



The Best Short Stories

J.G. Ballard , Anthony Burgess (Introduction)

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First published in 1978, this collection of nineteen of Ballard's best short stories is as timely and informed as ever. His tales of the human psyche and its relationship to nature and technology, as viewed through a strong microscope, were eerily prescient and now provide greater perspective on our computer-dominated culture. Ballard's voice and vision have long served as a font of inspiration for today's cyber-punks, the authors and futurist who brought the information age into the mainstream.

The Best Short Stories Details

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From Reader Review The Best Short Stories for online ebook

Stephanie Sun says

The world has died and died and died again. Sometimes from the inside-out: in these short stories, civilizations let their rules slip away from them, eliminating temporal measurement or living space or the Earth's oceans in pursuit of forgotten goals. Sometimes from the outside-in: Ballard, a World War II internment camp survivor, was the self-appointed poet laureate of the atom bomb.

High highs and low lows here average out to a three. The variation in quality was not among stories, a flaw that would have been forgivable perhaps for a book with nine copyright years ranging from 1957 to 1978 (the Reagan of the colorfully-titled final story is "Reagan the presidential candidate"), but within each story.

There was some beautiful writing:

"...systematically forgetting everything was exactly the same as remembering it..."

And some not so beautiful:

"Beneath the contour jewelry her breasts lay like eager snakes."

The exception that tests the rule is the wonderful "The Drowned Giant," a dark little inverse of Lilliput reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" in its bleakness, poetry, clarity, and economy. It alone is not to be missed.

That being said, the cumulative effect of the stories started changing my perception of the world midway through. They did what great science fiction is supposed to do: awaken you to the strangeness of reality here now. I felt like one of Ballard's helpless everyman characters in a dehumanizingly dense metropolis when I followed a mass of passengers off a Paris RER train whose path was being rerouted from Charles de Gaulle, and then, all of us with our minimally-varied roller bags, followed the mass on to the next.

Michele says

A truly superb collection of short stories from a great author. every story in here is terrific: clever, unusual, thought-provoking. Many of the stories deal with time in various ways, which I really enjoyed, and/or with humanity's idiotic tendency to let its technology outpace its morality (or its intelligence). "The Garden of Time" and "Deep End" broke my heart a little, while "The Subliminal Man" was so prescient of today's rabid consumer culture as to be seriously worrisome. (There's a short movie version on YouTube, too!). "End Game" and "The Overloaded Man" are small masterpieces of psychological suspense, and "The Voices of Time" had me researching genetics and 'the silent pair'.

Taken as a whole the book's Cold War-era origins are evident (stories written between 1957 and 1978), but given what's happening in the world recently, it feels rather timely. *Plus ca change...*

Apart from the 20 highly surreal pages that comprise the last four stories and which are just, well, beyond

odd, this is an excellent collection by a master of the short form.

Ooh, and as a bonus, my edition has a foreword by Anthony Burgess, in which he calls Ballard "not [just] among our finest writers of science fiction, but...among our finest writers of fiction *tout court* period."

Douglas Robillard says

J.G. Ballard is one of my favorite all-time authors. I have 22 of his books, including this indespensible volume. He's best known for his autobiographical novel, **EMPIRE OF THE SUN**, filmed by Spielberg. During the 60s he wrote some of the most imaginative science fiction, a good sampling of which is collected here.

With this collection, start your Ballard experience by reading the haunting "The Drowned Giant." How does a community respond to the sudden appearance of an enormous drowned human being in the surf? The community's varied response reveals some features of human nature. Next read "Billennium," an original take on the problem of overpopulation. Then read three stories that deal with the author's obsession with time: "Chronopolis," "The Garden of Time," and the mind-blowing "The Voices of Time." Follow these stories up with the exquisite "The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D." Using gliders and silver iodide, the scultors flying into clouds and carve them into evanescent sculptures: horse's heads, presidents' faces, unicorns. Leonora Chanel, a beautiful, mad,dangerous heiress commands the sculptors to carve her portrait in a deadly storm--can they meet her challenge?

"Cloud-Sculptors" is part of a series of "Vermilion Sands" stories. Vermilion Sands is a curious place, combining the features of both the ocean and the desert--a tremendous feat of imagination. These stories are collected in a book entitled, what else, **VERMILION SANDS**. Well worth checking out.

