

Science Fiction Book Club
Interview with D. Harlan Wilson (March 2022)

D. Harlan Wilson is a novelist, editor, literary critic, playwright, and English professor. He has published over thirty works of fiction and nonfiction, and hundreds of his stories have appeared in magazines, journals, and anthologies across the world in multiple languages. Among his books are the award-winning novel Dr. Identity, the two-volume fiction collection Battle without Honor or Humanity, a biocritical study of the life and work of J. G. Ballard, and scholarly monographs on the films They Live and Minority Report.

Thomas Keith: Why do you think the idea of catastrophe so preoccupied Ballard that he kept returning to it?

Natural disasters are fixtures in his early 1960s novels, beginning with *The Wind from Nowhere*, which he later disavowed as juvenilia, then in *The Drowned World*, *The Drought*, and *The Crystal World*. Part of the reason is that the “cozy catastrophe” subgenre was popular at the time and he was just trying to make a name for himself. But he was clearly attracted to dystopian settings and motifs his entire career. If he wasn’t writing about natural disasters, he wrote about cultural disasters. This may have had something to do with him being imprisoned in an internment camp during WW2 as a boy. He was probably just intrigued by humanity’s dark side, too. Many of us are, despite our personal histories.

Bill Rogers: Ballard is obviously well-known for his somber views concerning human progress. Did he see any “positive” trends in that regard?

Absolutely. His fiction became more didactic as he got older, and he variably claimed to be in search of positive social ends. Generally speaking, though, he saw more optimism in his writing than most of his readers. In a 1977 essay called “Cataclysms and Dooms,” he said: “I believe that the catastrophe story, whoever may tell it, represents a constructive and positive act by the imagination rather than the negative one, an attempt to confront a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game.” Here the positive act manifests via the use of the imagination and the production of art, but again, he was a bit of a prosthetizer in his elder years.

Simon King: Did Ballard in any way think of himself as a satirist?

I don’t believe he ever referred to himself as a satirist, per se, but much of his fiction functions as satire. If you look at his canon in chronological sequence, there’s a mounting satirical edge that crashes like cymbals in later novels like *Cocaine Nights*, *Super-Cannes*, *Millennium People*, and *Kingdom Come*, all of which are about superrich gated communities and anxieties about postcapitalist life. Ballard’s stark moralism in these books didn’t resonate with me. Satire manifests much more effectively in, say, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, where he rakes celebrities, politicians, and media culture over the coals with impunity.

Gökhan Karagül: What was the reason for placing himself as a character with his real name in his shocking book *Crash*?

The narrator and protagonist of *Crash*, “James Ballard,” is the first major instance of self-reflexivity in Ballard’s writing, and it’s one of several reasons that the novel came under attack. Some readers mistook it as an autobiographical statement about the author’s own desires and actions. In fact, the use

of his name is a literary technique that blurs the lines between fact and fiction, reality and fantasy, logic and absurdity. The name advances the theme of implosion that dominates *Crash*. "Ballard" teaches us how, between conscious and unconscious realms, we never quite know who we are or what we want.

Lee Campbell: I'm making my way through *The Atrocity Exhibition* in a linear manner. What would be gained/lost by reading the passages randomly? I understand that the genesis of the novel was his wife's death, but that does not seem to provide sufficient explanation for the wild connotations he makes (e.g., Christ's crucifixion = the first traffic accident). Instead, Ballard's writing in *Atrocity* seems affected by a kind of literary synesthesia. Could this have been caused by sexual trauma? (Naturally, *Crash* also makes me consider this question.) How much of the novel is an intellectual, modernist experiment, and how much is it a work of self-expression? Is he closer to Warhol or Pollock? Or are they nested within each other? Is *Atrocity* even a novel?

