

CAUGHT IN THE TEETH OF LOVE

a review by Jim Coby

Nathan Ballingrud. *Wounds: Six Stories from the Borders of Hell*. Saga Press, 2019.

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NATHAN BALLINGRUD studied literature at UNC Chapel Hill and the University of New Orleans. He was born in Massachusetts but has spent most of his life living in the South, currently in Asheville, NC. He has won two Shirley Jackson awards and his novella *The Visible Filth* (*This Is Horror*, 2015) has a film adaptation called *Wounds* (Annapurna Pictures, 2019).

OPPOSITE Nathan Ballingrud reading from *Wounds* at Malaprop's Bookstore in Asheville, NC, Apr. 2019

In his 2013 collection *North American Lake Monsters* Nathan Ballingrud created a world in which evil and the supernatural, while sometimes visible, were often lurking around the peripheries of the stories. His prose, sparse and direct but evocative, suggests what might happen if Raymond Carver or Ann Beattie happened to discover a monster living in their basements and sought to record their experiences. A book of evil hidden just out of sight may well have been appropriate for that time, but the year 2020 demands horror that more explicitly addresses the uncertainty, the anxiety, and the fear that comes with living in our moment. Enter Ballingrud's newest collection of terror: *Wounds: Six Stories from the Borders of Hell*. In his new collection, Ballingrud eschews much of the implied nature of evil and the supernatural present in his first collection, and instead looks horror right in its face, asking readers too to refuse to avert their eyes. Don't be misguided: the subheading "Six Stories from the Border of Hell" is no misnomer; nor is it metaphorical. In each of these stories we witness characters, sometimes willingly, sometimes not, encountering and engaging with otherworldly forces, with monsters, demons, and all manners of ghoulish concoctions spilling over the gates of Hell.

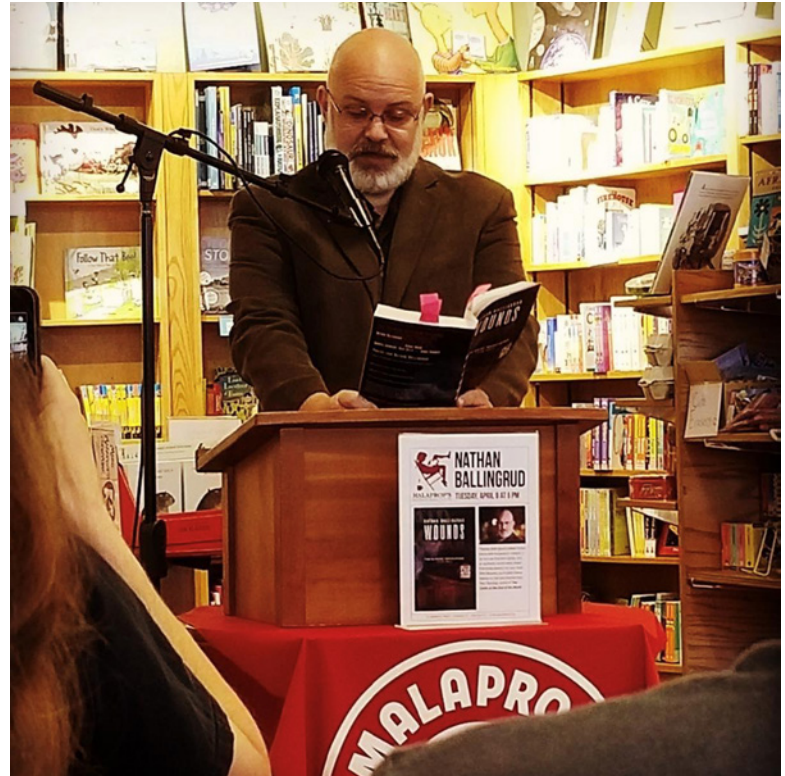
A forte of Ballingrud's that went largely unexplored in his first collection is that of world-building. With *Wounds*, Ballingrud has free reign to devise countless dark creatures that inhabit the borders of Hell, as well as much of the esoterica

