



A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews

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Over the course of his career, J.G. Ballard has revealed hidden truths about the modern world. The essays, reviews, and ruminations gathered here—spanning the breadth of this long career—approach reality with the same sharp prose and sharper vision that distinguish his fiction. Ballard's fascination for and fixation upon this century take him from Mickey Mouse to Salvador Dali, from Los Angeles to Shanghai, from William Burroughs to Winnie the Pooh, from the future to today.

A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews Details

Date : Published April 15th 1997 by Picador (first published 1996)

ISBN : 9780312156831

Author : J.G. Ballard

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Writing, Essays, Criticism, Literature



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Stephen says

Occasionally a bit stuffy and/or obscure (perhaps it would read differently to an native of England) but easily more than half the very short essays were entertaining and quite a few were thought provoking. One nice thing about a book of such short essays (most are less than 3 pages) is that there is less guilt when you find yourself skipping ahead to the next one after an opening paragraph or two doesn't engage your interest.

The Final Song says

From 1962 to 1995 this book collects little essays, musing and assorted texts from J.G Ballard. At first glance it appears really fragmented commenting on things so different, from Coca Cola to Mein Kampf. But i think that it really reflects the state of the 20 century and the current one too. Written in a way that is never a chore to read, even when he wrote constantly about the same topics.

I really enjoyed his reflection on science fiction, and what path should have taken, i wonder if that happen. (probably no, seeing that there is still star wars movies being made)

Paul says

A superb collection of essays and reviews written from the early 1960s to 1995. "Which Way To Inner Space" (1962) reads like a mini-manifesto of Ballard's intent for a new type of sci-fi and away from the 'space operas' he clearly though were a dead end.

His intelligence and wit shine through the collection on subjects as diverse as Star Wars ('the first totally unserious s-f film'), Hitler, Coca-Cola, Mae West, some excellent writing on the Surrealists for whom he had such a great passion and who were such a liberating influence on his imagination. I particularly cherished his essays on William Burroughs - his advocacy makes me want to run out and get a copy of "The Naked Lunch" and read it again for the first time in 30 years.

I've now read pretty much everything in book-form that Ballard wrote. I can only hope that his publishers have enough material from 1996 until his death in 2009 for another collection.

Brett Warnke says

A hilarious and dark journey through the second half of the twentieth century, Ballard's merry nihilism lightens my grimness and helps me smile more at the state of the world. Ballard has such a fascinating range: an acute critic of science fiction as well as contemporary pieties and wholesome myths like Disney (an FBI funk) and Coca Cola, the true victor of the Cold War. There are also haunting passages about his past,

criticisms about his youthful home in Shanghai as well as reviews of Sade, the surrealists, and new look at Hitler's propagandistic and paranoid legacy. Read all of Ballard and laugh and delight as we head to civilization's technological apotheosis (or funeral).

MichaelK says

The essays and reviews collected here span many decades and topics. I came to this shortly reading the book of Ballard's interviews (Extreme Metaphors), which I found more enjoyable overall. While some of the essays interested me and held my attention, many were a slog to get through, even though they were generally only a few pages long. The book reviews are mostly unmemorable and unstylish, coming across as generic ones which could have been written by any newspaper book reviewer or bookblogger. This isn't to say they are bad, just nothing special. Ballard's distinctive outlook and intelligence is more forceful and compelling in his interviews than these essays; he was a better conversationalist than essayist.

This collection does of course have its highlights - a review of Hitler's 'Mein Kampf', Ballard's negative review of the first Star Wars film ('Hobbits in Space?'), the science fiction essays, and the final autobiographical piece - most of which can be read for free online. I cannot really recommend this collection except to a die hard Ballard fan.

Al Young says

In modern alt-literature, there are two names that tower above everyone else- William S Burroughs and Ballard.