Sure, it's a novel, and I'd say it channels Warhol and Pollock in equal measures. It's not a traditional novel, of course, but I put no value on definitions of this nature. That's all theater of the absurd to me. If you tell me something is a novel, I'm going to write something that's the *opposite* of what you say and call it a novel. We love to categorize things, but it's all an illusion that we cultivate to the degree that we believe the illusion to be authentically true.

Atrocity is structured like a delezuguattarian rhizome. You can enter the text through the doorway of any chapter or even any page. The objective is full immersion. Capable readers don't need traditional narrative structures to experience or understand the text, which is a metaphor for our relationship with electronic media. We're immersed in media on a daily basis with no direction or blueprint. Every goddamn thing in the world and in people's heads is on my phone right now. How I negotiate the maelstrom is up to me. I can watch somebody die, listen to a guided meditation, order food, feed a troll, etc.—all in a matter of seconds. It's crazy. And totally normative.

Regarding the idea that sexual trauma might inform *Atrocity*, don't get caught up in biographical hermeneutics. That's all bullshit. Even the beatniks were artists first. I guess there are exceptions, but most novelists take liberties with everything. *Atrocity* was very carefully crafted, like all of Ballard's fiction. He was a fastidious technician of prose and knew precisely what he was doing.

SFBC Member: Is it known whether Ballard liked Steven Spielberg's 1987 *Empire of the Sun*? I know it must have been personal for him as it is semi-autobiographical.

Yes, he was very pleased with the film. Spielberg did as good of a job as anybody could do with that material, I think. A lot was lost in translation, but that's always the case.

David Agranoff: Hey David you wrote a novel soon after writing your Ballard book and it was great ... can you tell folks about it and how your Ballard research influenced it.

Thanks David. I think you mean *Natural Complexions*, which was unequivocally inspired by Ballard, as were my subsequent two books, *The Psychotic Dr. Schreber* and *Outré*. Ballard's "special effects" have only recently worn off of me, so to speak, but only because I haven't read anything by him since I wrote the book about him. When I research and compose works of literary and film criticism, I tend to bury myself completely in the content; then, when I'm done, I forget everything, almost instantly. For this interview, I had to reread my book on Ballard to bring myself back up to speed. I just started writing a

book on Kubrick's SF films after a year of concerted research and I'm really plugged into his cinematic consciousness. It's hard to think about anything else right now.

Ed Newsom: Did Ballard's involvement in science fiction negatively impact his reputation, or is the genre less of a literary ghetto in Great Britain?

Artistic ghettos tend to be better in the UK than in the US. I've lived abroad and travelled extensively. In my experience, Europeans are generally smarter and more perceptive than Americans because they have more cultural and historical awareness of themselves and the world they live in. Ballard was an anomaly, though. He wanted out of the SF scene almost immediately after getting into it. He went to a SF convention in 1957 when he was a young author writing short stories. It was the last convention he ever attended. He didn't say why he hated it so much, but it probably had to do with excessive nerdery and his peers not being on the same page as him in terms of what SF should do and where it should go. His experience at the convention was so bad that he claimed to take over a year off from writing. So he did his own thing, and he ended up creating his own subgenre: apropos, the Ballardian. *Collins English Dictionary* describes it this way: "resembling or suggestive of the conditions described in Ballard's novels and stories, especially dystopian modernity, bleak man-made landscapes, and the psychological effects of technological, social or environmental developments." Other authors have embodied these themes. For me, the Ballardian is ultimately located in his prose and in his unique surreality.

Ed Newsom: I think of *Concrete Island*, *Crash*, and *High-Rise* as science fiction. Did Ballard? Do you?

I definitely do, and I have embraced Ballard's mantra that "everything is science fiction" for a long time. Ballard isn't talking about garden-variety SF when he says this, but rather the type defined by the realm of electronic media and capitalist technologies, which increasingly affect and pathologize subjectivity. It's the SF of reality studios, commodity fetishism, social entropy and implosion. I call the novels you mention the Cultural Disaster trilogy. They don't exhibit mainstream SF tropes (e.g., time travel, robots, aliens, etc.), but they're all about technological affect and violence. Ballard's highway-encrusted island, souped-up (and sexed-on) automobiles, and primordial high-rise are all aggressive machines that process the human condition and reroute the flows of desire.

