

## ADVENTURES, ENTREPRENEURS, AND SCOUNDRELS

a review by Jim Coby

Nathan Ballingrud. *The Strange*.  
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**NATHAN BALLINGRUD** is the author of two collections of short stories, *Wounds: Six Stories for the Border of Hell* (Simon and Schuster, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021) and *North American Lake Monsters* (Small Beer Press, 2013). The winner of two Shirley Jackson Awards, Ballingrud studied literature at UNC Chapel Hill as well as the University of New Orleans. He lives in Asheville, NC.

OPPOSITE Nathan Ballingrud at Malaprop's Bookstore, Asheville, NC, 21 Mar. 2023

Nathan Ballingrud might be one of the best kept secrets in the American literary scene today. Primarily known for his masterful horror short story collections *North American Lake Monsters* (2013) and *Wounds* (2019), Ballingrud has made fans of Paul Tremblay, Victor LaValle, Stephen Graham Jones, and countless other contemporary giants of the genre. With his first novel, *The Strange*, however, one can't help but imagine that Ballingrud might soon be propelled to literary stardom.

In his immediately engaging and compulsively readable first novel, Ballingrud takes readers to an outpost on Mars named New Galveston, where adventurers, entrepreneurs, and scoundrels have settled in the distant year of – 1931. Annabelle Crisp runs the Mother Earth Diner with her distant and grieving father. After Annabelle's mother decides to return to Earth, the pair, but especially Annabelle's father, seek comfort in an audio recording that his wife has left behind. This token emerges as the final bond they have with their mother; however, when "The Silence" takes effect, and communications between Mars and Earth end, it leaves the Martians to wonder precisely what, if anything, remains behind on Earth. Stability is further upended when one evening, cultists who populate Dig Town, the desert outside of New Galveston, rob the diner of its valuables, including the audio recording of Annabelle's mother. Hoping to join the sheriff's posse, Annabelle quickly becomes disenchanted with how the law had "given up so easily" on its pursuit (32). Left with few options, she teams

with Joe Reilly, an alcoholic space pilot, and Sally Milkwood, a moonshiner and one of the diner's thieves, to track down the lost recordings. As she ventures farther and farther away from New Galveston, Annabelle begins to realize that Mars harbors far more strangeness and danger than she could have possibly imagined.

The temporal anachronism and historical revisionism quickly upset readers' expectations of how science fiction traditionally works, as does Ballingrud's incorporation of historical figures and events into the plot. Legendary pitcher, Satchel Paige, for example, plays an exhibition game on Mars, effectively revealing that Ballingrud isn't beholden to the rules previously set forth by Asimov or Butler or Dick, but rather seems determined to carve his own niche at the intersections of speculative fiction, historical fiction, horror, bildungsroman, and literary fiction. In short, this novel does a lot of things, and generally it does them very well.

For example, the young protagonist, Annabelle, bursts forward with life and a righteous indignation about the wrongs done against her and her father that can only exist in the lion-hearted spirit of a young person. Despite his admitted apprehensions that he frequently composes stories focusing "on working class men," and so, "What business did [he] have writing Annabelle's story?" (291), Ballingrud crafts a fully realized, rounded character who actively displays the wealth and depth of human emotions and experiences. Following the robbery, Annabelle finds herself sickened with the lack of judicial progress

and frustrated with her place as "a child among adults caught in a derangement" (91). The second portion of the novel is entitled "What I Did About It," and this curt title thoroughly sets the stage for the thrilling retribution to come.

Alluring tertiary characters also populate Ballingrud's Mars. Joe Reilly and Sally Milkwood, Annabelle's colleagues of necessity, each possess tragic, fully formed backstories. But aside from Annabelle, no character draws our attention and emotions more so than her robot or "engine," Watson, "a bipedal construct, humanoid in form, utilitarian and featureless" (5). Although his primary function is to cook and clean at the diner, Watson, too, finds himself caught up in Annabelle's rescue attempts. Watson, of course, lacks any personality save for what he is programmed to have, and so he becomes largely a sounding board for Annabelle's fears, while also providing perfunctory solace and advice in return. Watson, therefore, *shouldn't* elicit the emotional response that he does, but as readers feel themselves more deeply enmeshed in the loneliness of Mars life, it's impossible to deny just how necessary a sounding board can be, and how his unwavering dedication to Annabelle proves as endearing as any human's.

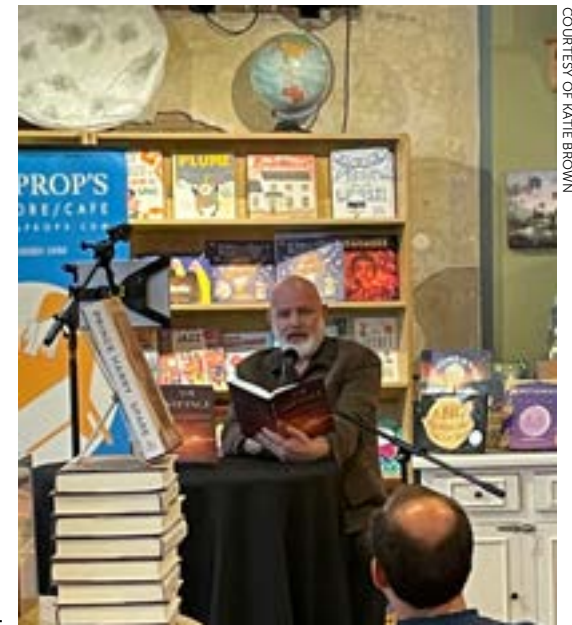
It's also worth noting the environment about which Ballingrud writes. Crafting a believable locale is essential in making resonant science fiction. Veer too far to the fantastic and readers become too caught up in the details of place at the expense of story; veer too far to the realistic and readers wonder why

the story needed an interplanetary location at all. In this high-wire act of crafting an immersive world for his characters, Ballingrud succeeds. Mars feels both intimately familiar, drawing from tropes of noir and western fiction, while also deeply foreign. "Colonists often had difficulty," Annabelle notes, "getting used to the colder temper-

atures of Mars. . . . The sun is smaller here, the days shorter and cooler. Twilight is the common mood of our sky" (22). A description of a decommissioned spaceship reads: "On windless days the pink sand and the dust covered it like a caul, giving it the appearance of a relic from an older age: something cobwebbed and forgotten. A haunted house full of the ghosts of the entire world" (46). In these passages, Ballingrud provides readers with a discordant sense of place; the tropes of American western literature would suggest hot, sluggish days, but Mars's climate upends such comforts. Similarly, shining, sleek retro futuristic visions of rockets are exchanged for abandoned junk vehicles, essentially forcing readers to abandon their expectations and settle in for the ride that Ballingrud has laid out before them.

I'm not the first (or second or third) reviewer to note that *The Strange* reads like an amalgamation of Charles Portis's *True Grit*

and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*. But the comparisons are too obvious and too clever to be ignored. Like Bradbury in the best of his short stories, Ballingrud fashions an interplanetary locale both immediately familiar and oddly foreign, divorced from time, but also of a very specific moment in American cultural history. Once you get comfortable with the fact that the story takes place on another planet, the descriptions of Martian soil and meteorological events seem no more foreign or unexpected than, say, Louis L'Amour's descriptions of Colorado. Likewise, Ballingrud's precocious antagonist who, in her quest for justice, provides not only answers for herself, but redemption for her rascal cohort, immediately draws to mind Portis's Mattie Ross. Ballingrud proudly wears these influences and extracts what works best from these works while also fashioning his own vision of the interplanetary western. ■



COURTESY OF KATIE BROWN