Philip Athans says

J.G. Ballard took the reigns from George Orwell as the most important author of late-20th century England and this collection of his short stories is a must-read for any Ballard admirer (like me). The stories track his progression from pure science fiction author all the way to his most surrealist flights of literary fancy. "The Drowned Giant" resonated the most with me. **READ THIS BOOK!**

Andy says

The densest, coldest science fiction stories you'll ever read. The most claustrophobic piece of fiction ever written is "Billennium", a nightmare world of overpopulation. People are clustered in corners like cockroaches. Some of this shit will give you nightmares - guaranteed.

Melissa says

This collection of short stories is a wonderful example of dystopian literature. Ballard has earned a place among my top ranked authors; he really is an amazing writer. Although some of the technology used in his books is laughable (tape cassettes as a medium of data storage for example or the detrimental effects of subliminal advertising as another) the themes of the stories are still pertinent to today and include empty consumerism, blind reliance on technology and the fragility (or adaptability depending on your viewpoint) of the human mind.

My favorite stories were:

Top 3:

Chronopolis

Deep End

The Subliminal Man

Other Favorites:

The Concentration City

Thirteen for Centaurus

Billennium

Manhole 69

They really all are worth reading, which is why I have so many favorites.

Sheri Fresonke Harper says

The stories in this collection are varied and often have human psychology embedded into the tale and offering a unique look at humanity. Quite a few are depressing with their frank expectation of overpopulation, the ruin of society and post-apocalyptic situations. However, they were all quite creative in imagining a world far different from our own. Some humor shines through now and then. My husband and I read these out loud and because of the lengthy sentences and awkward phrasing it is hard to do, but they are still quite interesting and literate with a good selection of vocabulary. The last stories were too stark for my taste, but others were dreamy and some were very tender and others cruel. Never a dull moment.

Isaac says

It's useful, I think, to compare Ballard to Philip K. Dick -- they tread similar thematic region in their short fiction, and early in their careers employed a similar clipped cadence, where every character is simply Barker or Tallis or Ridgway and there are no female characters (or, indeed, any developed characters at all) to get in the way of the ideas. Their development as writers also followed comparable arcs, arcs followed by most cutting-edge writers of science fiction as the field entered its self-proclaimed New Wave in the 70s. Trickery

with form became the norm, and galaxies and spaceships gave way to interior landscapes as it became fashionable to probe explicitly the undercurrents of horror and alienation always waiting below the surface of genre fiction. "The best short stories of j.g. ballard" is arranged chronologically, and by the end one feels as if one has read a book written by two writers, one juvenile but sincerely dedicated to his imagined dystopias, the other a mature craftsman but disengaged and sneering.

The major difference between Ballard and Dick, of course, is that Dick was consumed by his madness, and died of it; while Ballard even at his most outre keeps his demons writhing under pins in a glass case and looks down at them as if from a great height. Ballard, not coincidentally, is also far superior as a technician and a lover of language. He has a precision and succinctness which in his earlier work teeters on the verge of dryness and stodge -- but, as the later stories demonstrate, he can also pull wonders, flights of virtuosity, and fables.

I like the fables best, really. The major problem with this book is that (at least until ideas that readers/viewers of Crash will be familiar with creep in) there is not a lot of thematic diversity here. Most of these stories concern the effects of huge, glacially slow forces on individuals and environments - man-made or accidental, sinister or vaguely comical, it's all about the accumulation of things that are too small to notice until they become too large to halt. Whether it's greed, population growth, population decline, heat death, or just an excess of sand, these things show us how easily we as a species can be undone by our own lack of attention, and how horror upon horror can build while we remain distracted with the things we think are important. This is of course a useful message in the times we live in (it has probably been a useful message since the first world war) but it is relentless and the moments of respite and human connection are precious and few. The best stories here are the anomalous ones, the ones that are barely science fiction at all, but take the form of parables about castles and gardens, sculptors of clouds, a condemned man negotiating with his executioner. When he slows down, introduces pathos, lets go of the paranoia and overcooked psychoanalytic jargon that suffuse many of these narratives, he is better, and the larger message is not lost.

