

# Books

INTERVIEWS

## Extreme Metaphors: Interviews with J.G. Ballard 1967–2008

Edited by Simon Sellars and Dan O'Hara  
*4th Estate, £25 (hardcover)*

'All obsessions are extreme metaphors waiting to be born,' J.G. Ballard told *The Paris Review's* Thomas Frick in 1984. It's not the only time the title phrase appears in *Extreme Metaphors*, which collects 40 years of interviews given by the British novelist, who died in 2009. Interviews can be a hard arena for writers. Few are naturally gregarious. The same or similar questions recur. Naturally, the writer ends up repeating himself or herself, quoting themselves, and the same boilerplate phrases and well-rehearsed spontaneity start to dog them. It's conceivable that the reason novelists are prone to Amis-like contrarianism is simply as a means of coming up with something new to say and to break away from the familiar script. A few choice words about Israel or women and suddenly the afternoon is a shade more interesting.

For the same reason, collected interviews are not a common form of biography, or a necessarily appealing prospect for readers – too much echo in the chamber. But with Ballard it's different. He repeats himself, sure. *Empire of the Sun* (1984) took 40 years to write because Ballard's experiences as a child internee of the Japanese in wartime Shanghai 'took a long time to forget and a long time to remember' – a line we remember from his autobiography, *Miracles of Life* (2008), which also crops up a couple of times in *Extreme Metaphors*.

And there are those recurring Ballard obsessions: media technologies; surrealist art; ruins, particularly bunkers, drained swimming pools and abandoned hotels; human anatomy;

deserts and jungles; highways and the car; media figures such as Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe; sex and violence, viewed with medical detachment. These are marbled through the interviews from the first to the last. But their persistence isn't a continual or tiresome retreading of the same exhausted turf. Ballard used his obsessions, he tended them, he set them up as the totem poles of a private mythology. They were the basis for his truly amazing foresight. '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... like a great ramshackle barn,' he told Frick.

In his excellent introduction, Simon Sellars (who ably edited this collection with Dan O'Hara) calls the 200 recorded conversations with Ballard a 'second sun' in the Ballardian galaxy, 'an enormous parallel body of speculation, philosophy, critical inquiry and imaginative flights of fancy that comments critically on his writing, often explains it and, sometimes, extends or goes beyond it'. Ballard liked to talk and used interviews as laboratories for his writing, 'a workshop for experimentation', a place to test, refine and recombine ideas. The imagery builds up like lacquer, and Ballard proves a remarkably consistent commentator on the passing decades, watching the approach of the media-saturated,

affectless twenty-first century he was sketching out during the 1960s, when his science-fiction peers were prophesying nuclear wars and space adventures.

*Extreme Metaphors* is also a lavish serving of insight into Ballard's technique as a writer – his habitual favouring of technical literature and visual arts over the work of his fellow writers, for instance. *Gray's Anatomy* and the Warren Commission Report into the assassination of John F. Kennedy are separately cited as the greatest novels of the twentieth century; Damien Hirst is later called one of the century's greatest novelists (because his descriptions of his work are so much better than the installations themselves). Ballard makes a persuasive case that fictions of one kind or another have penetrated every part of reality, that 'nothing is spontaneous, everything is stylised, including human behaviour'. 'We are living inside an enormous novel, written by the external world,' he tells Carol Orr in 1972. 'The one node of reality left to us is inside our own heads.' Few have been willing or able to map their personal 'innerspace' to the same extent as Ballard. The inside of his head was a fascinating place, and he was always generous about allowing in visitors. *Extreme Metaphors* is the season ticket.

WILL WILES

