was testing my own hypotheses about the ambiguities that surround the car crash, ambiguities that are at the heart of the book. I hired a topless girl to interview people on closed-circuit tv. The violent and over-excited reaction of the guests at the opening party was a deliberate imaginative overload which I imposed upon them in order to test my own obsession. The subsequent damage inflicted on the cars during the month of the show—people splashed them with paint, tore off the wing mirrors—and at the opening party, where the topless girl was almost raped in the rear seat of the Pontiac (a scene straight from *Crash* itself), convinced me I should write *Crash*. The girl later wrote a damningly hostile review of the show in an underground paper.

INTERVIEWER

You remarked in an interview some years ago that you yourself consider *Crash* a corrupting book.

BALLARD

I haven't read it for ten years. That interview must have taken place in '73 or '74, when *Crash* and *Atrocity Exhibition* were very much in mind. I've long since moved on to more serene meadows. It's interesting to step, for a moment, into the time machine. Those were heady days, all right, when the sixties were a vivid yesterday, not a vanished epoch. As I remarked just last night to my girlfriend, how dull by comparison seem one's present concerns. *Crash* a corrupting book? I'll take my younger self's word for it.

* *Atrocity Exhibition* was published in the U.S. as *Love and Napalm: Export USA* (Grove Press).

INTERVIEWER

Could one think of that kind of writing as a sort of “cultural acupuncture”?

BALLARD

I don't know. I don't care for the notion of the safety valve, that the sight of a few Christians being devoured by the lions sends us home in a happier state of mind. I certainly do believe that we should immerse ourselves in the destructive element. Far better to do so consciously than find ourselves tossed into the pool when we're not looking.

INTERVIEWER

Especially if it's been drained. Do you have any other examples of this sort of research?

BALLARD

Generally, the imaginative hypothesis is tested within the four corners of my own head, though I'm always keen to see my hunches confirmed. Before starting *High-Rise*, I was staying one summer in a beach high-rise at Rosas on the Costa Brava, not far from Dalí's home at Port Lligat, and I noticed that one of the French ground-floor tenants, driven to a fury by cigarette butts thrown down from the upper floors, began to patrol the beach and photograph the offenders with a zoom lens. He then pinned the photos to a notice board in the foyer of the block. A very curious exhibition, which I took to be another green light to my imagination.

INTERVIEWER

Do you map out your way with any kind of outline or notes before you begin?

BALLARD

Yes, always. With short stories I do a brief synopsis of about a page, and only if I feel the story works as a story, as a dramatic

narrative with the right shape and balance to grip the reader's imagination, do I begin to write it. Even in the *Atrocity Exhibition* pieces, there are strong stories embedded in the apparent confusion. There's even the faint trace of a story in "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," and the other sections at the end of the book. In the case of the novels, the synopsis is much longer. For *High-Rise*, it was about twenty-five thousand words, written in the form of a social worker's report on the strange events that had taken place in this apartment block, an extended case history. I wish I'd kept it; I think it was better than the novel. In the case of *The Unlimited Dream Company*, I spent a full year writing a synopsis that was eventually about seventy thousand words long, longer than the eventual novel. In fact, I was cutting down and pruning the synopsis as I wrote the novel. By synopsis I don't mean a rough draft, but a running narrative in the perfect tense with the dialogue in reported speech, and with an absence of reflective passages and editorializing.

INTERVIEWER

Do you work on more than one project at a time?

BALLARD

I've never worked on more than one novel at a time, though I often break step and write a short story if I'm asked to by magazine editors I know. But! I only write them in the evenings or weekends, so that the imaginative continuity and commitment to the novel are unbroken.

INTERVIEWER

What are your daily working habits like?