This brings me to another point -- although Ballard likes to throw jargon around, scientific and psychoanalytic, his posits are often unconvincing. This is partially a function of time elapsed since the writing of the stories, but also just a willingness on Ballard's part to cobble together frightening consequences in forces that he doesn't *quite* have a handle on. In some ways for most of this book Ballard seems trapped in the fifties, both in the way his characters communicate with each other and with his capitulation to the idea that the human mind is a machine to be tweaked, with valves and pressures and easy descents into madness waiting at every turn if the machine is programmed a certain way, which is a viewpoint that has (thank god) fallen thoroughly out of favor in the intervening decades. This is a place where Dick has it over Ballard, and is the reason why Dick may in the end have been the better writer; his ideas were just as extreme, but he had a way of making them seem completely consistent, mostly through the calm, lucid, hardboiled surrealism of his narrative voice. Ballard cannot reliably overcome the reader's urge to go "wait, what?"

All of which boils down to a read which is eventually rewarding but only very occasionally enjoyable.

Frank says

Ballard is a talented writer but the short stories in this collection didn't do anything for me. Many had a similar tone. Some were just too strange and experimental for me. My favorite was THE OVERLOADED MAN.

Anne says

I was reading this as a sort of companion piece to Joan Didion's essays, as both are extremely fierce, and extremely detached vis-a-vis what's going on in the Reagan-Thatcher eras. I got it in my head to compare Didion's "John Wayne, a Love Song," with Ballard's "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan."

The former is a riveting, almost ballad-like chronicle of D's infatuation with the myth and larger-than-life heroism of the former Marion Morrison, and some speculation on the application of this tragic flaw (hers) to larger California scenes. Ballard's piece is the last in the book. It is not really a story, and is almost aphoristic. It consists of the behavioral reactions of a group of people, in psych experiment terms, to scenarios in which Ronald Reagan is killed.

Needless to say, the "notes" to the experiment are all about documenting the various states and varieties of arousal this scenario can generate, including "Reagan's hairstyle. Studies were conducted on the marked fascination exercised by the Presidential contender's hairstyle. 65% of male subjects made positive connections between the hairstyle and their own pubic hair. A series of optimum hairstyles were constructed."

The other stores are good too--one "gentle giant and the apocalypse" story reminds me of Atwood's Orxy and Crake.

Stuart says

The Best Short Stories of J.G. Ballard: A broad spectrum of Ballard's capabilities

Originally published at Fantasy Literature

The Best Short Stories of J.G. Ballard (1979) was published in 1977 in the UK and 1978 in the US. It contains a few stories from J.G. Ballard's earlier, more conventional SF phase in the late 1950s, his most productive and lyrical phase in the early and mid 1960s, and a small sampling of his experimental 'condensed novel' phase of the late 1960s/early 1970s. The stories are taken from these collections: The Voices of Time (1962), Billennium (1962), Passport to Eternity (1963), The Terminal Beach (1964), The Atrocity Exhibition (1970), and Vermilion Sands (1971).

The stories themselves are: "Concentration City" (1956), "Manhole 69" (1957), "Chronopolis" (1960), "The Voices of Time" (1960), "Deep End" (1960), "The Overloaded Man" (1961), "Billennium" (1961), "The Garden of Time" (1961), "Thirteen for Centaurus" (1961), "The Subliminal Man" (1961), "The Cage of Sand" (1962), "End-Game" (1963), "The Drowned Giant" (1964), "The Terminal Beach" (1963), "The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D" (1966), "The Assassination of JFK Considered as a Downhill Motor Race" (1965), "The Atrocity Exhibition" (1966), "Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy" (1967), and "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" (1968).

In The Best Short Stories of J.G. Ballard, I found his earlier stories to be more conventional than in his later collections, and while still interesting, lacking that distinctive Ballardian lyrical and thematic style: namely, "Concentration City" (1956), "Manhole 69" (1957), "The Overloaded Man" (1961), "Billennium" (1961), "Thirteen for Centaurus" (1961), and "The Subliminal Man" (1961). Interestingly, both "Concentration City"

and “Billennium” are about impossibly overpopulated future cities, a direct contrast to Ballard’s later obsession with solitary characters lost in desolate, deserted cities, space launch sites, jungles, etc. The other stories from that period didn’t really leave much of an impression on me.

