



The Day of Creation

J.G. Ballard

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On the arid, war-plagued terrain of central Africa, a manic doctor is consumed with visions of transforming the Sahara into a land of abundance. But Dr. Mallory's obsession quickly spirals dangerously out of control. First published in 1987, this classic Ballard thriller continues to resonate "with dark implications for the future of humanity" (*Publishers Weekly*).

The Day of Creation Details

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From Reader Review The Day of Creation for online ebook

Akiva says

What the hell just happened? I guess this isn't the first book I've read about traveling down a river with a narrator whose reliability is questionable at best. Well I suppose he is traveling up a river. Who is he? Dr. Mallory, an Englishman running a clinic for the WHO in Africa. He's obsessed with irrigating the local town and with the idea of another Nile to green the Sahara. The river of his dreams comes pouring through, and he's convinced he caused it. And so as everything goes mad around him due to a combination of the newly struck river and the general environment, he endeavors to travel to the source of the river. There are guerrillas and a documentary crew and a creepy obsession with a young girl associated with the guerrillas who he decides is somehow the spirit of the river. The whole thing is feverish literally and figuratively.

There are a lot of tricks I associate with Gene Wolfe where it's hinted that something is happening, but he doesn't spell it out, and then refers to it later as if it is clear what he means. In fact the whole thing reminded me of Gene Wolfe and particularly the parts sailing with Seawrack from *On Blue's Waters*.

Kevin Tole says

Having finished reading his autobiography, *Crash* and *The Atrocity Exhibition* I thought I would delve into other stuff by yer man Ballard as I was totally knocked out by *Crash* and the *Atrocity Exhibition* and he seemed far far more than the average middle class British writer. This one was the first that came to hand from the local library (they DO still have them and my word are they a resource that needs / must be maintained.)

It's a difficult book to review. Well written but without the great quantity of brilliant sentences in the other two. Indeed until you get half the way through the book it's a little difficult to see what is going on (nothing mysterious there in a Ballard book) but in a different way from the other two. This was less surreal and in fact might have been written by any number of British writers - certainly not 'Ballardian' in the greater sense of that word (Q. if someone asked me what I meant by 'Ballardian' could I explain it? A. Not concisely - the best way is to go to the website and to read 'Crash').

It's about this doctor who is in the dust-ridden downrun, usual coup-and-local-uprising-a-minute country in the centre of Africa, who has gone / is going mad. A decent enough Ballard start. But the writing at the start begins to sound like the usual British drudge writing. It's not till half way that things start hotting up. Even so it still has such wonderful gems as

We have spent so long in the worlds of publicity and self-promotion that only the calculated gesture was sincere. A spontaneous insincerity was as close as one could come to the truth. Mere honesty would have seemed contrived and dubious.

By the time he's fought off the local army captain (who has his own vision of future personal grandeur), become infatuated with a nubile native who has nearly shot executed him, and worked his way up the mysterious river and reached the centre of guerrilla activity, do we start to see some of what Ballard is banging on about in this tome.

There is the taint of disgust about what is happening in Central Africa / Sahel / immediate Sub-Sahara which starts to come across and the futility of it all as epitomised by the role of the river. Even Doctor Mallory appears to be ambivalent about it wanting to find the source to kill the river and then when it looks as though it is about to expire, to bring new life to the river. Mallory is an ambiguous confused and mad. Confused in his thoughts and confused in his actions which are a reflection of his confused life. He has seen so much and become so disillusioned by it all that he no longer knows what he wants, going from WHO medic to local hydrographer and water driller to explorer and an almost messianic figure of hopelessness.

