

## J.G. Ballard, Prophet With Honor

*David B. Livingstone*

“This author is beyond psychiatric help. Do not publish!”

It was with these ironic words that an editor at J.G. Ballard’s publisher futilely urged the suppression of *Crash* over a quarter-century ago, a book which many have since come to see as a visionary masterpiece. Though perhaps the first, this unnamed editor was by no means the last person to be discomfited by Ballard’s nightmarish, frequently grotesque tale of a small cadre of car-crash fetishists prone to getting their sexual kicks by staging smashups which resulted in very-real injuries and deaths. And given the impending release of horror director David Cronenberg’s film adaptation, it seems a certainty that the moral outrage is due for an exponential increase; media mogul Ted Turner and British cabinet minister Virginia Bottomley have already registered their howls of righteous indignation.

Considering his being “beyond psychiatric help,” the amiable, articulate, and consummately-logical James Graham Ballard has managed pretty well: His output to date consists of fifteen novels, seventeen collections of stories and essays, and substantial critical work for esteemed British newspapers such as the *Guardian*, *London Times*, and *The Independent*. Moreover, Ballard has come to be seen as one of science fiction's principal intellectual luminaries, and his work as perhaps the best argument for the genre's consideration as "serious" literature. The prophetic *Crash*, with its prescient foreshadowing of western culture's latter-day fixation upon violence as entertainment, attests to the author's acuity as a social critic.

While early works such as *The Drowned World* brought Ballard fame, it was *Crash* that gained him infamy. The novel's relentless probing of the intertwined psychologies of sex and violence, presented as a grandiose and hyperbolic panorama of crushed metal and battered bodies, immediately struck a chord of primal fear. "There are many things that people don't like to be reminded of," Ballard muses. "People are always surprised to discover in themselves that they covet their neighbor's wife, or that they harbor small racist feelings; they automatically think, oh my God, I'm not worthy of myself. And they immediately turn away from it. But if you look at the entertainment culture that people amuse themselves with, it's obvious that the car crash has a very powerful role to play in peoples' imaginations...something is happening in the imagination that tends to entangle the elements of violence and sexuality, and it's fed by this relentless flow of appealingly-violent imagery that we get in our movies. *Crash* is an attempt to follow these trends off the edge of the graph paper to the point where they meet. Basically the message is 'So you think violence is sexy? OK, this is where you're going.' I see the ultimate effect of crash as cautionary, as a warning against the role of violence and sex in our entertainment culture and the way the two can become intertwined."

The concept for *Crash* germinated in the social confusion of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period colored by the Kennedy assassination, Manson, and Vietnam. "Violence took the place of sex, I think, as the most exciting subject available to writers and filmmakers, and became sort of the key engine of the entertainment culture. The car crash came into its own. I remember writing in *The Atrocity Exhibition* about the psychology involved, and people dismissed it out of hand. They just refused to see."

As a means of testing his hypotheses, Ballard presented an art exhibition at a London gallery in April, 1970 where the "works" on display were three wrecked cars. "The behavior of people who visited the gallery absolutely convinced me that I was onto something. At the opening, people got so drunk, and over the course of the month they were on display the cars were attacked, one of them was overturned. Nobody would have noticed these cars in the street outside, but because they were isolated beneath the white gallery lighting they triggered enormous, confused emotions. So I thought, this is the green light. And so I sat down and began to write *Crash*."

Provoking enormous, confused emotions has always been a goal of Ballard's work. The reasons for doing so go well beyond simple sensationalism, however; Ballard's stated aim is honesty via the roundabout vehicle of fiction, an honesty intended to provoke movement towards the humane. "I see myself as a neutral observer; I'm not trying to impose some kind of private or personal vision on the world. All I'm doing is looking out and seeing what's going on in the street. And all my fiction is a fiction of analysis, where I've tried to identify certain ongoing trends that seem to be apparent," Ballard asserts. "I don't think it took a great deal of prophetic skill to guess what was going to happen as the sixties and seventies unfolded; I could see all these social trends, with an entertainment culture that thrived on violence and sensation and a rootless urban and suburban population with nothing to do other than play with their own psychopathic fantasies. Modern technology, whether in the form of a motor car or a motorway or a high rise building, was empowering peoples' worst impulses...the technology involved pandered to and facilitated the eruption of people's worst natures."

Ballard's heightened sensitivity to violence, as well as the corollary themes of isolation and social chaos which permeate much of his work, may well have its roots in his childhood in wartime China. Born in Shanghai in 1930 to English parents, Ballard's earliest years were spent in an expatriate's suburban idyll, a comfortable enclave of large houses, swimming pools, and servants. With the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937 and its subsequent metamorphosis into World War II, the Ballard family were removed to internment camps, and their colonial paradise was transformed into a killing field; from these experiences, Ballard wrote the semi-autobiographical *Empire Of The Sun*, which was subsequently adapted to film by Steven Spielberg. Ballard views his years in the camps as a painful education in the barbarous capabilities of humankind. "I don't think you can go through the experience of war without one's perceptions of the world being forever changed. The reassuring stage set that everyday reality in the suburban west presents to us is torn down; you see the ragged

scaffolding, and then you see the truth beyond that, and it can be a frightening experience. The war came, I spent three years in the camp, and I saw adults under stress, some of them giving way to stress, some recovering and showing steadfast courage. It was a great education; when you see the truth about human beings it's beneficial, but very challenging, and those lessons have stayed with me all my life."

Now in his sixties, Ballard may be finally tempering his apocalyptic vision. Recent works such as 1994's *Rushing To Paradise*, while retaining their author's signature dry wit and moral imperitive, stop short of blooming into nightmare worlds such as those of *Crash*, *High Rise* and *The Drowned World*; since *Empire Of The Sun*, his books have taken gradual steps in the direction of humor, and even hope. Furthermore, having explored the distant future and his own difficult past, Ballard's writing seems to be moving in ever-tighter concentric circles around the present-day reality that most would recognize, and his characters taking upon sympathetic foibles belying an underlying humanity as well as their external neurotic drive. Appearances would indicate that Ballard is cautiously closing in on a central, pivotal point, perhaps the wellspring of his fertile imagination. Asked if he knows what that point is likely to be when he finally homes in on it, he demurs: "I wonder if I ever will. Maybe that will be a mistake—sort of like going into analysis and getting yourself cured; one needs the sort of support system provided by the element of mystery about oneself." Cured or not, the sense of wonder and mystery remains in his writing—indicating that, editors' opinions aside, the Ballard method of shock therapy is working just fine.

*1348 Words*