

## THE BAROQUE POWER OF NATHAN BALLINGRUD'S NEW NOVELLA

a review by Dale Bailey

Nathan Ballingrud. *Crypt of the Moon Spider*. Tor Nightfire, 2024.

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**NATHAN BALLINGRUD** is the author of *The Strange* (S&S/Saga Press, 2024), *Wounds: Six Stories from the Border of Hell* (S&S/Saga Press, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021), and *North American Lake Monsters* (Small Beer Press, 2013), which won the Shirley Jackson Award. He has been short-listed for the World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Bram Stoker awards. His stories have been adapted into the Hulu series *Monsterland*. He lives in Asheville, NC.

The opening sentence of *Crypt of the Moon Spider*, Nathan Ballingrud's stunning new novella from Nightfire Books, establishes both the core aesthetic of the story itself and its place in the longer arc of Ballingrud's career. That career is every bit as stunning – consistently stunning – as this slim book, which at a mere eighty-five pages packs more power, beauty, and human insight than most novels three times its length. This assessment is evident in every sentence of the book, including the first one, which I here quote in full: "Looking through the small oval window of the twin-engine passenger shuttle which carried her over the moon's gray and rubbled plains, Veronica recalled a local myth, which held that the moon was the inhabited skull of a long-dead god who once trod the dark pathways of space like a king through his star-curtained palace" (1).

What is remarkable here is the juxtaposition of a mundane science fiction convention in all its tactile familiarity (that twin-engine shuttle) with a setting that is simultaneously familiar and exotic (those gray and rubbled lunar plains), augmented by an image of such baroque power (that skull) rendered in language of extraordinary precision, lyricism, and beauty (consider the phrase "star-curtained palace").

Now consider two further points. One, the novella is set in 1923, utterly undermining our initial assumption that we are reading a conventional, albeit beautifully written, science fiction story. Two, by setting his story in an era when interplanetary travel was clearly not possible, Ballingrud suspends us in a state of epistemological uncertainty: could it be that the moon

really *is* "the inhabited skull of a long dead god" (1)? The sound earth of our narrative expectations is knocked right out from under our feet. We are in the hands of a narrative wizard who isn't playing by the rules – and what glorious hands they are to be in.

Ballingrud leaves open the question of the moon's status as the skull of a long-dead god, but having established his world as a baroque challenge to our conceptions of science fiction narrative, he plays his cards straight – and with remarkable finesse. *Crypt* presents itself as a heady concoction of science fiction, dark fantasy, and horror, but it is actually something far more interesting. It's a gothic novel of the purest kind, complete with a young woman in jeopardy, trapped in a vast, grim edifice that might as well be the Castle of Otranto – only it's actually the Barrowfield Hospital for the Treatment of the Melancholy, situated in a forest on the dark side of the moon and constructed out of lunar stone "polished to a glistening shine" (6).

The woman in question is Veronica Brinkley. Subject to nearly suicidal "black spells," she has been remanded to Barrowfield by her husband, who has all the charm of a hammerhead shark, except that he's not quite so capable of love. He's clearly not seeking a cure for his wife; he's unloading her with the expectation that she will never return. At Barrowfield, she is placed under the care of Dr. Cull, a "surgeon of the mind" (17). Cull, of course, is a mad scientist: if the name doesn't give it away, the "uncapped human skull" in his office – "its hollow provisioned with colorful hard candies" (15) – surely will. He has

his Igor, too: Charlie Duchamp, "a pale . . . unfinished" man "who looks like something wriggled up from the earth. Like a grub" (5). There is also a mysterious monastic order called the Alabaster Scholars. And neither the crypt nor the spider of the title are metaphorical. This is all established in a mere twenty-two pages with remarkable economy. And it should collapse under the sheer tonnage of pulp gothic absurdity.

In the hands of a lesser writer, it would. Ballingrud is not a lesser writer. He is one of the most powerful fantasists of our time, acknowledged and appreciated, yes – but he should be revered. To give any more away of Veronica's story would be an offense against the pleasures and frissons that await you. But it is worth considering *Crypt* – and the stories in Ballingrud's previous collection, *Wounds* – as an extension of, not a challenge to the grounded working-class fiction of his first collection, *North American Lake Monsters*. The stories in *Lake Monsters* are the kind of stories Raymond Carver might have written if Carver had turned his mind to putting monsters – real, bloodthirsty supernatural monsters – in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" and "A Small, Good Thing." The stories in *Lake Monsters* are very much rooted in Ballingrud's compassionate and realistic depictions of an American underclass barely getting by – scrabbling to scrape up the cash to make the monthly payments on the beaters parked outside their crummy apartments and eating a diet of fast



## "IT'S BASED ON NOTHING BUT FEAR, BY A COMPULSION TO CATASTROPHIZE"

A Conversation with Nathan Ballingrud

by Jim Coby

A popular internet meme at the moment (that will undoubtedly be passé by the time this article sees publication) is "Gestures broadly at everything." For example:

Q: "Why do you think 2020 was such an awful year?"

A: "Gestures broadly at everything."

And while the phrase typically applies a frustrated cynicism toward whatever its target happens to be, it possesses manifold opportunities for a more positive usage. For example, if you were to ask fans of Nathan Ballingrud's horror fiction what makes his work so aggressively appealing, and yet, so unflinchingly discomfiting, they might well open their eyes wide, extend their arms, and gesture broadly at everything on the page.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most exciting and inventive authors writing today, Nathan Ballingrud writes fiction that consistently challenges notions about "appropriate" subjects for horror. His first collection, *North American Lake Monsters* (Small Beer Press, 2013), winner of the Shirley Jackson Award, relied less on monsters and demons, instead shifting the focus to the traumatic aftermath that ordinary people might experience in the wake of such encounters. As such, the horrors personified by the monsters became secondary to the terror of attempting to regain a sense of normalcy and stability after such a frightening experience.

food when they're lucky and dry Cheerios when they're not. They are stories of character.

It's easy to see Ballingrud's progressively more baroque plots and incidents – consider the flying giant squid in his novella "The Butcher's Table" (it's possessed by Carrion Angels; these things happen; go read it) or the ghoulish children of "Skullpocket" (another story you will not ever forget) – as a break with his early work: not stories of character but of plot and spectacle, the unholy love children of Clive Barker and Ray Bradbury (but only in the dark, unsentimental mode of his early career).

This is exactly wrong. In embracing pulp, Ballingrud has chosen not the limited and somewhat conventional aesthetic of his early stories, as wonderful as they are (and they are very, very wonderful indeed). He's throttled into a new and more impressive mode with

infinite possibilities, the pulp gothic fiction our literary tastemakers are too quick to reject. His stories are rendered with the precision of language and the attention to character we expect from the best literary fiction. He rejects category and embraces imagination. He populates his stories with people who matter, with heartbreak, hope, and horror, and he invests his wildest fantasies with an utter commitment to emotional nuance and a verisimilitude that will sustain the belief of even the most skeptical reader. He's working terrain no one else has worked before, and he's doing it with an excellence that few other writers could even approach. He is a writer of real significance. It's time for readers and critics outside the genre to take notice and give him his due. *Crypt of the Moon Spider* is a great point of entry to a great body of work. Not to mention the spiders. ■