There is also the challenging character of Mrs. Warrender, widow of another unseen white killed by the guerrilla fighters before the action in the book takes place. She is like some female Noah and epitomises this almost feminist statement running within the book too. The metaphor becomes confused or explicit - make of it what you will - when she and her retinue of local widows is moved from an experimental monkey breeding station onto a floating disused whorehouse-come-bar that has lain deserted and beached by the side of the dry lake. The Mrs Warrender plot line runs almost as a second story and we last see her heading into the mountains with her female followers. Hers and the women's vessel is presented as better run, better maintained, better led, cleaner and more efficient than anything else with a sordid past of male involvement. Mallory is seen as plain mad and the women under Mrs Warrender as the ultra sane / sensible. But what DOES the river represent? Why does Mallory want to kill it and then want to resurrect it? Mallory wants to get to the source as a mystical quest whereas Mrs Warrender says that "...because a great river like this draws men to it" when we have seen her women out hunting in the marshes - hunting for guerrillas and shooting them. Mallory talks about himself as 'BEING the river'. So for much of the book we are reading this through the eyes of a madman.

This is a decent book. Less immediate than Crash or T.A.E. but with the same depths within but not so explicitly on the surface. The currents are there but you need to find them. There are impressions of cargo cult, the pornography of media and the implied threat of the new taking over the old - the unseen replacing the conservative dilapidated present. They all want to achieve some kind of fame - perhaps not Mrs Warrender or Mallory, though they too in their own personal ways want that recognition of achievement.

It is another 'Ballardian' masterpiece in its own small way - and to know what I mean you will have to read it or go to the website for a definition of that term.

Bill Styles says

One of Ballard's best pure science fiction works. Mallory, the chief protagonist, is a doctor turned amateur civil engineer on an abandoned irrigation project in an African country south of the Sahara. The small town he is based in is being destroyed in actions between a rebel group and the local high ranking police chief. In using a bulldozer to clear away a massive tree stump, Mallory manages to release a trickle of water into the dried lake bed he is working on. Before long, it turns into a vast river, the river Mallory, that builds up and up to become a third tributary for the Nile.

Mallory commandeers an old river ferry. He is pursued along the river that he has created, now a tropical paradise where before there was just desert, by the police chief and the rebels. He gains a helper in the shape of a 12 year old girl who has deserted from the rebel group.

Of course the river and its paradise cannot last....

As with much of Ballard's work, there is a lot of imagery that relates to his experiences in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Shanghai during the second world war. This is related in "Empire of the Sun" and

the first part of "Kindness of Women". Both very fine novels in my opinion.

"Day of Creation" is excellent as a stand alone work, but is also significant in the main body of Ballard's work.

F.R. says

When I read 'Rushing to Paradise' the other month, I think I said that Ballard had managed to create a good sense of place away from his normal Shepperton stamping patch. But even though 'The Day of Creation' has an African setting, that sense of place is sadly lacking. Indeed it is so vague as to be almost dream-like, and that the whole thing is a dream is an interpretation Ballard positively invites. (Although bearing in mind that Ballard also wrote the likes of 'The Atrocity Exhibition', this is a far more lucid dream). However that dream quality means that it isn't a particularly compulsive read, almost drifting by the reader.

A young doctor discovers, then tries to destroy a river in Central Africa. No reading of Ballard is ever wasted, but he wrote better novels.

Steve Steidle says

What started as a wild fever dream quickly descends into a slog of racism, borderline pedophilia, and narcissism.

Darwin8u says

"Sooner or later, everything turns into television."
- J.G. Ballard, The Day of Creation

A hypnotic and dreamy parable or perhaps a freakish and hallucinogenic and moody allegory, 'The Day of Creation' drifts along with Ballard's beautiful (sometimes absurdly quirky) prose. I've read roughly eight of his novels or more and I've yet to be disappointed really in any of them.

The book is slippery. It isn't really plot driven (I guess all river novels have some direction and plot to them). Think of some strange combination of Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness', Twain's 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn', the 'African Queen', Burton's 'The Source of the Nile', etc., all mixed with a flavor of Greek myth. Dr. Mallory floats upstream with his girl Friday, his nubile Jim (Noon) to discover the source of the river Mallory "created". The further up the river he floats, the crazier and sicker everybody becomes. The novel bloats and floats on a lot of the fluvial space Ballard loves: environmental extremism, political absurdity, war, madness, nightmares, violence, sex, and technology.