Ed Newsom: What did Ballard think of the so-called American New Wave writers? I'm thinking particularly of Ellison, Dick, and Silverberg.

Ballard's early stories were instrumental to the New Wave, a movement actuated by the short fiction published in *New Worlds* under the editorship of John Carnell and then Michael Moorcock. Carnell's publication of "The Terminal Beach" in 1963 was a momentous trigger-pull for the New Wave, although what Ballard and like-minded authors were doing wasn't new to literature. In essence, they applied modernist techniques to SF. Ballard led the pack with stories that aroused hostility in both UK and US fans who preferred old-guard SF and thought literary experimentation didn't belong in the genre. In 1968, Ballard jokingly said: "I am the New Wave!" He didn't care about the label. He cared about newness and originality. The New Wave was a UK formation that bled into the US and climaxed in Ellison's *Dangers Visions* anthologies. I don't recall coming across how Ballard felt about US New Wavers in my research, but I'd be surprised if he didn't like what Ellison and Dick especially were doing. They're two of the greatest, most memorable twentieth-century American SF authors, no matter what movement we associate with them. Movements—like categories—are illusory, though. They're usually created for marketing or scholarly purposes.

Ed Newsom: Was *Vermillion Sands* based on an actual community?

They weren't based on one particular community. The stories in that collection were written over a period of fourteen years. I'd say they were the product of Ballard's fascination with gated communities in general. Specifically, he seemed to be interested in the psychological dynamics of people living in the same space. And this space is as internal as it is external. Here's what Ballard said in the preface to my edition of *Vermillion Sands*:

"*Vermillion Sands* is my guess at what the future will actually be like. It is a curious paradox that almost all science fiction, however far removed in time and space, is really about the present day. Very few attempts have been made to visualize a unique and self-contained future that offers no warnings to us. Perhaps because of this cautionary tone, so many of science fiction's notional futures are zones of unrelieved grimness. Even its heavens are like other people's hells. By contrast, *Vermillion Sands* is a place where I would be happy to live. I once described this overlit desert resort as an exotic suburb of my mind, and something about the word 'suburb'—which I then used pejoratively—now convinces me that I was on the right track in my pursuit of the day after tomorrow."

Damo Mac Choiligh: Did Ballard adhere to any particular politics or ideology? He saw the collapse of the British empire at the hands of the Japanese as both fought over China; other than the emotional or philosophical reaction to this, did it give him an ideological outlook of any kind?

He was vehemently opposed to the UK's class structure. *High-Rise* is a shining example of his views on this issue, even though he never preaches or makes a case for reform. There's no affect of that kind in the novel. Not until his later fiction does he exhibit a growing anxiety about humanity under the thumb of an increasingly aggressive consumer-capitalism. Personally, I think ideology is the end of reason and the beginning of evil—that's sort of my life's thesis. Over the course of human history, far more Bad than Good has resulted from people's beliefs, especially the beliefs of Little Men. Most of Ballard's fiction is ambiguous in terms of politics, and it's much more effective that way. His later novels are, as always, very well written, but he's too forthright about what he thinks. This *affect* diminishes those novels' *effect*. Then again, I put ambiguity on a pedestal. Subtextuality is everything to me.

Damo Mac Choiligh: Did Ballard have any thoughts on his "outsider" status? Did he consider himself an outsider? I ask this as it seemed to me that among the English literary scene, he would have been thought of as a SF author and potentially dismissed as such. As a SF author, he was English and particularly literary and experimental, therefore outside the mainstream North American set. Even among English SF writers he was more experimental than most.