So regardless of what I think of him, I have to acknowledge the debt that stuff I like owes to him. For starters, I will give you Joy Division, David Cronenberg, and Grant Morrison, to name three. The guy is so influential his name is an adjective. The idea of dystopia, post apocalyptic misery- of industry and technology making life unbearable- hey right down my alley.

The truth is though that while Burroughs seized me immediately, Ballard generally seems more difficult for me to grab.

I have read a couple of his fiction works- one at the beginning and one near the end of his career, and I can't say either did much for me.

Ballard did release a collection of mostly magazine articles of his called A User's Guide to the Millenium. The title is misleading - it's mostly book reviews, thoughts about books, musings on science fiction, and an otherwise assortment of things Ballard has been paid to write about.

Ballard makes an interesting essayist though, and this (non-fiction) book is one I could (and do) pick up from time to time.

I have read or at least perused some of those late 60s and early 70s writings that made Ballard the name he is (as well as some short stories), and if they may not quite set my world on fire, I have to admit they are unlike anything else.

In short, Ballard's the guy who wrote Why I Want to F--k Ronald Reagan and that was in 1967. Respect.

T.E. Wilson says

Only for Ballard fans. These essays are now quite dated.

Antonio Vena says

Alcuni articoli belli, altri fantastiche pietre miliari intellettuali (ovvero metafore estreme) e altri ancora non particolarmente ispirati.

In ogni caso un libro da avere e leggere.

Kim says

Ballard is a randy old goat who writes elegantly and thinks future civilizations will remember us by our motorway flyovers. He doesn't say this in an irritating "satirical" Bill Bryson/David Brooks way, he actually thinks it, and he's utterly convincing.

It's amazing, when I look at the shit that passes for commentary in the British press 99% of the time, that most of the essays in this book originally appeared in newspapers. The stuff on classic Hollywood and Sci-Fi is great. And although, by the time most of the essays were published, he was already a balding, middle-aged man, he's never embarrassed, or embarrassing, when he writes about sex, which he does all the time, because he's a randy old goat who loves motorways and airports and cars.

I called him up once at his Shepperton home (his number's in the phone book) when I worked at his local rag. He answered the phone and I asked him for an interview. He paused for a long time and then said, in a very polite voice, "I think I shall have to decline." Which is a pretty classy, funny way of saying "no," I think.

Stephen Curran says

The 20th century feels like a very long time ago. JG Ballard's occasional playful imaginings of the future in this collection of (in the main) book reviews, understandably fail to predict the dominance of the internet, but manage to get things half right by suggesting that the steering wheel in cars might one day be replaced by a dial telephone and a copy of the Yellow Pages.

That's not to say that he isn't astute. Far from it. Ballard is one of the few writers who's unique and beautifully expressed world view skews and infects my own as I read his pages. Our culture, for him, is a collection of subconscious death wishes, where the motorway is the key image of the era, and society is as easily dismantled as a stage set. Sometimes I think he's a madman. Sometimes I think he simply sees things more clearly than the rest of us. The more I read him, the more I nod my head in agreement.

Erik says

J.G. Ballard is always provocative and is a hell of a writer. In this collection of essays, he is strongest in his writings of his native Shanghai, most amusing (and often wrong-headed) in his writing on other writers (I have to assume it is a generational thing - his adoration of William Burroughs is something that I once agreed with, but now find a bit juvenile, and his view of the novel, based, as it is on the idea that Burroughs's approach is still the model of the novel of the future is downright daft), and thoroughly thought-provoking on his ruminations on the space age and the automobile (and mostly right on both accounts).

John Kenny says

A Users Guide to the Millennium by J.G. Ballard is an absolute treasure chest for anyone interested in 20th century pop culture. It's a collection of essays and reviews that spans 30+ years, culled from a wide range of magazines and covers such subjects as art, history, science, cinema and science fiction and such personalities and icons as Marilyn Monroe, Elvis, Dali, William Burroughs, Howard Hughes, Einstein, Warhol, Henry Miller, the list goes on.