If you are new to Ballard, I might not recommend you start with this one. Ballard is like raw oysters, pickled beets or artichoke hearts: he's slippery, earthy, and an acquired taste. So, start with something a bit more mainstream. But if you are into funky contemporary literature and are willing to drift, float, and eddy around

a bit while drunk or high -- this novel might just be exactly what you weren't looking for but might want anyway.

Perry Whitford says

Ballard treads water in an imaginary African river.

Dr Mallory works for the World Health Organisation on a failed project where he instead conceives a mad obsession to bring water to the Sahara by tapping a source under a drained lake in Central Africa.

A river duly appears, local interests come into conflict over the potential wealth, outside media interests descend, while Mallory gives his own name to this 'third Nile' and heads out for the source with a talismanic pre-pubescent guerilla girl.

If that all sounds a little bit like *Heart of Darkness* meets *Lolita* then that's fair enough; Dr Mallory comes across as something of Marlow and Humbert Humbert combined, the River Mallory as Kurtz and Quilty:

'I had become so obsessed by myself that I had seen the Mallory as a rival, and measured it's current against my own ambition.'

The river quickly becomes home to the imported detritus of Western colonization, "*beer bottles, cigarette packs and French pornographic magazines,*" alongside broken items of technology both large and small, such as aerosol cans, hairdryers and aircraft hangers.

Native influences infest the waters too, such as snakes, fevers and disease. The young girl who accompanies and intoxicates Mallory, called Noon, has a natural affinity with the river, though her obsession is for Western gadgetry, especially film.

The local players are Captain Kagwa, the police chief, and General Harare, leader of the guerillas. Both have essentially the same ambitions. In two excellent examples of Ballard's way with a pithy phrase, the former becomes '*a black conquistador sailing up his private Amazon*', the latter '*a Messiah come to claim his kingdom of dust*.'

Also on the river are Professor Sanger, a dubious maker of TV documentaries, and a small gang of female natives out for revenge on the men that killed their husbands and raped them, led by Nora Warrender, who runs an animal breeding centre.

Ballard's previous novel, *The Empire of the Sun*, was immediately adapted into a popular film by Stephen Spielberg. I think its fair to say that the director wouldn't have been so keen to make a movie about a story where a middle-aged white man longs to rob Africa of a new source of water while lusting after a twelve year old tribal girl.

I opened this review with a lame pun about Ballard treading water in this novel, which is partly true. Much is familiar here, if generally less so. But it's still Ballard, a superior writer of speculative fiction if ever there was one. Few swam as fast as he doggie-paddled.

He was also very brave. He would have started this novel in about 1985 at the height of the African drought

and the charitable response from the West which culminated in Live Aid.

So this was his uncharitable response.

Baal Of says

Ballard writes ugly novels filled with ugly characters, and stories that reflect his disgust for humanity. Part of me agrees with him, when I see the ugliness of the current state of American politics with the rise of the racist, fascist right, and the regressive stupidity of Trump and those who continue to support and defend him. Another part of me wants to just throw this book away since it feels like wallowing in despair, with its ecological undertones revolving around the nastiness that fills the magical river. Adding to all the unpleasantness is the main character who is loathsome in just about every way, and particularly with his sexual obsession with Noon, the 12 year guerrilla girl he ends up travelling with. As the novel progresses, the imagery around the river and the attempts by the people to control its waters become increasingly sexual as well, and even though Ballard's adeptness with language kept me from giving up entirely, by the end of the book I was just glad it was over, and I was left with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Alan says

J.G. Ballard was a giant of speculative fiction. His feral visions of futures in decay were a tremendously influential perspective on what had all too often been an unreflectively triumphalist literature. After encountering works like *High Rise*, *The Terminal Beach*, *The Drowned World*, *The Crystal World*, *The Atrocity Exhibition* and of course *Crash*, it becomes much more difficult to accept wide-eyed technological utopias without at least a degree of skepticism. His books take hold of the mind and won't let go, like the dried black-green algal bloom adhering to the sides of an empty swimming pool in the courtyard of the last Martian hotel.