Ballard will always be associated with twentieth-century SF, and he had a profound effect on many SF authors, like the cyberpunks. But he almost never interacted with the SF community, and he lived an insular life, rarely straying that far from his home in Shepperton. The terminal subjects that populate his fictions were often extrapolations of his life as an outsider in prewar and wartime China and later in postwar England. As an author, Ballard was an outsider, too, writing against the codes and norms of SF despite being one of the genre's shining stars. I don't think he cared about being an outsider. He was just doing his thing. Concerted experimentalism only manifests in *Atrocity*, and it's pretty tame. It's certainly not Joycean. *Crash* is often called experimental, but like all of his other novels, the narrative shoots straight, with a beginning, middle, and end. The content is just weird, and Ballard's prose is reliably estranging and uncanny.

John Grayshaw: On Ballard's Wikipedia page it discusses his influence on pop music and lists over 20 bands/artists influenced by his work. What do you think it is about Ballard's work that appeals to musicians?

Its transgression, I'd say. Ballard broke rules and was one of very few authors in any genre who consistently aspired for genuine innovation. Plus, books like *Crash* and *Atrocity* are at once totally bizarre, smart, and stylized. These kinds of things probably resonated with young musicians. Punk bands in particular.

Christophe De Nockere: What did Ballard think of the big influence he had on the early (late 70s, early 80s) industrial music scene? Could he relate to their musical and visual ideas that were partly inspired by, for example, *The Atrocity Exhibition*? Bands like early SPK and Throbbing Gristle mentioned his works in many interviews, and Graeme Revell (SPK) did an interview with Ballard for RE/Search.

Apparently, Ballard didn't listen to music. I don't know if I believe it, but in multiple conversations and interviews, he admitted that he didn't like music and that it made no impression on his writing. There's actually a dearth of musical references in his fiction. Ironically, many music critics and musicians have said that few authors have influenced the punk and postpunk music scenes like Ballard.

Christophe De Nockere: What did Ballard think of the movie adaptation of *The Atrocity Exhibition*?

I'm not sure about that one. Honestly, though, I'm so uninterested in what authors or artists actually think about anything. The texts they produce are all that interest me. Ballard's adult life wasn't that eventful. Nor is mine. My real life unfolds in my fiction. That's why I write so much. I can't say if Ballard felt likewise. I get the sense that he was fundamentally mild-mannered and introverted.

John Grayshaw: What makes Ballard interesting from a critical perspective? What first drew you to his work?

It had less to do with a critical perspective than an idle desire to read more of Ballard's work and develop my knowledge of the SF megatext. Before I wrote my book on Ballard, I had only read *Crash*, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and a few stories. I wanted to read and study his entire oeuvre, and I knew a book contract would force me to do it; otherwise, I would have just read another novel or two and then moved on to somebody else's stuff (I'm scatter-brained, with a touch of ADHD). Ballard was a seminal New Wave figure and one of the most important twentieth-century SF authors. I knew much of his fiction was as sophisticated as it was offbeat and deviant, too, which is the type of fiction I try to write myself. There's really no author like him, although many people have tried to emulate his style, affect, surreality, etc. As I conclude at the end of my book, everybody who has tried to conjure the Ballardian invariably fails.

John Grayshaw: Who were some of the writers Ballard grew up reading? And who are some of his contemporaries that he enjoyed reading?

In *The Pleasures of Reading*, a 1992 collection of essays by prominent writers, Ballard answers both questions.

Early influences: "I read everything I could find—not only American comics, but *Time*, *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post* and *The New Yorker*. At the same time I read the childhood classics—*Peter Pan*, the *Pooh*

books and the genuinely strange *William* series. Later, when I was seven or eight, came *The Arabian Nights*, Hans Andersen and the Grimm brothers, anthologies of Victorian ghost stories and tales of horror, illustrated with threatening, Beardsley-like drawings that projected an inner world as weird as the surrealists'. The greatest exception was *Treasure Island*, frightening but in an exhilarating and positive way—I hope that I have been influenced by Stevenson as much as by Conrad and Graham Greene, but I suppose that *The Water Babies* and all those sinister fairy tales played a far more important part in shaping my imagination."

