

science fiction news

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Selectors: Kingsley Amis, John Carnell, Dr J. G. Porter

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE

The Drowned World

By J. G. Ballard

AT SOME point in the future there has been a great increase in the sun's heat. The seas have risen, through the melting of the ice caps, and the temperature has driven the remnant of the human race to areas like northern Greenland. But the setting of this novel is farther south, close to London, where the sea and the jungle have returned to dominate the earth. Plant life is reverting to the giant forms it had in the Triassic Age, the last great period of intense heat; the most powerful animals now are the iguanas and crocodiles. As the temperature rises huge bamboo-like trees spring up out of the silt, and reptiles flourish.

The strangest change is in the human beings, most of them members of an expedition from Greenland, sent to investigate the possibility of land reclamation in the distant future. In the terrible heat primitive reactions deeply buried in the racial memory are aroused by stimuli which have been dormant in man for millions of years. Men find themselves lost in barbaric dreams and have no wish to return to civilization: they seem to be moving backward in time, returning physically to the primeval swamps from which life emerged, and psychologically to the drowned world of their existence before birth. The power of the increasing sun seems to be drawing them southwards across the drowned cities and the lagoons to the heat-filled swamps of the equator: it is as if the birthplace of life on this planet was to become the grave of man.

'In J. G. Ballard's new book we have something without precedent in this country, a novel by a sf author that can be judged by the highest standards. To my knowledge this level has as yet been attained by only two American writers. . . . Mr Ballard may turn out to be the most imaginative of Wells's successors, though he has expressly repudiated Wells as an influence.

'There is plenty of drama, notably after the arrival of a diabolical freebooter, bone white in a world of darkened skins, whose ship is crammed with equestrian statues and salvaged altar-pieces, and whose *entourage* consists of a band of half-civilized Negroes and a pack of alligators. By his agency the main lagoon is drained and a paranoid *Walpurgisnacht* enacted among the slime-coated buildings that prove to be Leicester Square. But the main action is in the deeper reaches of the mind, the main merit the extraordinary imaginative power with which whatever inhabits these reaches is externalized in concrete form. The book blazes with images, striking in themselves and yet continuously meaningful.

'There are perhaps faults of luxuriance, not very reprehensible anyway in a young writer . . . but he triumphantly achieves his object, set out in a fascinating article of his in a recent *New Worlds Science Fiction*, of exploring "inner space". His emblem is the metaphorical diving-suit, as against the literal space-suit of most of his contemporaries.' KINGSLEY AMIS, *Observer*.

'*The Drowned World* is a most imaginative work, and more, one hopes, than a mere *tour de force*. . . . The nightmare clarity of Mr Ballard's images and the imaginative sureness of his ending are reminiscent of *Lord of the Flies*.' *Sunday Times*.

'Ballard is a master of this kind of black psychological art. I hope we have a cold, wet summer!' *Guardian*.

'Science fiction suffers a sea-change into something rich and strange. Ballard's potent symbols of beauty and dismay inundate the reader's mind. It's most haunting: really the very best Ballard—which is very good indeed.' BRIAN ALDISS.

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