about this geography. In order to map out Hell, you need cartographers, of course, and Ballingrud crafts these with a race of humans who cover their visages with lead boxes, the Black Iron Monks, and venture into Hell to record topographic features such as the Love Mills, the Breathing Mounds, and the Grieving Fields. These evocative and haunting bits of knowledge permeate the text and hint at a darker, scarier, and more expansive world than can possibly be contained within a single collection. Which is to say that even with all of the explicit horror in the text, a latent world of the unknowable and unthinkable exists just beyond reach.

Each story in this collection proves relentlessly readable and fascinating, but the best of the lot engage with humans (which I suppose would be assumed in other books, but, given the surfeit of ghouls running around, requires pointing out here) grappling with unexpected and senseless losses. The trauma inherent in a story such as "The Butcher's Table," a rollicking maritime adventure from Gulf waters to, where else, Hell itself, comes from Captain Toussaint's deceased love. In the standout "The Visible Filth," a cellphone left behind during a brawl at a New Orleans bar begins to receive disturbing images from some unknown force. As if the disturbing missives weren't enough, the story's protagonist, Will, finds himself on the verge of losing his partner, his best friend, and his mind, as his alcoholism and the stress of the haunted phone apex.

"The Maw," is perhaps the best and most unassuming of the collection's stories, and yet finds Ballingrud at his emotional and narratological finest. This story of exploration and world-building centers around Mix, a seventeen-year-old urban explorer who chaperones wanderers and seekers – in this case an older man named Carlos – into the burnt-out and Hell-occupied husk of a major city, "The Maw." At stake in this story is Carlos's immense sense of loss and disorientation when his life partner of fifteen years, Maria, a "scruffy tan mutt" (94), goes missing. Amidst a beautifully, if macabre, rendered setting, Mix and Carlos dart between buildings in an attempt to avoid detection of the various monsters haunting the streets, while also seeking out the missing pup. Ballingrud's take on the platitude of lovers' willingness to travel to Hell and back for their partner is to send a man into Hell's depths to locate his canine, at once upending the cliché, while at the same time emphasizing the emotional bond that people form with their pets. At its best, *Wounds* captures how deeply unsettling the notions of dependency and love can become. No single ghoul or Hell-beast in this collection holds a candle to the distress elicited from a character rebuked and denied love and affection. And it is in "The Maw" that we see the themes of loss and reconciliation portrayed more explicitly than in any other story.

For all of the horror that pervades this collection – and, to be sure, there is plenty of it – there are also moments of levity and humor that serve to disrupt



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW FULLER

the onslaught of evil in a way that paradoxically not only provides comfort but also creates a sense of false security. In the wonderfully deranged "Skull-pocket," for example, a cadre of ghouls (quite literally, ghouls) invite a platoon of children into a haunted house, where a disembodied brain affectionately known as Uncle Digby regales the guests with a recounting of some of the town's more nefarious and frightening traditions before the children themselves have the opportunity to participate. Any horror story involving children is likely to immediately raise readers' alarms, but Ballingrud ingratiates his grotesque characters to readers in clever and subversive ways: for example, Mr. Wormcake, "the Eminent Ghoul" (49) of the town has deteriorated into little more

than bones, the remains of an ill-fitting suit, and "eyes [that] have fallen to dust" (50). In a typically understated comment, Ballingrud writes of Wormcake: "He looks frail, and he looks tired" (50). Ballingrud peppers such descriptions, clever asides, and bite-sized pieces of humor throughout his collection. As a result, the moments of intensity that so define this collection punch all the harder.

While far more gruesome than his first collection, *Wounds* is also Ballingrud's most fun work to date. As with the best horror movie, you might well find yourself wanting to turn away, but utterly incapable of doing so. Compulsively readable, timely, and inventive, *Wounds* is a necessary addition to the library of anyone who has even an inkling of interest in horror. ■