BALLARD

Every day, five days a week. Longhand now, it's less tiring than a typewriter. When I'm writing a novel or story I set myself a target of about seven hundred words a day, sometimes a little

more. I do a first draft in longhand, then do a very careful long-hand revision of the text, then type out the final manuscript. I used to type first and revise in longhand, but I find that modern fiber-tip pens are less effort than a typewriter. Perhaps I ought to try a seventeenth-century quill. I rewrite a great deal, so the word processor sounds like my dream. My neighbor is a BBC videotape editor and he offered to lend me his, but apart from the eye-aching glimmer, I found that the editing functions are terribly laborious. I'm told that already one can see the difference between fiction composed on the word processor and that on the typewriter. The word processor lends itself to a text that has great polish and clarity on a sentence-by-sentence and paragraph level, but has haywire overall chapter-by-chapter construction, because it's almost impossible to rifle through and do a quick scan of, say, twenty pages. Or so they say.

INTERVIEWER

How many hours a day do you put in at the desk?

BALLARD

Two hours in the late morning, two in the early afternoon, followed by a walk along the river to think over the next day. Then at six, Scotch and soda, and oblivion.

INTERVIEWER

That sounds like the schedule of an efficient worker.

BALLARD

Well, concentration has never been a problem, and now there are few distractions. I assume that it is not entirely coincidental that, to the despair of my friends, I live in this remote backwater seventeen miles from London, in a small town where I know almost no one. However, until five years ago I had three adolescent children here, and not much more than ten years ago, at the time I was writing *Crash*, I was still driving them to school, collecting

them, and getting totally involved in the hurly-burly of family life as a single parent. My wife died from galloping pneumonia while we were in Spain. But even in those days I kept the same hours, though then I stopped drinking at about the time I now start. At the time I wrote *Crystal World*, and through the five years of *Atrocity Exhibition*, I used to start the working day once I returned from delivering the children to school, at nine-thirty in the morning, with a large Scotch. It separated me from the domestic world, like a huge dose of novocaine injected into reality in the same way that a dentist calms a fractious patient so that he can get on with some fancy bridgework.

INTERVIEWER

What about your children? Have they been sources of anything that has gone into your fiction?

BALLARD

My children are in their mid-twenties, my son in computing, one daughter in the fine arts, the other in the BBC. They haven't figured at all in my work, which is curious, as I've lived so closely to them for so many years and they were more important to me than my fiction. Presumably the sources of my imagination, at least, run back to a world beyond my adulthood.

INTERVIEWER

Are you a note taker? Before the synopsis, do you jot things down, experiment?

BALLARD

Yes, if I'm not working, I talk over ideas to myself on the machine, by which I mean I type out little ideas, let my mind wander. I generally begin a book with a large sheaf of notes, covering everything from the main themes to the details of the setting, the principal characters, etcetera, all of which I've daily speculated upon in the months before I begin. I'm already doing so now for

what may be my next novel. I've never had a creative block, touch wood. I've never had any problems stimulating my imagination. Rather the opposite. At times, I need to damp it down.

INTERVIEWER

It sounds as though you're constantly working. Do you rest between books?

BALLARD

I don't really think of it like that. Usually, as at present, as I finish one novel the idea for the next is there—even if as no more than a small piece of grit—and within six months or so, I will be ready to start work on it. But during that period, the work's steadily gathering material to itself, and that probably represents the main effort of imagination I will make.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of stimulation, did any of the psychoactive drugs of the sixties give you any clues for your writing?

BALLARD

I suppose I'm a medium-to-heavy drinker, but I haven't taken any drugs since one terrifying LSD trip in 1967. A nightmarish mistake. It opened a vent of hell that took years to close and left me wary even of aspirin. Visually it was just like my 1965 novel, *The Crystal World*, which some people think was inspired by my LSD trip. It convinced me that a powerful and obsessive enough imagination can reach, unaided, the very deepest layers of the mind. (I take it that beyond LSD there lies nothing.) Imagination is the shortest route between any two conceivable points, and more than equal to any physical rearrangement of the brain's functions.