I think it may be telling that my *most* memorable Ballard moment is Kara murmuring "Maybe the next one," as she watches traffic from a hotel room balcony, a line which as far as I can tell is actually from the David Cronenberg film rather than from the book *Crash*... but in any case, when I ran across this recent reissue of Ballard's 1987 novel *The Day of Creation* on the new books shelf at my local public library, I knew I had to pick it up.

The packaging of this edition is simple and eye-catching without being gaudy. I especially liked the edgy display font chosen for the chapter titles—lines which, thus set off, become one-line short stories in their own right, like "The Impresario of Rubbish"; "Out of the Night and Into the Dream" and "Journey towards the Rain Planet." Unfortunately, I cannot put a name to that face... there was no "Note on the Fonts" in the volume at hand, nor did it turn up using the web services Identifont and WhatTheFont.

The Day of Creation's locale is suitably exotic, or will be to most of Ballard's readers—an imaginary Central African region abandoned by its own people when the encroaching Sahara Desert all too realistically dried out all their farmland. It's set in a time that is also rapidly becoming exotic, an era of "clocks without hands" (p.106), devoid even of the concepts of cellphones, laptop computers and ubiquitous wireless connectivity: the 1980s.

It is not primarily a work of scientific fiction, though. The events described are realistic, or at least start out that way, set in motion by an unprecedented but nonetheless plausible shaking of the earth. A great river appears out of, essentially, nowhere. Dr. Mallory, the narrator of this story, a medical doctor and quondam water prospector, witnesses what he takes to be its day of creation, springing from beneath the exposed roots of a great old oak tree near the empty village on the former shore of dry Lake Kotto where Mallory has his clinic. This "third Nile" promises to revivify the Sahara seemingly overnight... and of course Mallory's first impulse is to own, to control, even to destroy what he, in his more feverish moments, believes he has created. He embarks upon an upstream journey to find the source of this natural prodigy—after all, "Men must play their dangerous games." (p.86)

Dr. Mallory, whose first name is never mentioned, is not a very likeable character, and *The Day of Creation* is a story of unpleasant emotions, of hubris, lust, anger and fear, played out against a surreal background that seems to be as much internal landscape as it is navigable river. The Africa he sees is a very European one, mysterious and powerful but even so a mere *possession*, subject to his whims, full of benighted natives obsessed with Western gadgetry but incapable of maintaining it for themselves. It's an outsider's imperialist view that was hardly tenable even at the time Ballard was writing, and seems even less so now. And Mallory's obsession with the just-pubescent guerrilla girl Noon is, if not technically criminal in this jurisdiction, certainly unwholesome. I began thinking of *The Day of Creation* as something like *Heart of Darkness* crossed with *Lolita*—though not, I suspect, likely to be remembered as long as either.

"God rested on the seventh day in order to look at the rushes."
—(p.64)

I did like the ambiguity of this line, though—the "rushes" denoting both the film from the Japanese documentary crew encamped near Mallory's clinic, and the reeds now growing along the newborn river. However, this was not my favorite of the Ballard I've read.

Maybe the next one.

Bjorn Roose says

Een tweetal boekbesprekingen terug had ik het ook al over een werk van de in 2009, op 69-jarige leeftijd, overleden J.G. Ballard, dus op de auteur en zijn andere werken terugkomen lijkt me weinig zinnig.