“Chronopolis” (1960), “The Voices of Time” (1960), “The Garden of Time” (1961), and “The Cage of Sand” (1962) were the standout stories that do not overlap with his collection *The Terminal Beach* and contain the most classic Ballardian themes of entropy, melancholy, time coming to a halt as the past merges with the present and future, lonely couples, obsessed eccentrics, deserted hotels, abandoned launch sites, empty swimming pools, strange and pointless scientific experiments, dead astronauts orbiting space forever, and the moribund US space program.

Finally, *The Best Short Stories of J.G. Ballard* includes four bizarre ‘condensed novels’ from Ballard’s controversial collection *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970): “The Assassination of JFK Considered as a Downhill Motor Race” (1965), “The Atrocity Exhibition” (1966), “Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy” (1967), and “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” (1968). From the titles alone, you know they are not your normal subject matter. In fact, the first US edition was destroyed by publisher Nelson Doubleday due to concerns about lawsuits from celebrities mentioned as well as general concerns over obscenity. That, of course, made the few remaining copies extremely valuable, and with most such cases, makes readers even more interested. Eventually, US publisher Grove Press took the plunge and published it in 1972 as *Love and Napalm: Export USA*.

Inspired by William S. Burroughs, these stories are fragmented, bizarre, experimental, and explore the unstable main character’s twisted attempts to come to grips with major public events of that era such as Marilyn Monroe’s suicide, the Cold War and space race between the US and USSR, and most of all the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Honestly, it’s hard to really grasp what Ballard intended with these stories, as they defy any conventional storytelling standards. They certainly explore his patented ‘inner space’, which often shapes the external environment, but there isn’t much pleasure to be derived from reading them now. Basically they’re of historical interest now as experimental writing from that period, but not much more (some fans may disagree, of course).

Overall, I think *The Best Short Stories of J.G. Ballard* is a good sampling of three distinct phases of Ballard’s writing: his earlier, more conventional SF period, his most lyrical and distinctive middle period, and his later, more experimental period. In that sense, it is a convenient way to trace his development as a writer. However, as I think his best and most enduring short work comes from his middle period, I would recommend *The Terminal Beach* and *Vermilion Sands*, which contain the bulk of his best, most memorable stories. Of course, if you are a dedicated completist, then the only way to go is with the massive *The Complete Stories of J.G. Ballard*, which itself has some notable omissions.

Finally, it’s worth noting that after the 1984 publication of Ballard’s autobiographical novel *Empire of the Sun* and the 1987 film version by Steven Spielberg, he suddenly found himself in the limelight and enjoying much more mainstream attention, and went on to a very prolific writing phase which produced a number of notable mainstream novels (none of which I’ve read), such as *Running Wild* (1988), *The Kindness of Women* (1991), *Rushing to Paradise* (1994), *Cocaine Nights* (1996), *Super-Cannes* (2000), *Millennium People* (2003), and *Kingdom Come* (2006).

Benjamin Espen says

The Best Short Stories of J. G. Ballard
by J. G. Ballard; Introduction by Anthony Burgess
312 pages
Published by Holt, Reinhart and Winston (1978)
ISBN 0-03-045661-4

I am a great lover of scifi short story collections, and this volume of J. G. Ballard's work, lent to me by a co-worker, is no exception. There are some top-notch stories in here, spanning just over twenty years of Ballard's career. In the past when I have reviewed collections of short stories, I have usually featured a few really notable ones, and discussed the general theme of the work.

This time, I want to try the technique of giving each short story its own mini-review, along with a mini-score out of five stars. I've seen it done to good effect in other reviews, and it seems like fun. I also plan to discuss the general themes of the collection.

The Concentration City ***

One of the reasons I like reading old scifi is that because it ages so rapidly, you can get a better feel for the obsessions of the past. "The Concentration City" has a too obvious textual link with the then still new Nazi concentration camps, but a more subtle one with overpopulation. There is just one problem....

The eponymous city is huge. A county of the enclosed, multi-level city represents a thousand floors, one hundred thousand cubic miles, and a population of thirty million people. Each county is grouped with 249 others to form sectors, and 1500 sectors form a Local Union.

