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Finding a hidden heroine in J.G. Ballard's sci-fi novel, *The Drowned World*

ABSTRACT

J.G. Ballard is not known for his sensitive or nuanced portrayal of women. Yet in this paper I pose the question, if we re-examine his 1962 novel, The Drowned World*, can Beatrice Dahl be re-read as a heroine? In order to answer this question, I will read between the lines of this popular science fiction text to expose Beatrice's hitherto marginalised history and liminal strength. I will carefully examine the text for clues; then, using a strategy employed by both fan -fiction and post-colonial literature, I will write an imaginary Chapter 3.5 into the existing plot framework* of The Drowned World *in order to reveal Beatrice's complexity and her role in conveying one of the key messages of the novel.*

KEYWORDS

J.G. Ballard
The Drowned World
feminist critique
post-apocalyptic fiction
extinction

FINDING A HIDDEN HEROINE IN J.G. BALLARD'S SCI-FI NOVEL, *THE DROWNED WORLD*

In the beginning, according to the Bible at least, there was Adam. At the end, in the post-apocalyptic future of J.G. Ballard's novel *The Drowned World*, there is the character Robert Kerans, who is described more than once as a kind of inverted Adam, more last man than first (Ballard 1962: 22).The original Adam may have gone forth and multiplied (as well as subjugated the Earth, the futility of which is one of the overarching themes of the novel) but Kerans is much more interested in devolution and extinction than fruitful procreation. However, Ballard has, as a beneficent and resolutely heterosexual god, nonetheless furnished him with a female counterpart: Beatrice Dahl.

Beatrice is the only woman in *The Drowned World* and the first time we see her Ballard describes her thus: 'Beatrice Dahl lay back on one of the deck-chairs, her long oiled body gleaming in the shadows like a sleeping python' (Ballard 1962: 23). For Ballard, Beatrice is not only an Eve for Kerans' Adam, she is the insidious serpent as well. Ballard is not only heterosexual, he is unapologetically sexist.

In fact, it is something of an understatement to say that Ballard is not known for his sensitive or nuanced portrayal of women. Even David Pringle, one of the author's earliest and most consistent supporters, was forced to admit in his 1979 critique of Ballard's work *Earth is the Alien Planet* that Ballard's female characters are generally either stupid and shallow or highly irritating or both. At best they are alluring sirens; at worst threatening femme fatales (Pringle 1979: 40-44). Some twenty-five years and many more books by Ballard later, Andrej Gasiorek came to a similar conclusion in his monograph *J.G. Ballard* (Gasiorek 2005: 30).

I first read *The Drowned World* at an impressionable age and I was duly impressed. But that does not mean that I was not critical. As a young woman I was incensed by Ballard's overt sexism.

For decades the idea of somehow recuperating Beatrice has been simmering in the back of my mind. At first Beatrice seems like an unlikely candidate for even the most determined feminist project of recuperation. She is neurotic and listless in the 'present' of *The Drowned World.* Ballard seems to have conceived of Beatrice as a character written to be played by Karen Black in her 1970s prime: dishevelled, ditsy, desirable and drunk.

Yet by reading between the lines, carefully mining the original text for clues and using a strategy employed by both fan fiction and postcolonial literature,[1] I have written an additional chapter which slots into the existing plot framework of *The Drowned World*. This piece of creative writing provides Beatrice with a credible backstory and reveals the hitherto hidden complexity of her character.[2] And, significantly, an exercise that was initially fuelled by youthful outrage proved to be an important methodological tool. By immersing myself deeper and deeper into Ballard's imaginary world in order to recuperate Beatrice, I began to realise that despite all appearances to the contrary, *The Drowned World* might actually offer a glimmer of hope for our post-climate change age.

