Read It, April 2015: Progress Report 3



Figure 1: Word Cloud

Kingdom Come by J. G. Ballard

I had a line-jumper. A copy of J. G. Ballard's last novel, *Kingdom Come*, showed up in the mail and I found myself compelled to read it before finishing *The Fox in the Attic* by Richard Hughes. The Hughes novel is going slowly. It's a very dense, slow book where the dialogue is loaded with what would be called, these days, "microaggressions," also known as "snark." So much of it is about class that I'm having a bit of trouble identifying with the characters. They are having dinner parties and self-aggrandizing conversations while nothing much has happened yet, except that meanwhile, looming in the background, there is a young dead girl who isn't getting any fresher. I suspect she is the character I will wind up identifying with the most.

Meanwhile, I finished *Kingdom Come*. This book also starts with a dead character that looms over the rest of the book. Ballard is one of my favorite writers but I will freely admit that he isn't for everyone, and this book would be, I think, likely quite frustrating for someone who isn't already a Ballard fan. The introduction refers to the book as Ballard at his "most didactic."

That's one way to put it; one might also say that the dialogue is mostly an excuse for another Ballard lecture, and most of the characters various forms of Ballard talking at each other and setting each other up for the next Ballardian turn of phrase. Since I like his writing and thinking, I find this tolerable, and

I basically imagine the story as a one-man play. But this is not really a good novel by the usual measures; it's just impossible to imagine real people uttering this dialogue. Was Ballard effectively a self-parody at this point in his writing career? Well, that's a matter of opinion, but I don't think he was writing this way unknowingly. I think, essentially, he had given up trying to write realistic dialogue. Are the events of the book convincing? Well, that depends a lot on your understanding of human nature. Ballard's wartime childhood continues to loom large here; he doesn't give humans much benefit of the doubt.

So what is this novel about? A recently filed advertising executive finds himself in a London suburb where his father has been killed in a shooting inside an enormous shopping mall, the Metro-Centre. This is the "king dome" that looms over the surrounding community. This is the setup for the kind of descent in to madness that is Ballard's stock in trade in previous novels like *Concrete Island* and *High Rise*. Ballard's fascination with how architecture affects human emotion is also a major theme in his work. Here the consumer madness afflicts the entire community of shoppers. Consumerism has become their religion, and the Metro-Centre is their church, and their community activities center on shopping and violence, because as their existence is largely meaningless, sports fandom has grown, and part of sports fandom is participation in xenophobic attacks on anyone who doesn't look and act just the way they do. This slide into suburban fascism is not just mentioned but dissected, with explicit references to the Third Reich and the role of ordinary Germans.

I am reminded strongly of a non-fiction book I read years ago, *Among the Thugs* by Bill Buford, in which the author infiltrates violent football clubs, except in this case the instigators are middle-class and upper middle-class people: doctors and lawyers. Our hero wastes no time in becoming an agent provocateur, turning his skills as an ad man into creating psychopathic images just to see how easy it is to whip up the slightly bored citizens. It turns out that it's pretty easy. How realistic is this? I don't know. But I am inclined to go along with Ballard, as a thought experiment, even if this is not so much a novel as a polemic.

And now back to another book that is ultimately about Hitler as well. I didn't plan this, I swear!

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