En toch moet ik dat laatste misschien doen: De dag van de schepping heeft namelijk – uiteraard een aantal gelijkenissen met andere van zijn werken, maar ook verschillen en één specifieke eigenschap. Die specifieke eigenschap is dat het héél erg Afrikaans is, of toch Afrikaans zoals in “Afrika zoals het door een Europeaan die er gewoond heeft aangevoeld wordt”. Het is een rommeltje van opkomende en weer verlaten steden, rivaliserende bendes (“krijgsheer” is nog een eretitel voor de leiders van die groepen van een paar tientallen “soldaten” groot), achteloosheid en diepzinnigheid, ecologische rampen en schitterende natuur, en vooral véél ... koorts.

Want dat is wat deze De dag van de schepping is, een geleidelijk escalerende koortsdroom. Niet eentje van het soort waarmee je te maken krijgt in *Apocalypse Now*, maar een waarin de werkelijkheid gewoon steeds gekker begint te worden.

Dat belet echter niet dat in die droom/werkelijkheid of droomwerkelijkheid een aantal van de typische Ballard-thema's opduiken: rampen (zelfs als ze in eerste instantie een zegen lijken en soms alleen maar omdat ze de personages in de weg zitten/helpen), idealen die bij contact met de werkelijkheid in hun tegendeel omslaan, de invloed van de cameralens, en hoofdpersonages die op een of andere manier niet écht in de wereld lijken te staan.

Het boek dateert intussen al van 1987, maar het verdient nog steeds ten zeerste gelezen te worden, ook al heeft de auteur van de achterflap er met zijn pet naar gegoooid toen hij een korte inhoud neerschreef. Deze keer niet omdat het over een donkere toekomst vertelt, maar over een donkere realiteit.

Joseph S says

A hallucinatory epic, part Apocolypse Now part Lollita but all Ballard. In pontificates on television and our vision of ourselves: How technology quickens our evolution, like a tectonic river and how near devolution waits. Our ability to adapt just as much a hindrance as strength, our modern convenience and reliance ultimately leading to our downfall.

Ron says

Ballard wrote this book at least 4 times in the 60s and after having read one of them, the average reader will be wholly bored and unimpressed with the others (I've always felt they should have been one big book at half the total length, so there was a limit to what people have viewed as his prescience).

It's a wonder that he returned to this territory so late in his career, only to pen such a disaster (pun intended) of a novel. It's perhaps his most praised, with blurbs from a handful of British literature luminaries (his greatest champion, the equally overrated Martin Amis shockingly not among them).

The biggest problems is that it's wholly formulaic and a pale imitation of the previous works, even if, for once, he does pin the blame for the catastrophe on human intervention into the landscape. There is his stand-in character, the M.D. at the center of the book, a professor, a roguish bush pilot (usually Australian), a few vague and mysterious foreigners, and a beautiful and slender, but tough woman who has been recently widowed (or, in the case of a few others, would soon be widowed). Sprinkle in a few natives for local color and we've got another disaster epic from Ballard!

The problem is that this one is utterly boring and tedious. I can scarcely say that anything happened at all during the first 100 pages, even though he takes his usual tact of dropping us squarely in the middle of a chaotic situation (this may be half of his inability to write good characters, so driven is he by themes and ignorant of plot and pacing). Ballard often takes a page to describe a journey of 3 paces, paragraphs to describe the act of turning on a car and putting it into gear, repeatedly, each and every time his characters move through some harrowing situation or engage in some small act. The micro-detail is extremely off putting and nearly lulls one to sleep.

The themes suggested by the authors writing those blurbs scarcely exist. It barely focuses on the TV crew attempting to cover this event, so it fails at all to serve the purpose of being a media critique. It also fails as a critique of white Western imperialism and arrogance or even as the Conrad-like (also a vastly overrated

author) tale of obsession and love that Angela Carter describes (she also mentions the theme of 'life giving' water, when the book in fact shows water as nothing but a destructive element, though it only slightly suggests the sort of destruction Buckminster Fuller attributed to water transport).