Let's look at that math. Each county is a thousand levels, so each floor must be 100 square miles. That is about the same as a medium size American city, like Sacramento. If you assume roughly even distribution of those 30 million people, you get 30,000 people per floor....

Sacramento currently has almost 500,000 people in it, and I don't know anyone who finds it oppressively dense. An order of magnitude less people would make it positively rural by almost anyone's standards. I think Ballard was going for something like the feel of Alex Proyas' 1998 movie Dark City, a movie also about an inescapable prison city, but just had no quantitative sense at all.

The city as a whole makes better sense as a crushing mass of humanity. 30 million people per county times 250 counties per sector times 1500 sectors per local union gives you 11 trillion 250 billion people. And we see several local unions in the text! That is a number that can boggle the mind! It clearly seems to have boggled Ballard.

The story is strong on atmosphere, but weak in details. The huge numbers probably worked to inspire the right feeling in Ballard's readers, so I suppose I can't fault him for that stylistic sense, I just like it when an author tries hard to get the little things right even when most people won't notice. It is like a carpenter who makes the lines straight on the backside where no one can see, the mark of a true craftsman.

Manhole 69 **

The flavor text in this tale of a psychological/surgical experiment gone wrong is heavily Freudian. Sixty years later, it looks kind of stupid, given how far Freud's reputation has fallen, but I have to imagine the flavor text of a contemporary book would look just as ridiculous in 2078.

Chronopolis *****

I love this one. At his best, Ballard had an impressive imagination that encompassed the good and the bad of both the thesis and the antithesis at once. Chronopolis is the ruin of a once great city that was overthrown in a revolution against the tyranny of precisely-scripted efficiency.

There is a bit more sloppiness about population density here, but what really struck me is that just before the protagonist is arrested for the forbidden practice of time-keeping, he restores the chimes of the bell tower of Chronopolis, and the muddled masses who mill about aimlessly start using the chimes to order their days again.

The city truly was tyrannical and inhumane in its time-keeping. It was also much more productive, supporting ten times as many people in far greater luxury. Being punctual is the epitome of quotidian, but it is easy to underestimate how valuable it truly is.

The Voices of Time ***

This was the first story in this collection that brought me up short. Ballard's wikipedia entry describes his work as provocative and transgressive, and this is all of that in spades. "The Voices of Time" combines the mid-century English novel's characteristic despair with post-apocalyptic dystopia.

We see a return of the themes from "Manhole 69", but done far better; dubious scientific experiments attempting to literally excise the need for sleep from the human brain, badly suppressed erotic desires, and a pervasive sense of decline.

I've written a few posts recently about superversive science fiction. Superversive scifi attempts to create a sense of wonder and hope in the reader. The neologism is coined in opposition to subversive scifi, which seems to be aptly represented by Ballard. This story is hella edgy, and even though-provoking, but this isn't the kind of scifi that inspires nerds to create stuff. This is the kind that inspires them to cut to feel.

Deep End ***

"Deep End" is a fantastic example of the kind of scifi that inspired the environmental movement. It also features an almost heroic protagonist, grimly determined to pay homage to a dying world, but also a bit cracked in the head.

The feel of this story is nearly Stoic in its unblinking acceptance of Fate, but not really interested in the cultivation of virtue that Stoicism entails.

The Overloaded Man *****

This story nails the feelings of alienation and ennui that accompanied the huge material successes of the mid-twentieth century. It also perceptively describes the dangers of mystical experience. Unlocking your psyche isn't necessarily a good idea.

Bilennium ***

Another overpopulation tale, but this one is subversive of the genre insofar as the protagonist ends up a capitalist in the end. Concern for overpopulation was a big thing in the middle of the twentieth century, but it

largely got shoved down the memory hole at the beginning of the twenty-first, even though there are roughly twice as many people now as there were then. The rate of growth has slowed, but that likely isn't the only reason. In part, I also think that those of us alive today simply don't remember the world that existed before. Jerry Pournelle once pined for the America that had a population of 125 million people, which he thought was too many at the time. I can't imagine my country with 200 million people not there.

