

THE **ONE** **About**

THE BALLARD

FANATIC

A Story by David Hull

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THE ONE ABOUT THE BALLARD FANATIC

A STORY

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actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

LATER, AS BLOOD THICKENS on the woven jute rug in Gennison's study, I wonder how we got on to Ballard in the first place.

I was nursing a pint of stout at a pub in Hampstead. Behind the bar, bottles glittered like gaudy cathedral saints in a common alcove; above them, a bank of silent televisions, each tuned to a different satellite news channel. The Secretary-General of the UN kept popping up as though he were trying to coax me into a game of peek-a-boo. I didn't want to play, and I returned my attention to the rapture of beige bubbles ascending the sides of my glass.

Then someone a few seats to my right snorted and mumbled "Jackpot." I glanced over to see a middle aged man tucking into a basket of chips. He sensed my attention and nodded towards the televisions.

The news cycles had briefly synchronized. All six screens were showing identical footage of a helicopter

hovering over a bulbous water tank on rickety stilts, rising a hundred feet from a drab prairie that might have been Kansas or Kazakhstan. Dangling at the end of a thread extruded from the chopper's belly was a tiny knot of flailing limbs. Zoom: a geared-up trooper holding the boy he'd just plucked to safety. America then. They're the sort that care.

The barkeep was watching too.

"He's right, luv," I said to her. "It's come up all helis." I pushed my glass forward. "Pay out."

"Fat chance," she said, and stalked to the other end of the bar.

The fellow and I exchanged a wry glance, and then we both watched the stations slide out of synch, their momentary convergence as transient as the fleeting communion he and I had just shared.



WHEN I REGAIN consciousness, I'm aware of nothing but a repetitive thud in my left ear, drumming out through an oceanic swirl of white noise. Fastening on to the muffled beat, I realize that it's my own pulse, and around this single clue the order of things resolves. I'm lying on my side; I'm thinking about a JG Ballard story called "Track 12," in which a man dies to the susurrations of his own grossly amplified kiss, and from this stubborn thought I

grobe my way back: to the pub, to the screens, to Ballard. To Gennison. I'm lying on the floor of his study.

You might think my next question would be "How did I get here?" But I remember perfectly well how I got here. The barkeep rang last call and Gennison suggested a nightcap at his place. "Just around the corner, right on the square," he said. "Show you my Ballard firsts while we're at it," he added with a self-deprecating roll of his eyes.

I take in a deep, shuddering breath and open my eyes. I make out the black and white pattern of the rug. About a yard away this pattern vanishes beneath a coagulating pool of black-red blood, which I stare at for a short eternity, until I'm certain its tide is not advancing. I dare not wonder whether the blood is mine, not yet. A few sheets of paper are stuck to the surface of the pool.

I try to remember when I had the first intimation that Gennison was mad. But my thoughts won't stick, and the question persists: how on earth did we get on to Ballard? Surely none of this would have happened if we hadn't.



IF YOU LOVE TO READ, favourite books and authors are at the back of every conversation, waiting for their cue, the slightest pretext to join the fray. Many of my youthful friendships—courtships too—only gained altitude when one of us artlessly guided the chatter to a writer or title

we loved. Much later, in the general shakedown that is middle age, one looks at the friendships and relationships thus forged and questions, at last, the accuracy of literary taste as a predictor of like-mindedness.

Perhaps the question is moot. Gennison was a fanatic. He no doubt had a thousand different strategies for slipping Ballard in. Turning conversations to Ballard was the man's specialty, perhaps his *raison d'être*. He could probably do it in such a way that left you thinking you were the one who'd done it.

Still, memory insists on churning over the evening for a clue. One minute I was nursing my drink, the next I was smiling faintly as my neighbour at the bar merrily jabbered on about JG Ballard.

Gennison was roughly my age, 45, a balding chap with watery eyes, round cheeks and a bushy moustache. He wore a tan trench coat over a dark brown suit that was fraying at the cuffs and bronze at the knee, like a statue rubbed for good luck by generations of passers-by. I would have guessed he was a salesman, an area rep for a pharmaceuticals firm perhaps. It turned out his game was civil engineering.

I laughed when he told me this. "You've got me there."

His eyes showed confusion. But he was eager to avoid giving any hint of offense and he quickly shaped his lips into a weak smile. "Er, not sure I follow," he apologized.

“Your profession. It’s the profession of an archetypal Ballard character,” I said, faintly impatient. “I’d have to be a psychiatrist to trump you.”

“Yes, now that you mention it there are rather a lot of them in his stories, aren’t there?” He forced a laugh, and then fell silent. “So good to meet a fellow enthusiast,” he sighed into the conversational pause.

I make no apologies for being proprietorial, as I’m of that very small cadre of readers who’ve actually suffered for Ballard. As a spotty teen back in the seventies heyday of British fandom I bore the brunt of some cheap shots from the spaceships and robots crowd, who ran Jim down at every opportunity. Well of course no sooner had the literary world begrudged him a measure of respect than the bifurcated penis crowd came along to claim him as one of their own.

