

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 fired 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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