The Garden of Time ****

Another Stoical tale of the calm acceptance of a horrible fate, with the suggestion of some preventable tragedy in the unwritten past. The garden, an oasis of beauty, will inevitably be overrun by the masses of the unwashed. Count Axel and his beautiful wife are the only inhabitants of the villa within the garden.

Each day, they watch the surging horde approach the villa. Each day, the count spends of the substance of the garden to delay the inevitable, until at last, nothing remains.

I have a hard time imagining that I am on board with the idea Ballard was getting at here, but this is an achingly beautiful story.

Thirteen for Centaurus ****

This is the Fallout short story, reminiscent of the sick experiments the Vault Corporation conducted on its customers. In real life, the best examples came later than the fictional 1950s of the Fallout series. The Stanford Prison Experiment, fraudulent from the start, was in 1971. "Thirteen for Centaurus" was written in 1962, earning Ballard some points for prescience, but losing some for missing the likely perpetrators. The military-industrial-complex didn't run most of the shitty science of the mid-twentieth century. They just featherbedded the Cold War.

The Subliminal Man ***

A haunting extrapolation of the finding in economics that the most efficient economies in the world replace their equipment most frequently. I was pretty surprised when I found this out some number of years ago, but now that I work in manufacturing I can see how it works.

Unfortunately, it is also pretty obvious that doing faster and faster it just because it is supposedly more "efficient" would be counter-productive. An interesting conceit for a story, but too clever by half.

The Cage of Sand ****

Unlike most of these short stories, "The Cage of Sand" was markedly improved by its ending. The premise was kind of stupid to me as physicist: eastern Florida had been turned into a facsimile of the Martian desert because we kept dumping Martian sand there to balance out the stuff we shipped to Mars in order to preserve the Earth's orbital distance from the Sun. This was compounded by a plot device of dead astronauts in orbit, entombed in their space capsules, because they missed their one and only chance to rendezvous with an orbital platform.

Since my parents got me SimEarth on the Mac LC, I knew that there was no plausible way the fractional change in orbit from moving a few million tons of stuff to Mars would matter, due to the remarkable homeostasis of the Earth. But I already knew that Ballard wasn't a details guy for the science stuff.

End Game ***

This one was completely unexpected. I didn't need to be told that the Soviet Union was a tyranny the likes of which the world had never seen, but perhaps Ballard's audience did in 1963. Clearly, Ballard had no sympathy for the Soviets in this tale of guilt, innocence, and power.

The Drowned Giant ****

At first, I was inclined to dismiss this uncanny tale of a overly large body washed up on shore, on account of Chesterton's notion that mere physical size ought not to impress us. But then upon reflection, I realized Ballard was trying to criticize failing to see another's humanity because of physical differences.

One point of contention I would take with Ballard is that he says the common people were more easily convinced that the bones left behind in the bay were merely a giant whale, than his professorial interlocutor. I don't believe that for a second. Folk memory works just fine, you need to be highly educated to disbelieve your lying eyes.

The Terminal Beach **

As a child of the 1980s, I have struggled to understand the obsessions of my immediate predecessors with the Cold War. The Cold War still existed when I was a child, but it had obviously [to me] lost its sting. The apocalypticism of earlier generations regarding nuclear war often seemed disproportionate to me, and this story is all of that in spades.

Since it is also couched in now tainted Freudian terms, I find "The Terminal Beach" completely ridiculous. It doesn't help that I have seen the same idea done far better by another author. You can get an interesting story out of the identification of sex and death, but Freud and Ballard alike didn't manage to contribute anything interesting to the conversation.

The Cloud-Sculptors of Coral D ***

I'm curious to know if Ballard had some reason for hating the Chanel family, given his antagonist here. This is about the point in the collection where I started to wonder if I would finish. Many of these short stories are challenging, rather than enjoyable, but the ability of Ballard to tell an interesting story while riding his hobby-horses seems to have tapered off with time.

The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race *

This is the point where I started to question Ballard's sanity. I think it was not actual mental illness, but rather a calculated pose. Whether that makes this better or worse, I am not sure.