Favorite books of all time: "*The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West; *Collected Short Stories*, Ernest Hemingway; *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge; *The Annotated Alice*, ed. Martin Gardner; *The World through Blunted Sight*, Patrick Trevor-Roper; *Naked Lunch*, William Burroughs; *The Black Box*, ed. Malcolm MacPherson; *Los Angeles Yellow Pages*; *America*, Jean Baudrillard; *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, Salvador Dali."

John Grayshaw: What do you feel are Ballard's most significant works and what are some of Ballard's works that you feel should be better known than they are?

To my mind, his most significant work is *Atrocity*, but it's also an anomaly in his canon: no other book he wrote looks or reads that way. Today, most people know him for either *Crash* or *Empire of the Sun* because of Cronenberg's and Spielberg's film adaptations. For SF scholars, I think his most important books are the two Natural and Cultural Disaster trilogies that I mentioned earlier. His later work is good but not as compelling. The trilogies will mark his contribution to SF and literature. That's where the real Ballardian lurks.

John Grayshaw: Ballard said in a 1970 interview with Michael McNay: "Science fiction is the main literature of the twentieth century ... science fiction was a unique literature that responded to the continuous changes that took place, the continuous transformation of people's lives by science and technology. Here was the only literature that responded to this fact." How did Ballard's work explore these themes?

The main way is inner space. Ballard's fiction explores how we have been affected and pathologized by the culture machine and media technologies. An attention to the flows of (un)consciousness was a staple of the New Wave and distinguished that movement from most SF that preceded it. That's why Ballard was such a New Wave icon. Nobody in the SF genre had represented the dynamics of inner space like him. Hence Ballard's maxim: "The only truly alien planet is Earth."

John Grayshaw: "What I hope the computer and TV revolution will bring about is a scientific information channel where you can just press a button and ... I want a much higher through-put of information in my life than I can get my hands on—I want to know everything about everything! I mean, I want to know the exact passenger list of that DC-10 that crashed outside Malaga two weeks ago, I want to know the latest automobile varnishes that are being used by the Pontiac division of General Motors, I want to know exact details, hard information about everything. I want to know what Charles Manson has for breakfast—everything! It's very difficult to get this information—access is the great problem." This is what Ballard said in 1984 interview with *High Times*. How did he feel years later about the Internet? Was it a realization of his desires to have information at his fingertips or did it fall short of his vision?

I don't recall reading anything about his views on the internet, but I suspect he thought it was another "natural" extension of our technological existence. We've always been technological beings, after all—any extension of the body is a technology, including primitive tools and spears. There is no high-tech cyberspace in Ballard's fiction, and it's hard to picture him surfing the web or even using a computer. He lived a long life and died in 2009, but I always associate him with the 1960s. That's where he lives on my mind's screen.

John Grayshaw: "I think that fear of boredom explains a great deal of what's going on at present in the world. Our lives in the West, certainly, are becoming ever-more circumscribed. We're all deeply conventional, and hardly differ from one another in any vital sense. We're desperate for excitement of some kind" (*Frieze* 1997). "There's a certain sort of logic leading towards these immaculate suburbs. And they're terrifying, because they are *the death of the soul*. And I thought, *My God, this is the prison this planet is being turned into*" (*High Times* 1984). "If you have a world like that, without any kind of real freedom of the spirit, the only freedom to be found is in *madness*. I mean, in a completely sane world, *madness* is the only freedom!" (*High Times* 1984). Ballard seemed to fear the conformity of the suburbs more than anything else. Why do you think this is? And how did his literature reflect this fear?