INTERVIEWER

Back in the sixties, Martin Bax and yourself, as editors of *Ambit* magazine, ran a drug competition.

BALLARD

Dr. Bax and I ran a competition in *Ambit* for the best prose or poetry written under the influence of drugs, and it produced a lot of interesting material. In general, cannabis was the best stimulant, though some good pieces came out of LSD. In fact, the best writing of all was done by Ann Quin, under the influence of the contraceptive pill.

INTERVIEWER

Dr. Bax is a novelist as well, isn't he?

BALLARD

Martin is a physician, a research pediatrician, and consultant to a London hospital, and his book *The Hospital Ship* (published in the States by New Directions) is the most remarkable and original novel I've come across since reading William Burroughs.

INTERVIEWER

Burroughs wrote an eccentric and laudatory, in its way, introduction to the American edition of *Atrocity Exhibition*. Do you know him?

BALLARD

Burroughs, of course, I admire to the other side of idolatry, starting with *Naked Lunch*, then *Ticket*, *Soft Machine*, and *Nova Express*. I'm less keen on his later books. In his way he's a genius. It's a pity that his association with drugs and homosexuality has made him a counterculture figure, but I suppose his real links are with Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and the Beats. Still, I think he's much more of an establishment figure, like Dean Swift, with a despairing disgust for the political and professional establishments of which he is a part. I have met Burroughs quite a few times over the last fifteen years, and he always strikes me as an upper-class Midwesterner, with an inherent superior attitude towards blacks, policemen, doctors, and small-town politicians,

the same superior attitude that Swift had to their equivalents in his own day, the same scatological obsessions and brooding contempt for middle-class values, thrift, hard work, parenthood, etcetera, which are just excuses for petit-bourgeois greed and exploitation. But I admire Burroughs more than any other living writer, and most of those who are dead. It's nothing to do with his homosexual bent, by the way. I'm no member of the "homintern," but a lifelong straight who prefers the company of women to most men. The few homosexual elements in *Crash* and *Atrocity Exhibition*, fucking Reagan, etcetera, are there for reasons other than the sexual—in fact, to show a world beyond sexuality, or, at least beyond clear sexual gender.

INTERVIEWER

How long does a novel generally take you?

BALLARD

Most have taken a year to eighteen months. *Crash* took two and a half years, as did *The Unlimited Dream Company*; the first because it was a continuing moral challenge—I had three young children who were endlessly crossing the road, and still are—the second because it was imaginatively exhausting, a real set of balancing acts.

INTERVIEWER

Do your titles spring naturally out of the work for you, or do you have to hunt for them?

BALLARD

Titles do tend to suggest themselves without being looked for, though in retrospect I feel one or two were mistakes. *The Unlimited Dream Company*, for example, sounds like a jeans emporium. There were also some titles that were strongly urged by the publisher against my better judgment; "Up" was my title for *High-Rise*. I often wrote short stories around titles that intrigued

me, though I'm sure I would have written the stories anyway. One title, *Venus Smiles*, inspired me to write a short story, but when it was published I found the editor had changed the title to something else. So I wrote another story with that title.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever get well along and find you have to abandon something? And what's your approach to revision?

BALLARD

I've never aborted or abandoned anything, perhaps because everything I've written has been well-prepared in my mind. I write the complete first draft before returning to the beginning, though of course I'm working from a fairly detailed synopsis, so I'm sure of my overall structure. I then do a fair amount of cutting of superfluous phrases, occasionally of paragraphs or pages. Each book is written consecutively, as read, never out of order. I think that the use of the synopsis reflects, for me, a strong belief in the importance of the *story*, of the objective nature of the invented world I describe, of the complete separation of that world from my own mind. It's an old-fashioned standpoint (or seems to be, though I would argue vigorously that it isn't) and one that obviously separates me from the whole postmodernist notion of a reflexive, self-conscious fiction that explicitly acknowledges the inseparability of author and text. I regard that whole postmodernist notion as a tiresome cul-de-sac, from which any writer with a strong imagination, or any sense of moral urgency towards his subject matter, would burst forth with immense relief. Of course, I accept that an imaginative writer, like a figurative painter, takes for granted perspective, illusionist space, the unlimited depth of the picture plane, and that with the more extreme types of imagination, such as the surrealists (or myself), a double piece of illusionism is called for—one is asked to accept not only the illusionist space of the picture plane or the narrative text, but the strange events going on within that illusory space. Curious to say, the human mind seems to have