BEATRICE DAHL: J.G. BALLARD'S HIDDEN HEROINE

In *The Drowned World*, the entire geography of the planet has been reshaped and all major metropolises worldwide have been flooded. This ecological catastrophe was triggered by a series of violent (and inexplicable) solar storms just seventy years prior to the beginning of

[1] See for example Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997) in which the author reworks the character Magwitch from *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys which is a feminist prequel to Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë that provides a backstory for the first Mrs Rochester, Antoinette Cosway.
[2] The full text of this piece of creative writing can be read here:
https://traceyclement.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/the-penthouse-pool_tracey-clement.pdf.

the novel. In the first chapter, 'On the Beach at the Ritz,' Kerans is coming to understand that his job of mapping the lagoons and the mutated wildlife there is a pointless exercise.

The whole bioscience team has been recalled to the only major human city left: Camp Byrd, a UN-run station in Greenland. They are preparing to leave behind the extreme heat, oppressive fecundity and damp glamour of *The Drowned World*. But by the end of the second chapter in the novel, 'The Coming of the Iguanas,' Kerans has decided to disobey orders and remain behind in the lagoon.

However, refusing to leave is actually Beatrice's idea. "'Tell me, Robert, seriously,'" she says, "'if I decide to stay on here, would you?'" (Ballard 1962: 26). In his response, which is characteristically both sexist and dismissive, Kerans refers to Beatrice as Eve for the first time. And in this dual biblical role as both Eve and seditious serpent, it is Beatrice who takes the initiative. She is the catalyst, the leader of their rebellion against authority - our first clue that she is more than the vapid, whiskey-soaked temptress that Ballard presents.

In fact, the text is littered with unanswered questions that suggest that there is more to Beatrice Dahl. Like all of Ballard's characters, she is only vaguely sketched. As Duncan Fallowell put it in his now infamously vitriolic review, 'Characterisation. [Ballard] is quite hopeless at this. Nowhere in his writing can I recall a name actually turning into a face' (Fallowell 1977: 59). Fellow Ballard critic Michel Delville makes the same point with more tact, saying, 'Ballard's talents lie in the sustained power of imagery and ideas, rather than in the realist description of people and relationships' (Delville 1998: 5).

Whether she is a character or a caricature, all the novel offers in terms of facts about Beatrice is that she is lithe, beautiful and has dark hair. She was raised by her (unnamed) eccentric, art-collecting grandfather because her parents died shortly after she was born. When Kerans and the bioscience team arrive (six months prior to the action in the novel), they find Beatrice living alone in her grandfather's penthouse apartment which seems to have an endless supply of alcohol and frozen steaks. Beatrice (like most of the bioscience team with the exception of Colonel Riggs) has already started having the collective nightmare of a huge pulsating sun.

In fact, facts in general are scarce in *The Drowned World*. The novel is set in the near future. Rather than restrict his story to any particular date, Ballard marks time by counting backwards from the post-apocalyptic present of the novel.

After the cataclysmic solar storms seventy years prior, the polar ice caps melted, oceans rose and silt and sand changed the landscape beyond recognition over the course of

the next twenty years. Waves of climate change refugees migrated north during this period. The last of the remaining fortified cites was abandoned twenty years prior to the present of the novel. Ten years prior to the beginning of the novel, the last remaining occupants left the Ritz hotel in London where Kerans takes up residence.

Important questions about Beatrice, including her age, how she has kept her generator and air conditioner going and how she evaded detection by the bands of marauders moving north are neither asked nor answered in *The Drowned World*. What is clear is that if Beatrice had always been as ineffectual as Ballard presents her to be, she never could have made it into the present of the novel. Chapter 3.5, 'The Penthouse Pool,' the supplementary chapter I have written, starts with the scanty evidence Ballard does provide. We know that Kerans is forty. He always describes Beatrice as a girl but to make their implied sexual relationship socially acceptable, I have made her twenty-seven years old. Based on Ballard's exodus timeline, Beatrice has been living alone for ten years in Chapter 3.5.

The action in this piece of creative writing is set just before Kerans visits her apartment, in Chapter 4 of the novel, 'The Causeways of the Sun.'[3] When Kerans arrives he finds that Beatrice's air conditioning is broken and she is wearing nothing but a black towel while drinking whiskey for breakfast. The prose of this supplementary Chapter is not an attempt to mimic Ballard's work but the story does conform to the facts and timeline of the novel and it follows the logic of his imaginary world.