The Atrocity Exhibition *

In a way, this may be the ultimate Ballard story in this collection. Apparently he called the technique a "condensed novel". My opinion of the short, choppy paragraphs with no transitions is that is just an unenjoyable as James Joyce, but at least shorter.

We get Freud, eros, thanatos, an attempt to make a literary device of weird mathematics, and painfully avant-garde style.

Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy *

Just about the only thing Freud ever talked about that seems to have stood the test of time is projection. As such, one wonders about Ballard's obsession with Jackie O. But he's dead now, so it is probably all sorted out.

Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan *

Ronald Reagan inspired an impressive amount of vitriol from the writers of his day.

Ben's final verdict ***

There are some truly great stories in here. There are also some truly bizarre ones, that seem to lack the kind of enduring value that might excuse their sins against propriety. I am not sorry that I read this volume, but I doubt I would ever return to it. As Ballard aged, he seemed to get lost in his edginess and simply sought shock-value above all else. Some of these works are genuinely challenging, but few of them are fun. I'm not really surprised that Ballard doesn't appear on the NPR list of 100 best science fiction books, voted on by fans. There is nothing here to be a fan of.

Peter says

Ballard is an interesting author. Some of what he writes is science fiction, some is not. He writes about experiences and events more than building toward climactic endings. Some of the stories in this anthology barely even have an ending; instead you turn the page and see that he stopped describing what happened next.

The Drowned Giant, included, is probably his most famous piece unless something else is. It's about the human reaction to a giant humanoid that washes up dead on a beach. It rings very true how humanity doesn't really know what to do with it, studies it some, mainly just takes turns climbing on top. Despite the shocking nature, there's not really much shock; having lived long enough now to see the turn of the millennium, a disaster here and there, a few elections, I find this a pretty apt depiction of how we would react. Once the giant is gone (corpses don't last forever), the story is over, and the protagonist and narrator has been of no importance whatsoever. Edit: Here it is, all seven pages, if you're curious: <http://tinyurl.com/yfradel>

Then there are the stories grouped at the end of the book, such as Why I Want To Fuck Ronald Reagan. That one isn't quite what it sounds like but nonetheless communicates unambiguously that Ballard is without question clinically insane.

Vanessa says

If Margaret Atwood and George Orwell had a love child, it would be J.G. Ballard. Naturally, I am now a life long fan of Mr. Ballard. This is a 5 star collection, I mean it. So many of these stories rocked my world and will stay with me for a very long time. If you only decide to dip into a few of these, I hope my list below will help you decide which ones to pick.

DISCLOSURE: I have given a short description/teaser of what each story is about, so if you consider pretty much anything a spoiler, don't read them. There. I've done my due diligence.

I hope you will all get lost in these brilliant stories.

5/5 - The Concentration City – a man living in an overdeveloped near future, builds a flying machine and attempts to travel outside his city via public transport to find free space to fly it... what he discovers on his journey is shocking.

5/5 - Manhole 69 – an experiment is conducted on three men underground to see if they can genetically reverse the human need for sleep.... awesome concept, creepy ending. So messed up, so naturally, I loved it.

5/5 – Chronopolis – a future society that is haunted by a past obsessed with keeping time, so much so that every clock and watch has been banned... and yet, one boy remains transfixed by his mother's old watch, which he hides. I found it spectacular the way Ballard played with time here. How the act of keeping time can be just as important as it can be devastating. Loved it. 5 star story.

3/5 - The Voices of Time – This one was somewhat interesting but way too long winded. It follows a psychiatric scientist who is slowly starting to become what the society calls a “sleeper” – one of hundreds of thousands of people who lapse into sleeping comas and cannot be awoken. That's pretty much the plot. For a long story, not too much happened.

5/5 - Deep End – the world's oceans are completely dried up due to massive over fishing... all that is left is an aquatic graveyard stretching for miles on end. Until, of course, the main character finds one last solitary patch... Great commentary on complete human disregard for the impact we have on the natural world. Loved, loved, LOVED this one. Another 5 star.

4/5 - The Overloaded Man – a man meditates in his backyard, over looking all the silly possessions and commodities in his life. Slowly, he strips them of their meaning with his mind. This one was weird, but definitely eerie and creative.