This is where I align with Ballard more than anywhere else. Like I said, Ballard lived a relatively monotonous life in suburban England, although Shepperton is far more urban than where I live in rural America, which I hate. I hate the sheltered worldview of the people here, I hate the lack of culture here, I hate the geographic artificiality and flatness. I even hate the air, which oscillates between the smell of farmland manure and dead fish from a nearby toxic lake. For Ballard and I, the "madness" of fiction and the imagination is the proverbial escape. The recurrent thesis of his later novels is that madness (i.e., subversive behavior) can function as agency, but that's a diegetic matter. He wasn't telling his readers to go out and fuck shit up. As always, he was being provocative and testing the waters of what an imagined future might be. And, of course, he was trying to write books that would sell in spite of themselves. He's one of the few authors that managed to do that. Many of his books have mainstream appeal while remaining thoroughly "criminal."

John Grayshaw: Bruce Sterling in his introduction to the *Mirrorshades* anthology cites Ballard as an important forebear of the cyberpunk movement. What parallels do you see between Ballard and cyberpunk?

As I said, Ballard didn't write about cyber-anything, really, but the cyberpunks latched onto his preoccupation with inner space and venerated him. His voice echoes throughout cyberpunk literature of the 1980s. They also liked how he thematized consumer-capitalism. In many of Ballard's near or alternate futures, the external reality of consumer society is an mirage perpetrated by the central nervous system to the point that we become fixtures (sometimes fluid, sometimes static) in the virtual space of billboards and signage, movies and TV shows, transportation and communication networks. Cyberpunks pushed this state of being further, extrapolating it into dystopian, hypercapitalist, technophilic futures where the body and mind have been invaded by machines. Like the cyberpunks that chased his dragon, Ballard was concerned with the present—not the New in the Next, but the New in the Now.

John Grayshaw: Any interesting anecdotes about Ballard going to conventions and/or meeting his fans?

As far as I can remember, he only went to that one convention in the 1950s. He hated conventions. He didn't like crowds either as far as I can tell. I'm almost certain he didn't enjoy interacting with fans. He just wanted to write his stories and books. We're similar in that way.

John Grayshaw: Who are some science fiction writers he had correspondence and/or friendships with?

Certainly Michael Moorcock because of *New Worlds*. Beyond him, not many. Ballard didn't say much about other writers in his nonfiction or interviews. I could be wrong. Again, Ballard's life and relationships don't interest me and I didn't pay much attention during my research. My book includes a biographical sketch and some general details about his life, but for the most part, I perform literary analyses and close readings of his fiction.

John Grayshaw: Did Ballard have any particular writing habits or routines he stuck with?

One thing he did regularly is read his work aloud to himself during the revision process. I recall his daughter Bea telling me that she had fond memories of listening to her dad read aloud in his office when she was a kid. There's a cadence to his prose that's deceptively amenable to the spoken word.

John Grayshaw: What were some of Ballard's hobbies other than writing?

Hmm. I'm not sure. Drinking at one point. But he got that under control.

John Grayshaw: What is Ballard's legacy?

The conclusion of my book addresses that question. Here's the last paragraph:

"J. G. Ballard will always be an icon of SF against which other authors measure themselves. This will be the case whether or not we think he abandoned the 'genre of ideas' because it ironically put restrictions on imagination. The fact is Ballard's career charts the path of science fiction for the second half of the twentieth century into the dawn of the twenty-first, illustrating how its imagined landscapes, alternate realities, electric dreams, and machinic desires have been subsumed and standardized by the futures we have come to inhabit."

Throughout the book, I harp on the irony that SF is supposed to be a genre that gives primacy to innovation, experimentation, imagination, etc., but it's a very conservative genre lorded over by editors and publishers who want a certain type of canned fiction. That was the case in Ballard's time and it's still the case today, at least for the few big publishers that haven't keeled over. Today, real innovation only exists in the small press, and genre is no longer a factor. As Ballard foretold, we all live in a SF novel now, whether we like it or believe it.