A number of classic literary archetypes are invoked in the final act, but the reader is by then too weary to care about this sudden shift in tone that seems intended to amplify any previous metaphors. It's often surreal and incoherent and pages go by without anything happening, the reader scarcely aware that all of this action has taken place over a period of 6 months (one might think it was only days or a few weeks). The worst aspect is a sudden and inexplicable proliferation of breast metaphors--perhaps this is why Carter viewed it as a mediation on life giving powers of water--that fall utterly flat.

It's a slog of a book with almost no redeeming values and one of the most painful reading experiences from his catalog.

Rick says

A fetid fever dream, running
like an infected river through
Ballard's dark imagination.

Brett Warnke says

Most authors would describe a helicopter, descending on a protagonist as a "terrible wasp" or a "monster." Check Ballard out: "through the clouds of illuminated smoke the helicopter appeared, the grand finale of this fireworks spectacular. An ugly genie, it descended to within 50 feet of us. The restraining nets of the west wall were now alight, and revealed the huge rounded breasts of the dam in a fiery striptease." The rich, conjuring of images--a helicopter as an 'ugly genie'!--this is the writing that makes Ballard the last of the Surrealists. He died in 2009. Ballard wrote dozens of novels and a massive collection of short stories. Also, his amazing book of reviews and essays, "A Users Guide to the Millennium," is a key to his very idiosyncratic but fascinating style, as is his somewhat autobiographical novel, "Empire of the Sun." Being a great author is writing clearly but also developing a style. Cormac McCarthy, J.M. Coetzee, Margaret Atwood, Gertrude Stein, Vladimir Nabokov, Martin Amis, Antonio Lobo Antunes, William Faulkner--all of these authors have a unique style of enriching a paragraph, sharpening the page so that the sentences could only be theirs. Ballard's "The Day of Creation" is a wild Conradian journey through East Africa. But is Ballardian, too. The narrator, Dr. Mallory, is possessed with a troubled subconscious--his obsessions take him on a journey up a self-named river he wants to create but also destroy. He believes he has created the source of this new river and travels through the mud and mosquitoes, beside a young girl, Noon. The novel, published in 1987, is an adventure and a subtle critique of the TV culture that preys upon Africa in a kind of war-porn, exploitative neocolonialism. I think Ballard's goal as a writer was to disprove Henry James's dictum, "Tell a dream, lose a reader." Many of Ballard's characters are purposely thin, with minimal characterization and backstory--as if they are walking through a dream. While not exactly devices, many of his main characters serve as a kind of "everyman." Types. Many are doctors and thinkers. But their desires, obsessions, fears, and hopes are very much realized through their actions (and misdeeds). Many revert to primal and often vicious behavior when given the chance. If the novel's dialogue is often useful as opposed to rich, it is because Ballard plays to his strengths as a writer--offering us rich images, twisted desires and

carries us through a flood of sensations. Ballard's fiction is a walk through a Francis Bacon painting, a crooked journey through the late 20th century madness. Ballard predicted the catastrophes that will be our reality, receiving little readership in the United States. Often dismissed as a mere SF author, he was on no college syllabus of mine. "The Day of Creation" is very much a story of discovery and loss, as well as the tale of a mad dream--mysterious characters with questionable motives on oddly selfish missions to achieve strange ends in an uncertain, dreamy setting. Both hyper-specific (we know the types of birds in the trees and vines on the ground) we don't know which country we are in. Of course, the criticisms of a Surrealist writer can produce themselves, but Ballard didn't care. Or, more likely, he dared his critics. Look at the clear and complex realistic characters in "Empire of the Sun." He could certainly develop it when the story required it. Obviously, Ballard's modernist work—Freudian misadventures—explored the inner space of what we are and what we are capable of doing in extremes. And it is a book that upon finishing, you know you will pick up and sail through at least once more.

Daniel Polansky says

My first Ballard! Late to the game, I know. Anyway, it's fabulous. Dreamlike, erotic, exciting, working as an adventure novel and as a philosophical discursion. Strange and sad and melancholic, as soon as I read it I ran out and bought a bunch more. Ballard deserves the accolades he gets.
