



capacity global

living in a clean and healthy environment is everyone's right

One Planet Culture

The Drowned World Book Review

In 1962, the Russians and the Americans brought the world to the brink of nuclear war over missiles in Cuba; seven countries including Algeria and Jamaica gained independence; and James Watson, Francis Crick and Maurice Wilkins jointly received the Nobel Prize in Physiology for the discovery of DNA. The future back then must've appeared simultaneously apocalyptic and hopeful – and it was into this world that JG Ballard published his first novel, *The Drowned World*.

The book became an instant classic. Readers debated whether it was really science-fiction – there was no enemy to defeat, no heroic mission for the protagonist. It is not about the triumph of mankind and his technological inventions over nature.

Instead, Ballard treats us to a fascinating conception of a future where rising sea levels and overbearing and increasing heat have forced most of civilisation to the poles. The great cities of the world are submerged, overrun by prehistoric flora and fauna. Ancient forms of amphibians and reptiles grow in numbers while the human population dwindles as only one in 10 marriages produce a child. It is a rather apocalyptic look into a world we don't recognise.

But Ballard doesn't dwell on the ins and outs of this foreign environment. It merely provides the backstory to the real issue – how humans have adapted to it. In this sense, *The Drowned World* is less like a science-fiction fantasy than an exploration at the human psyche and its evolution.

The protagonist Kerans is a biological researcher, one of the few people living outside of the temperate Arctic and Antarctic cities. He is accompanied in the story by various characters, each representing a different path the human mind is capable of taking. There's Riggs, the steadfast military colonel, and Strangman, the shady opportunist. There's Bodkin, an older researcher trying to find his forgotten memories, and Beatrice Dahl, the self-absorbed introvert.

The lyrical text evokes some powerful imagery, but Ballard's years in training as a medical doctor do come through from time to time. Every now and then, sentences appear with so many technical terms, you'll be reaching for the dictionary. Witness this passage:

“Was the drowned world itself, and the mysterious quest for the south which had possessed Hardman, no more than an impulse to suicide, an unconscious acceptance of the logic of his own devolutionary descent, the ultimate neuronc synthesis of the archaeopsychic zero?”

Of most interest, though, is the implication that with this extreme climate change, towards conditions not seen since the age of dinosaurs, evolution would bring back the dominant

lifeforms of that era. In a sense, we would see reverse evolution. How could we, as a civilisation, cope when nature is pushing us out? That is what Ballard seeks to find out.

Overall, *The Drowned World* is a quick read and a very interesting story about human psychology as well as climate change, with many layers beneath the surface, inviting us to peel them back one by one to reveal the depth and complexity of Ballard's imagination. And what a fertile imagination it is.

Steven Wong
Programme Officer