5/5 - Billenium – Probably my favorite in the collection. This is a world of complete over population...where four and half square feet of space – the current statutory standard - will soon become three. The scenic imagery Ballard conceives of in this story is positively jaw dropping. The images were vivid and strangely, believable. At the core of the story, a human impulse to help others that, in face, backfires.

4/5 - The Garden of Time – I liked this one but it seemed a little out of place in the book. It was the least like the others I should say, but I still enjoyed it. Two lovers tend to their fantastical garden as an army of unknown enemies approach. The closer they get, the faster the garden dies. Beautiful writing.

3/5 - Thirteen for Centaurus – a mission to earth that will take several generations of passengers to get there... and yet those aboard don't know it. They are subdued with mind control. But one child who asks way too many questions seems to be catching on. Notes of Enders Game... and The Island.

5/5 - The Subliminal Man - another top favorite. Huge blank billboards are being erected around a city saturated with advertising. What are they for? A friend of the main character tells him they send subliminal messages to the brains of all those who pass underneath them. The main character, at first, refuses to believe it. But as the story progresses, his suspicion grows. SUCH a great concept for a short story with a perfect

Orwellian ending. Basically, this story was written for me to read and love.

3/5 - The Cage of Sand – This one was okay. Liked the premise: humans try to introduce some kind of mineral or plant from Mars into the earth's atmosphere and the entire ecosystem goes ballistic, turning the whole earth into a sandy desert. The characters at the crux of the story weren't as compelling as others, but I still enjoyed it for all the creative juice that went into it.

5/5 - End Game – Another jem. A man is serving out his sentence on some gorgeous villa in an undisclosed location, with only his executor to keep him company... make him breakfast and play chess with him. Only one catch: he doesn't know when his execution will come... but the executioner does. Pure brilliant.

5/5 - The Drowned Giant – Nothing futuristic about this one, more fantastical. But one of the best in the collection. A giant washes up on a beach. No one knows where he came from or how he came to be on the beach...a report on the scene shows what happens to the body days, weeks and even months after the discovery. Reminded me of a sad, strange Gulliver's Travels.

2/5 - The Terminal Beach – This was strange and fragmented. Couldn't get into it or really figure out what was going on. Something about a man stuck on an island perpetually searching for the ghost of his wife and son. Yeah, that's all I got.

4/5 - The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D – Mind-boggling concept. A group of friends who literally sculpt clouds into art with gliders and planes they fly. So cool! Everything is going great until they are invited to some Gatsby mansion to sculpt this rich lady's facade into the sky... then things go a little south.

4/5 - The Assassination of JFK Considered as a Downhill Motor Race – The title of this story is all the description you need. Being totally obsessed with the whole JFK Assassination investigation, I thought this was pure poetry. Felt as though I was listening to some kind of Bob Dylan song. Awesome.

Last three were a little off the rails... not really sure what happened there, but I wasn't as a huge fan as you can see. And who wouldn't want to read that last one? But still, I didn't comprehend a whole lot of what he was trying to say. I'd say keep it to the ones above!

2/5 - The Atrocity Exhibition

2/5 - Plan for the Assassination of Jacqueline Kennedy

2/5 - Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan

Bottom Line: READ. THIS. COLLECTION.

Michael says

This is the first book of Ballard's that I've read, and I was surprised by the variety and consistency of these stories. Ballard never falls into the generic faults of the genre the way most of the other great sci-fi authors have. Like all great writers in the genre, though, he is concerned less with the technology and more with its impact on humanity, less with the details of the future, and more with the mood, the experience of the person living in that future. These stories scare us in an existential way that no horror story will ever be able to replicate.

Since I'm a lazy student now, I'm only going to pick four of these stories to give my one-liner about.

In "The Concentration City" a hellish manmade cosmos without free space or bounds, Ballard creates a subtle terror right out of *The Twilight Zone*.

Reading "The Garden of Time" is like Macbeth watching the forest encroaching upon him, moving inevitably to overtake him, despite his struggle to back time.

"Thirteen for Centaurus" is a sort of space age *The Village* but with the reveal in the beginning, so the implications can bloom with the reading, instead of after.

"The Cloud Sculptors of Coral D" is less straight sci-fi, more of a science fantasy or science folk tale, much like Calvino in its manipulation of nature.