Gennison claimed to have fought the good fight too, but as our conversation ran on I began to suspect he was a latecomer. For one who, moments before, had been crowing on about surgical precision in prose, he showed a damnable imprecision about short story titles: it was “the one about the dying astronaut” or “that one with the family members who kill each other when they finally meet in person.” I’m not petty about these things in small doses but after the fourth or fifth time my irritation surfaced.

“Another classic is the one about the motorway,” I said.

“But... but that could be any of them. Oh, I see!” He laughed at what he took to be a joke, as fearful of taking offense as he was of giving it.



I LIE ON THE FLOOR in Gennison’s study, listening intently to the silence of his house. Somewhere a spring-driven mantle clock whirrs like frantic beetle trapped in glass and rings out the hour.

Midnight. Only midnight. Whatever madness erupted forth was cataclysmic, immediate, and, to gauge from the silence in the house, conclusive. Where is Gennison?

An hour ago I was holding the door of the pub open for him. 55 minutes ago we were strolling through the youthful mayhem of Friday night, two middle aged men tacking gently, mildly under the influence of drink. Occasionally our separate weaving courses converged and we bumped shoulders. Another five minutes and we had entered Gennison’s narrow house on the square, where he deposited me in a spotless but rather desolate front room while he trotted off for a bottle.

At the far end of the room a set of French doors opened into a second room, pitch black. In the darkness, at floor level, the green led’s of a cable modem briefly flickered at a burst of network activity—a carrier’s touch, or the

port scan of a hacker. In the assumption that this must be Gennison's study, I stepped through the doorway and groped for a lamp standing just inside.

I found myself in a sublime iteration of that most pallid of fantasy rooms, the learned man's library. "Fantastic," I said aloud as I took in the details of this cozy chamber: an antique globe the size of a medicine ball on a gleaming oak pedestal. A rack of pipes on one wall, purely ornamental in that there was no hint of tobacco in the air. The walls were Manly Blue and seemed to recede in embarrassment at the burden of etchings and oils they bore. I drifted to the desk. Queued up on the back edge was a set of miniature die-cast satellites that must have dated from the sixties. Not simply nostalgic for the collective past, Gennison evidently longed for his own childhood too, and for the future as it would have seemed to a boy admiring his rockets forty years ago.

The walls on either side of the desk were lined with books. I moved towards the shelves with a sense of foreboding.

The library was devoted entirely to Ballard, and contained multiple editions, in many languages, of almost every title the man had published. Even the exceedingly rare first Gollancz printing of *The Drowned World*. There were also Advanced Reading Copies, Uncorrected Galleys, and the like. On the lower shelves were magazines

in which Ballard's stories had first appeared, stretching back to sci-fi pulps from the sixties and seventies.

I noticed several framed pieces of correspondence nearby and stepped over for a closer look. They were bits of Ballard ephemera—a note from the man to his agent promising an unnamed ms. in two weeks time, a letter from his editor at Cape apologizing for a publication delay. There was also a photo of Ballard with John Malkovich on the set of *Empire of the Sun*.

I took a step back, and looked at the library afresh. Who but the author himself would reasonably be expected to possess such an exhaustive collection? I pictured Gennison seated at his desk, surveying his books and relics, fingering his little Sputnik, adrift in a dissociative fugue.

Gennison wasn't just trying to collect Ballard: he was trying to be him.

I heard footsteps, and stiffened, as though I'd been caught rifling a porn stash.

"Ah!" said Gennison behind me as he entered the study. "You've found the Ballardiana."

"Yes," I said. I was reluctant to turn around, lest I find that he had changed into Ballard kit and drag.

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"TIDY LITTLE ST. EMILION," said Gennison as he uncorked a bottle with some sort of hydraulic device that went off

with a muffled retort. "Shame about what's happening in Bordeaux. EU paying the old firms to plough the vineyards under." We were seated in the corner in a pair of velvet wingchairs. Gennison's hand shook as he leaned over to pour wine. He snuck a nervous glance at me, but his eyes quickly darted away when they met my own cool appraisal.

I suppose I felt a twinge of pity: he must have believed that he'd found in me a sympathetic audience for his tawdry secret life. But he'd miscalculated, and he seemed to know it. His fumbling attempt to change the topic of conversation, to prove that he could talk about something other than Ballard, was an obvious ploy to counter the evidence of monomania surrounding us.

"Ballard still lives in a bungalow near Shepperton," I said. I sipped the wine. He was right; it wasn't shabby. "I doubt his study looks anything like this." The wave of my hand was unmistakably contemptuous, but when Gennison responded, it was by smiling. He had absorbed the contempt and appeared chagrined, but there was confusion in his eyes.

"Well, yes, no doubt he'd find a room like this rather trite. Faded dreams of Oxbridge I suppose."