Most of the pieces are short but pack a punch. Brilliant observations, a wicked turn of phrase and loaded with information, history and little-known facts, this gem has the effect of whetting your appetite for more. I, for one, will be tracking down books on various of the subjects and people explored in this volume.

One might think that a hotch-potch collection like this can't have anything like a cohesive quality to it, but, more than anything else, the sheer breath of the canvas painted and the uniquely skewed view of Ballard gives us an inside look at the mind of the writer. Of particular interest are the autobiographical essays which serve as the core of the book and paint a vivid picture of Shanghai in the 30's and 40's.

Highly recommended.

Ted Laderas says

Fantastic short essays that turn your viewpoint on its head...the title essay describes 10 influential surrealist sci fi movies, although some (like Douglas Trumbull's "Silent Running") are a bit dated and painful to watch. Mostly I'm grateful to this book for introducing me to Godard's "Alphaville" - a no budget sci fi film that fuses ultramodern Paris locales with gumshoe detectives and a paranoid computer named alpha-60 who controls the planet.

A good critic can open a reader's eyes to subtleties that might've been missed - in the case of Ballard, he can show you the seamy underbelly of nearly any kind of art....eye opening.

Boyd says

I can't in good conscience give this book a 5: it's a baggy miscellany, which is something people in my business (publishing) are taught to frown upon. Misshapen, little chance of review attention, no particular audience, etc., etc., etc. I seriously dug it.

Yes, okay, it's mostly book (and a few film) reviews, rather vaguely broken out by category ("Writers" "The Visual World," "Science," etc.), along with some even more general stuff filed under "In General." Sounds bad. It's not: it's a great and idiosyncratic cruise through (mostly) the last three decades of the twentieth century, with a couple of personal detours into World War II-era Shanghai, when Ballard, his parents, and his little sister were confined together by the Japanese in one small room for nearly three years. The writing is pure Ballard, which would be more than enough for me even if he were writing about his collection of rusted sardine cans.

The hook here isn't really the material, but rather its range and the way it's processed and commented upon. Ballard doesn't spend much time dallying with the Masters of 20th Century Fiction. Yes, there's Thomas Wolfe and Fitzgerald, Vonnegut and Burroughs (largely second-hand, via their biographies), but most of the books he writes about are odds and ends of nonfiction that provide springboards to something he wants to talk about.

Who'll you find here? Nancy Reagan (as crudely dismembered and presented for inspection by "chainsaw biographer" Kitty Kelley); Richard Feynman; Walt Disney; Freud; Docs Papa and Baby; Hitler and MEIN KAMPF paired with Joyce and ULYSSES; Coca-Cola; a guy who wrote earnest and romantic marriage manuals in the 50s; STAR WARS (dismissed as "Hobbits in Space"); the depraved last empress of China, Tzu Hsi; Salvador Dali...you get the picture. Except it's more like a jigsaw puzzle.

Can one tell anything about someone from a list of his or her favorite books? Ballard's are Hemingway's COLLECTED STORIES; West's DAY OF THE LOCUSTS; THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER; THE ANNOTATED ALICE; NAKED LUNCH; Baudrillard's AMERICA; THE SECRET LIFE OF SALVADOR DALI (by Dali); THE WORLD THROUGH BLUNTED SIGHT (Patrick Trevor-Roper); the Los Angeles Yellow Pages; and THE BLACK BOX, a collection of cockpit recorder transcripts, "not all of fatal crashes." *You* be the judge.

Charles Dee Mitchell says

These are mostly short reviews written for a variety of London daily papers. The choice of review material is classic Ballard -- biographies of Nancy Reagan, Henry Miller, and the Emperor Hirohito; books on surrealism, war photography, and the Golden Age of science fiction; a review of a mail-order sex manual. There are also essays on some favored painters and review of Star Wars titled Hobbits in Space. Excellent bedtime reading.