not the slightest difficulty in doing this, and even seems designed to work that way, at least, if dreams, myths, and legends are any guide. The notion put about by deconstructionist critics—who I hear are all the rage in the States—that there is no difference between a bus ticket and, say, Mr. Micawber, that both equally are fictions, seems to me to miss the point that we can't think about Mr. Micawber at all without making just that old-fashioned imaginative leap that the deconstructionists are working so hard to dismantle.

INTERVIEWER

Aside from your adolescent dream of becoming a psychiatrist, do you have any other pet daydreams about other lives, other careers?

BALLARD

I haven't really had any private fantasies about an alternative life, even in the daydream sense. I rather like the idea of ending my days drinking myself to death on a mountainside in Mexico. I went to the same school as Malcolm Lowry, The Leys in Cambridge, and curiously enough, in September 1939, while waiting with my parents for a boat back across the Pacific to Shanghai, I lived in a rented flat on the same shoreline near Vancouver and Victoria Island where he had his shack—we stayed a couple of months at a time while he was there. His father came from the same Manchester cotton industry background as mine. Bigger mythologies have been built on smaller grounds.

INTERVIEWER

Were the classics big among your studies?

BALLARD

Yes, Latin was very important. I was still doing subsidiary Latin when I read English for a year at London University, after ending my medical studies at Cambridge—from one set of Latin

tags to another. At school—The Leys—we even attempted Latin conversation. We all agreed that we would far rather take the Latin oral than the French oral, which we detested.

INTERVIEWER

You had a succession of jobs and were late in becoming a full-time writer. How did you make that transition?

BALLARD

My first novel, *The Wind from Nowhere*, was a hack job written in a fortnight to allow me to make the break into full-time writing. I worked full-time as deputy editor of a scientific journal until I was thirty-two or thirty-three, and I felt that I needed to give up journalism in order to have the time to work on a more serious novel. Luckily, that happened.

INTERVIEWER

Your work has been very well received by critics, but you've had a rough time with publishers in the United States—even though we seem to be in the midst of a science-fiction boom.

BALLARD

My own work has nothing in common with *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, and not much, in a real sense, with written American science fiction, which has veered away into out-and-out escapist fantasy. I don't bring "Good News" . . . though actually I think I do—for me, *Crash* is a novel with a happy ending. But there's very little my agent or I can do about my work not being in print in the States. Perhaps the economics of U.S. publishing necessitate a larger hardback sale in the short term than my rather quirky fiction can manage. The same is true for paperback. I *was* published and in print in the States throughout the sixties. I've always tried to be as internationalist as possible, to get away from the parochial view of things summed up in that *London Times* headline fifty years ago or so: "FOG IN CHANNEL—CONTINENT ISOLATED." Actually,

almost my entire output of eighteen books has been published, reissued and retranslated in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Japan, and Holland, and it's those countries—all (except Japan) far closer to here than Los Angeles and San Francisco are to you on the Eastern Seaboard—which give me my sense of a readership. I think there's no doubt that a new European sensibility is growing, particularly among the college-student young who have grown up in the Western European autoroute and high-rise culture of the past fifteen years. They see certain political concerns in my fiction that Americans miss. Perhaps, too, there is a certain amount of fog around Manhattan Island. I regret that I haven't had more success in the States, but the Atlantic is very much wider than it was twenty years ago. I sometimes feel that to have a novel accepted in the States again means I will have to write about a bushy-tailed mammal who joins a nature commune and falls in love with a tree. In fact, you and a very nice teenager in New York may well be my only two readers in the States, the way things are going there. Perhaps I should introduce you?