It begins with the following passages:

> Beatrice was awakened by a trickle of sweat pooling between her breasts. It was very hot, moist and dark. Covered in sweat and still caught in the throbbing, murky realms of her dream, Beatrice wasn't sure at first where she lay. But slowly, semi-consciously, her mind filtered through its sensory information and decided that the soft, damp tangle she was sleeping in was the sweat drenched sheets of her bed, not a nest of leaves on the ground. She wasn't outside, not any more.
>
> Armed with the knowledge that she wasn't in any immediate physical danger, Beatrice's mind let itself be drawn back down into its own treacherous depths, lured and lulled by the mesmerising reverberations of her own heartbeat, mirrored in the pulsations of her nightmare sun.

These first paragraphs allude to Beatrice's earlier adventures outside where she revelled in the heady fecundity of *The Drowned World*. In the novel it is implied that she has always been cloistered in the penthouse like a damsel in distress.

[3] After asking Kerans to stay behind with her in Chapter 2 of *The Drowned World*, we next encounter Beatrice the following day in Chapter 4. Chapter 3 takes place on the same day as Chapter 2 does not feature Beatrice.

But in Chapter 3.5 I posit that Beatrice's apparent ineptitude can also be read as a conscious decision to pander to the male ego:

> Beatrice lay in bed and considered fixing the generator to get the air-con going, but decided against it. It was only in the mid-nineties inside and besides Robert would probably pop in later. She decided to let him do it. He enjoyed the pantomime of looking after her, overtly displaying his masculine prowess in such manual tasks. Smiling to herself, she thought, 'Who am I to deny him such a simple pleasure?' Finally deciding on a course of action, Beatrice got up, wrapped a black towel around her midriff in a concession to getting dressed and poured herself a large tumbler of whiskey. 'Cheers,' Beatrice said to herself, taking a small sip and raising her glass. 'Here's to the end of the world.'

Naturally, in order to have been able to survive alone Beatrice must have been able to fix her own generator so she clearly made a conscious decision not to do so on this occasion. This scenario seems far more believable in the context of the world that Ballard himself created.

In the full text of Chapter 3.5, many of the other unanswered questions about Beatrice – for example her family history and her survival strategies and methods for avoiding detection – are addressed. The final paragraphs of this piece of creative writing explain why Beatrice finally let herself be discovered:

> She still wasn't sure why she had let Riggs find her. Subconsciously she guessed she was tired of flying solo; she didn't want to be all alone at the very end. Riggs and his soldier boys were leaving, but Robert would stay, she was sure of it. And so would she.
>
> Beatrice absent-mindedly surveyed the room: shelves stacked with books, 20th century Surrealist masterpieces on the walls, and out the window the glassy surface of the lagoon; a white-hot sheet of light refracting the relentless sun. Once again she was feeling its inexorable pull. But this time, instead of drawing her outside, the glowing orb had entered her dreams, bathing her nightly in its terrible aura, obliterating her, pulling her under. Soon it would be too hot.

In my alternative backstory Beatrice is capable and self-reliant. The fact that she seems so helpless in *The Drowned World* is more likely to be a product of Ballard's inherent sexism than a plausible (or even deliberate) plot device. As noted earlier, many critics have acknowledged Ballard's sexism. It is often dismissed as merely being a product of the times. After all, the novel was written in the early 1960s before the sexual revolution and second-wave feminism really had a widespread effect.

For a contemporary feminist reader, the hopelessness of the only female character in *The Drowned World* is infuriating. Yet it served a purpose. Driven by outrage I undertook a detailed re-reading and imaginative re-writing of the novel in an attempt to recuperate

Beatrice. Through this process I realised that Ballard's post-apocalyptic novel offers redemption, and Beatrice, as his Eve, has a pivotal role in delivering this message of hope for The End.