Suddenly it was all pouring out, as though what he really wanted when he invited me back from the pub was not a fellow enthusiast, but a confessor. "A collection

does rather sneak up on you. I didn't set out to collect Ballard, just found myself acquiring Modern Firsts. Having dropped a few more quid than I should have I thought it best to learn the ropes before I blew it all—a small inheritance from my father—and what they tell you, 'they' being, as 'they' always are, those who might be expected to know such things, at any rate what they tell you is to choose a niche that's of inherent interest to you. Because chances are you're going to be repeatedly and royally bugged by the very blokes giving you the self-same advice, and that being the case, you might as well own some books that you'd bloody well like to *read*, because you sure as hell won't be selling them for profit. Not in your lifetime nor that of your heirs." He flashed a quick smile, a weak and rather pitiful invitation for me to smile along. "Anyway, so I thought Golden Age Sci-Fi would do it, but it's all priced out, then took a look at the English New Wave, more affordable but far too much to keep track of for a duffer such as me. So I settled for Ballard. Prolific enough that one will never have it all, which would quite defeat the purpose wouldn't it? Enough mainstream recognition—Hollywood and all that—that he's not likely to sink into utter jumble sale obscurity. Still producing, with the resulting appeal of new firsts at less-than-list. And with the happy added benefit that I actually like the stuff."

He'd been counting off the reasons to collect Ballard on his fingers. Now he waved his hand at the groaning shelves with a gesture of such feigned indifference that I could no longer hold in my loathing at his evasions and hypocrisies.

"How many times can you read a two line note to his editor?"

He was flummoxed and tried to outsource responsibility with another appeal to the natural 'momentum' of a collection, but he veered off when he saw that I was having none of it. "You're making too much of it," he pleaded. "Those were just sitting in the case at the counter in a shop. In Tunsbridge Wells if I recall. I wasn't even buying Ballard! Some nonsense about wizards for my youngest."

That bit, I admit, took me aback. "You have children?" I glanced around as though the wretches might emerge from beneath the furniture. "A wife?"

"Three of the former. An ex of the latter." He bowed his head and sucked in his lips, catching the lower fringes of his moustache too. I remembered, for no reason, that when I was a child I liked to hold my toothbrush under the running tap and then suck the water from its bristles. For some reason the water tasted better that way. What would Gennison's whiskers taste like? Stale ale, tangy sweat, and salt and grease and vinegar from the chips he'd been eating in the pub.

Now he looked up at me again. "I suppose it's why I got started in the entire collecting business. The Bordeaux." He waved at the shelves again, this time the motion communicating an utter exhaustion. "The Ballards. Lot of new holes to fill in the evening." His gaze moved past me to the books. At last the desperate, appeasing expression drained away and he sagged in desolation and confusion.



I AM LYING ON THE FLOOR in a man named Gennison's study. I don't take my eyes off the clotting pool of blood a foot from my face, lest it creep towards me and engulf me.

I haven't moved. Gradually the last and most elusive of the senses returns to me: proprioception, that inner awareness one has of one's own body. I close my eyes, the better to concentrate, and I'm rewarded with a profound awareness of my own mind. The warmth spreading through me is mind itself flowing through my torso and limbs to reclaim its full allotment of clay.

I feel no pain. I wiggle my toes, and smile. "Careful," I chide myself, wary that this sense of well-being may be mere propaganda spread by natural opiates in response to grievous harm. And then I do receive an unnerving message. I seem to be in a semi-foetal position, with my hands tucked down near my groin. One of them is wrapped around a something smooth and tubular,

something that feels warm and comfortable in my palm. I raise my left hand.

My cheek chafes against the rug as I cry out in alarm: my hand is covered in blood.



I JUMP TO MY FEET, keeping my right hand pressed against my groin, in case it should prove that I'm holding my own butchered member in place. I gape down in horror at myself. From the tunnel of my hand's grip emerges a mangled vortex of bloody matter. A few hairs stick to this mess.

Then a gleam of light reflects from the bloody stump in my grip. I raise my hand and I discover that I'm grasping the neck of a wine bottle. I relax my hold on it and study it in my outstretched palm. The bottle has shattered; around the base of the green shaft, like a corolla of angry petals, are jagged shards of glass from the shoulders of the bottle. These shards are painted with blood, yet the effect, now that my surge of panic has passed, is one I find almost beautiful, and I am obliquely reminded of Count Axel snapping crystalline flowers by their glass stems in his doomed compound.

I hear Gennison's voice in memory.

"We're all like the old fellow in that garden, when you get right down to it. You know, the one where every

time he picks a flower time stutters backwards and the barbarous army recedes.”

Suddenly light-headed, I take a step to catch my balance, and there is Gennison, flat on his back, surrounded by pages torn from a book, some of which are stuffed into his mouth.

“The Garden of Time, you idiot, The Garden of bloody Time!”

The voice, recalled, is mine, and the sucking sound, the terrible sucking sound I hear all around me, is the present, rushing back in.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID HULL WAS BORN in Regina and grew up in Owen Sound, Ontario. His work has appeared in *The Walrus*, *The National Post*, *Canadian Literature*, *ON SPEC*, and other journals, including *Prairie Fire* as winner of its long fiction competition. A father of one, he lives in Toronto.

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THE METAPHYSICAL DICTIONARY
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autumn 2015



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