INTERVIEWER

Your books are imported by the specialty shops, though they're damnably expensive. The last time I bought one, it was pulled out from behind the counter.

BALLARD

Remaindered copies, under the counter—the next step down the spiral is samizdat, I suppose; a few bundles of grubby typescript will circulate in a clandestine fashion, rooted out one by one by the thought-police of the New York publishers. Of course, I'm joking . . . or am I?

INTERVIEWER

Could you say more about this new European sensibility?

BALLARD

The young people of Western Europe since the sixties have grown up in a remarkably uniform environment, both in terms of the postwar architecture of high-rises and motorways and shopping malls, and also in terms of fashion in clothes and pop music, beach holidays in Spain and Greece, and their attitudes to society as a whole and their place in it—to the place of Europe between the two superpowers (both of whom, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., are tolerated but not trusted). I think for the first time in Western Europe, one sees a generation that finds itself living in sane, just, and largely humane societies—the welfare-state social democracies west of the Iron Curtain—and is *deeply suspicious* of them, while in fact sharing all the values for which those societies stand. Young people who take for granted that the state will provide free university education, free medical treatment, and prosperous consumer-goods economies, but who nonetheless seem to suspect that behind all this lies some unseen conspiracy. One sees the most extreme example in the Baader-Meinhof group in West Germany, whose terrorist acts seem totally meaningless and irrational. But, of course, that is the very point of those acts—in a totally sane society, madness is the only freedom. I think a lot of my own fiction—*Atrocity Exhibition*, *Crash*, *High-Rise*, for example—taps these feelings of paranoia and desperation. As well, there are all the enormous institutionalized divisions between the social classes, between the meritocratic elites and those on the dole who will never work again, between those making their way into the Silicon Valleys of the future and those left behind in the dead end of the twentieth century. A lot of the youngsters who come to see me and talk about *Atrocity Exhibition* see it as a political work. To them, the voracious media landscape I describe is a machine for political exploitation.

INTERVIEWER

I know at one time you put together some collage-texts. As a frustrated painter, are you ever tempted to work more visually, in film or television, for instance?

BALLARD

I have, in fact, done a little work in film and television, but nothing I would really recommend to you.

INTERVIEWER

How about aleatory methods, à la Burroughs? There was a drawing of you in *Ambit* magazine in which I noticed a pair of scissors on the front of your desk.

BALLARD

The artist requested those scissors in order to cut up his sheets of paper. He then placed them on the desk and incorporated them into the drawing. On the whole, no. I need to rework my material to too great an extent to allow intact found pieces to appear. However, as in Dalí's paintings, there are more elements of collage than might meet the eye at first glance. A large amount of documentary material finds its way into my fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Can you give me some examples?

BALLARD

Well, certainly *Atrocity Exhibition*, where I adopt a style of pseudoscientific reportage closely based on similar scientific papers. And there's the piece "Theatre of War," in *Myths of the Near Future*, where all the dialogue except for the commentator's is taken from Vietnam newsreel transcripts. There is a scene in *Concrete Island* where the girl Jane Shepherd is berating Maitland. That is a transcript of a secret tape recording I made of my then-girlfriend in a rage—well, secret is the wrong word; she was simply too angry to notice that I had switched the machine on.

INTERVIEWER

What about the piece "The Generations of America," which

consists entirely of a list of names, connected alternately by the words *and* and *shot*—as opposed to *begat*?

BALLARD

Lists are fascinating; one could almost do a list novel. Those names were taken from the editorial mastheads of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Fortune*—that was part of the joke, of course, as the first two publications played a large role in the sensationalizing of violent death and assassination that I described.