THE END

In a deliberately circular gesture, the last line of my supplementary Chapter 3.5 repeats the first line of *The Drowned World,* 'Soon it would be too hot.' We come back to the beginning, which is of course also the beginning of The End.

In the final pages of *The Drowned World*, Kerans walks south, deeper into the jungle, knowing he cannot hope to live for long. He willingly wilfully chooses death over attempting to survive in the last outpost of civilisation. In the very last line of the novel he is described as 'a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn sun' (Ballard 1962: 158). Ballard's many biblical references in *The Drowned World* are not arbitrary, for his novel is not just science fiction; it is a post-apocalyptic story. In her book *Apocalyptic Transformation*, Elizabeth Rosen argues that all apocalyptic stories in the Western tradition can trace their lineage to the Bible, specifically the Book of Revelation in the New Testament (2008: xiii). And like the biblical narrative, *The Drowned World* is a story about the End or perhaps more accurately, like all apocalyptic stories, it is about what happens after The End. In his influential work of literary criticism, *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode argues that we use stories about The End 'to make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, stranded in the middle' (2000: 190). Rosen concurs, saying, 'Apocalypse is a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it. It is an organising principle imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly disordered universe' (2008: xi).

Rosen makes a distinction between what she calls 'neo-apocalyptic stories' (which are unrelentingly grim) and stories in the traditional biblical mode which, despite being secular, draw on the fact that the apocalypse is inextricably linked to reward. It is the promise of a new heaven on Earth. In these stories destruction is tempered by hope and the promise of redemption (Rosen 2008: xiv).

The Drowned World was written during the slow-burning crisis of the Cold War, a time when nuclear Armageddon felt inevitable. As Ballard scholar Jeanette Baxter so perceptively notes in her analysis of *The Drowned World*, 'The sun which overwhelms Ballard's landscape can be read in terms of a nuclear explosion' (Baxter 2009: 35). The

pervasive eschatological dread of this era is evident in the novel. On first reading, *The Drowned World* does seem unapologetically nihilistic, a criticism often levelled at Ballard.

But closer inspection reveals that Ballard is indeed writing in the traditional apocalyptic mode. He offers both redemption and a certain kind of hope, both of which are as relevant today as they were during the Cold War. And Beatrice plays a key role in conveying Ballard's message.

Although what exactly happens to Beatrice at the end of the novel is not clear, we must remember that her intention to stay is manifested in Kerans's actions. They both choose death. In this ending Ballard anticipates the work of cultural theorist Claire Colebrook by more than fifty years. In her 2014 book, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, Colebrook dares to suggest that human extinction may not only be inevitable, it may be desirable.

Colebrook argues that as we find ourselves in the midst of the sixth great extinction, spiralling towards ecological meltdown, the key philosophical questions have changed:

> The overwhelming question that presses itself upon us – requiring incessant repression and working through – is not the question of how we humans were placed in a world in which the task was too hard, the conditions too bleak or the burden of freedom too confronting. The question is not one of how we humans can justify a hostile life, but how we can possibly justify ourselves given our malevolent relation to life. (Colebrook 2014: 198)

By accepting the possibility (perhaps the inevitability) of our extinction, Beatrice and Kerans both make Ballard's most salient point for our post-climate change world: man is not the centre of all things, but just one lifeform among many.

Our survival is not imperative; it is conditional and precarious. And Beatrice's refusal to cling to life, to procreate, and strive for species survival is perhaps even more symbolically potent than the actions of Ballard's 'second Adam'. She rejects her gender determined destiny as Eve (first mother, mythic creator of all human life) and instead chooses death.

By accepting this fate, rather than fighting it no matter what the consequences for other lifeforms and the broader environment, these fictional characters offer humanity perhaps the only chance of redemption still available in the post-climate change age and a glimmer of hope for the rest of life on Earth. Even without the backstory I have constructed for Beatrice, her decision to accept extinction demonstrates a kind of pragmatic heroism. In Beatrice Dahl, Ballard (no doubt inadvertently) created a resilient, self-reliant and complex female character who has survived decades between the lines of *The Drowned World*.

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