INTERVIEWER

Given that a certain center of your work's themes and imagery lies in the events and personalities of the sixties, and given that your work was more available in the States then than now, what would you say were the major alterations in the zeitgeist?

BALLARD

I'm not sure I have anything to add to what everyone has been saying for years. The sixties were a time of endlessly multiplying possibilities, of real selflessness in many ways, a huge network of connections between Vietnam and the space race, psychedelia and pop music, linked together in every conceivable way by the media landscape. We were all living inside an enormous novel, an electronic novel, governed by instantaneity. In many ways, time didn't exist in the sixties, just a set of endlessly proliferating presents. Time returned in the seventies, but not a sense of the future. The hands of the clock now go nowhere. Still, I've hated nostalgia, and it may be that a similar hot mix will occur again. On the other hand, being quite serious, the future may be boring. It's possible that my children and yours will live in an eventless world, and that the faculty of imagination will die, or express itself solely in the realm of psychopathology. In *Atrocity Exhibition* I make the point that perhaps psychopathology should be kept alive as a repository, probably the last repository, of the imagination.

INTERVIEWER

Speaking of the media landscape, you don't seem to mention music very much. What do you listen to?

BALLARD

I think I'm the only person I know who doesn't own a record player or a single record. I've never understood why, because my maternal grandparents were lifelong teachers of music, and my father, as a choir boy, once sang solo in Manchester Cathedral. But that gene seems to have skipped me. I often listen to classical music on the radio, though never as background. I can't stand people who switch on the record player as soon as you arrive for drinks. Either we listen to Mozart or Vivaldi, or we talk. It seems daft to try to do them together, any more than one would hold a conversation during a screening of *Casablanca*. In fact, without thinking I usually stop talking altogether, waiting for the music to finish, to the host's puzzlement.

INTERVIEWER

You've been listed as prose editor for *Ambit* magazine for quite some time. Yet the magazine seems mainly devoted to poetry, and, I must say, very bad poetry too.

BALLARD

I agree. In fact when people ask me what my policy is as the so-called prose editor I reply that it is to get rid of the poetry that infests the magazine. Of course, *Ambit* began life as a poetry magazine pure and simple, and the bulk of its readers, I would guess, are its present and would-be verse contributors.

INTERVIEWER

Most of your work is grounded in landscapes, whether real or imaginary. Shepperton and its surroundings play a large role. And certainly the United States, or at least images of the United States, are dominant in many pieces, completely so in your recent novel,

Hello America. I wonder if you've traveled much in the States, or if you, like Kafka, in *Amerika*, made up your own.

BALLARD

When I travel, it's usually to the Mediterranean, where I go practically every summer. I visited the States in 1939 as a child; and in 1954, when I spent six months in Canada, I made short trips around the Great Lakes, to Detroit, Buffalo, Niagara, etcetera. I've never been to New York or Los Angeles, though I'm keen to visit. I don't think that handicapped me in writing *Hello America*; quite the contrary. Charles Platt recently criticized the book, not on the grounds of accuracy—he said it was wholly accurate—but for lacking authenticity. I feel he has the wrong end of the stick. *Hello America* is about that image that the States has chosen, in this century, to present of itself to the world at large. That image, and no country has been so consistent or effective in presenting an image of itself, is made up of its film stars and gangsters, presidents and their assassins, flashy cars, skyscrapers, Las Vegas, Disneyland, Cape Kennedy, the mafia, all-powerful advertising, casually owned guns, Coca-Cola, blue jeans, street violence, drugs, and so on. I don't think there's any doubt that these constitute the image that the States has presented, and they would come first to the mind of anyone stopped in the street and questioned in Singapore, Sydney, Sweden, or wherever. Have they anything to do with life as actually lived in the States? Only marginally, I daresay. But I was trying to construct a society using just these images. I suggest you would come up with President Manson playing nuclear roulette in Las Vegas. It's not an incredible thesis, given that we now have a Hollywood actor playing nuclear roulette in the White House, with the latest "nuclear war is winnable" strategy endorsed by the Pentagon. Contrary to what Platt seemed to think, *Hello America* is pro-American, and ends in the triumph of those old nineteenth-century Yankee virtues embodied in my old glass-airplane-building inventor.

INTERVIEWER

In one sense, in the midst of technological decay and overload, you uphold a conservative yet paradoxically protechnological view . . .

BALLARD

I'm certainly no Luddite. The whole drift of my mind is pretty clearly stated in my work; basically, one has to immerse oneself in the threatening possibilities offered by modern science and technology, and try to swim to the other end of the pool. I think my political views were formed by my childhood in Shanghai and my years in a detention camp. I detest barbed wire, whether of the real or the figurative variety. Marxism is a social philosophy for the poor, and what we need badly now is a social philosophy for the rich. To Americans that means Ronald Reagan, but I'm thinking of something else, some moderating set of values, whether the noblesse oblige, the obligation owed to the less fortunate by the old English upper classes, or the Buddhist notion of gaining merit. Apart from anything else, the modern communications landscape creates a different system of needs and obligations. I've written about that in much of my fiction.

INTERVIEWER

What about your reading? Does your writing hamper or dictate your reading?

BALLARD

I think my reading has grown more quirky and idiosyncratic with the years. At present I'm reading and rereading Martin Gardner's *Annotated Alice*, both for the text and for Gardner's brilliant marginal notes, without really realizing why. I try to keep an eye on what is going on. I was very impressed by John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, a masterpiece in its way. As far as reading for research is concerned, I've always been very fortunate in my friends. For years, Dr. Christopher Evans, a psycholo-

gist in the computer branch of the National Physical Laboratory (whom I visited regularly until his death—his lab was just a ten-minute drive away), literally sent me the contents of his wastebasket. Once a fortnight, a huge envelope arrived filled with scientific reprints and handouts, specialist magazines and reports, all of which I read carefully. Another close friend, Dr. Martin Bax, sends me a lot of similar material. The sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi is a restless globe-trotter who culls Japanese and American magazines for unusual material. Vale, the San Francisco publisher of the *Re/Search* series—with excellent volumes on Burroughs and Gysin, and the latest *Industrial Culture Handbook*—is a one-man information satellite beaming out a stream of fascinating things. Readers of mine send in a lot of material, for which I'm grateful. The leader of the rock group SPK, who visited me a week ago, told me that he believes that there is a group of some two or three thousand people in Europe and the States who circulate information among each other. Sadly, modern technology, which ought to be so liberating, threatens all this. Already, I've received the first videocassettes in the place of the old envelopes crammed with odd magazines and cuttings. As I don't own a video recorder, the cassettes sit unseen on my bookshelves—the first volumes of the invisible library. One of my daughters reported on one tape, "It's rather weird, all about autopsies."

INTERVIEWER

One odd thing I've noticed about the varying responses to your work is that some people think it's extremely funny, while others read it in an extremely serious way. I know I've had both responses to the same piece—though usually at different times. What do you think?

BALLARD

A tricky question. I've always been accused of being a humorless writer. *Crash* strikes me as very funny, reading a paragraph aloud used to have me in fits, because in a way it's so preposterous.

And *The Dead Time* has strong elements of a concealed humor of the same kind. But then, existence itself is a very special kind of joke.

INTERVIEWER

Now, that old chestnut: Do you have any advice for young writers?

BALLARD

A lifetime's experience urges me to utter a warning cry: Do anything else, take someone's golden retriever for a walk, run away with a saxophone player. Perhaps what's wrong with being a writer is that one can't even say "good luck"—luck plays no part in the writing of a novel. No happy accidents as with the paint pot or chisel. I don't think you can say anything, really. I've always wanted to juggle and ride a unicycle, but I daresay if I ever asked the advice of an acrobat he would say, "All you do is get on and start pedaling . . ."

