

FRIGHT NIGHT

a review by John Kessel

Dale Bailey. *This Island Earth: 8 Features from the Drive-In*. PS Publishing, 2023.

JOHN KESSEL's latest book is *The Dark Ride: The Best Short Fiction of John Kessel* (Subterranean Press, 2022), the subject of a review essay in *NCLR Online Winter 2023*. Kessel's stories have twice received the Nebula Award given by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. Additionally, he has gotten the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, the Locus Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, and the James Tiptree Jr. Award. Kessel holds a BA in Physics and English and a PhD in American Literature. He is retired from NC State University where he helped found and served as the first director of the MFA program in creative writing.

OPPOSITE Dale Bailey (left) talking with fellow North Carolina speculative fiction writer Nathan Ballingrud at Malaprop's Bookstore, Asheville, NC, 21 Mar. 2023

In 1958, Forrest J. Ackerman founded the magazine *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, a colorful celebration of schlock science fiction and horror movies in all their lurid sensationalism. Ackerman coined the label "sci fi" for these movies. His magazine was an immediate hit, and soon the term "sci fi" replaced "science fiction" in the popular mind. Writers trying to write serious science fiction, to high literary standards, have fought having their work thrown into the sci fi bin with *The Blob*. Some have latched onto new labels – speculative fiction, magic realism, cyberpunk – in the hope of separating their work from "sci fi."

In his new collection, *This Island Earth: 8 Features from the Drive-In*, Dale Bailey, thirty or more years into a career writing science fiction for grown-ups, tries a different strategy. Rather than run away from schlock sci fi, he steals the rubber alien costume, tries it on for size, and uses it without apology to tell stories that touch the heart and mind.

Bailey, who teaches writing and literature at Lenoir Rhyne University, brings a wide knowledge of non-genre fiction to his work. So though you will find "The Horror of Party Beach" in this collection – a story that does indeed contain a horror on a beach where teens go to party – Bailey pushes this scenario in directions that the 1964 movie released under that title

never would have gone. His story titles may be borrowed from actual fright night features of the 1950s, and the stories abound with mutant monsters, flying saucers, aliens, rebellious teens, hot automobiles, and high school romances, but they do not focus so much on the sci fi as on the people. As Bailey says in his preface, "these stories should not be seen as homages to the movies they draw their premises from [but as] homages to the movies I summoned into being as a boy – movies that never truly existed outside the theater in my head" (Bailey xii).

For example, in "I Married a Monster from Outer Space," Ruth and Donny live in a trailer, and their stale marriage is going nowhere. Ruth works checkout at the Walmart; Donny, though he is a superior auto mechanic, doesn't seem to be able to hold a job. Everything changes the day Ruth brings home a stranded alien from outer space whose flying saucer has crashed. Ruth and Donny nickname him "Gort" after the killer robot in the 1951 movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. His stay with them while Donny repairs the flying saucer and Ruth finds a (perhaps imaginary) emotional connection with the mute alien renews the couple's marriage. It's not exactly *E.T.*, but the saga of Ruth's relationship with Gort is a sad and funny commentary on the ordinary and the strange in our own world, and the emotional

complexity of Bailey's characters recalls Ray Bradbury more than Ed Wood.

The majority of the stories in *This Island Earth* are set in small towns. Ordinary people leading ordinary lives find themselves in the middle of lurid horror stories. The horror is most definitely there: in Bailey's stories a lot of bad things happen to good – and bad – people. But Bailey's focus is always on their hopes, their fears, their frustrations, their low motives and their high ones. Teenagers on their way to adulthood try to find a better way to live than what is held out to them; old people look back on the choices and accidents that led them to where they are now. And, I think centrally, most of these are love stories.

"Teenagers from Outer Space" turns aliens from space into a metaphor for race. In the town of Milledgeville, OH, aliens have appeared and settled into "Bug Town," a disreputable neighborhood across the tracks. The townspeople's attitudes toward the aliens – "the aliens walked among us, but we did not walk among the aliens" (179) – are analogous to the racial prejudice of that era.

Against this backdrop, high school student Nance tells us about her best friend Joan's rebellion against her dictatorial, righteous father and the stifling culture of the town. Joan first takes up with Johnny Fabriano, who drives a tricked out 1948 Mercury with flames painted on its hood. When Johnny turns out to be bad news, to his dismay, the horror of her father, and disapproval of most of her fellow students, Joan starts dating one of the aliens. Worried Nance protests to her that they're

aliens; Joan replies, "No worries, Nance. I'm used to it" (197).

In some stories Bailey plays the absurdity of the premise for laughs. "Creature from the Black Lagoon" is about the making of that classic '50s horror movie, but in this version the creature is played by an actual amphibious Gill-Man, captured in the Amazon, brought to Hollywood, and persuaded to become an actor. Unfortunately, as the Creature explains to us, he has fallen in love with Julie Adams, the movie's star. Plus, he's afraid his career will suffer if he's typecast as a monster. He tries to master his loneliness, murderous impulses, and hopeless love. What might have seemed a joke becomes a story of someone dying – or perhaps willing to kill – for love.

My favorite story from the book might be the quietly evocative "Night Caller from Outer Space," which tells of Ezra, a late-night DJ at a tiny Iowa radio station trying to cope with the aftermath of his wife's recent abduction by aliens. His struggle to get back to his lonely work is complicated by strange phone calls that come into the station's request line in the dead of night.

Bailey's description of this time, place, and man are simply beautiful:

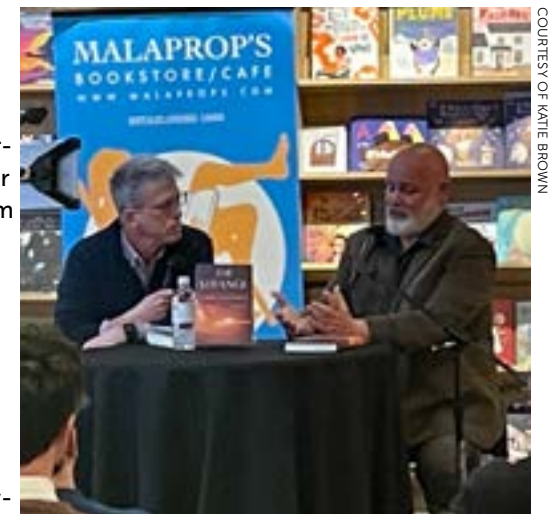
He killed the engine, listening to it tick as he pulled himself together. When he finally forced himself out of the car . . . he stood hesitant in the January cold, fixed in the red neon haze of the call letters bolted to the sign high above him: KNWC.

The windows of the station glowed yellow. Behind it, the shadowy tower of the transmitter array printed itself against the sky.

Against these frail assertions of human dominion, a wall of night and the sigh of wind combing the rye; above them, the black arc of heaven: a thousand stars like still points moving and billions more unseen beyond them. Nothing else: only the vacuum of space running on to the edge of all things, expanding. (92)

Bailey evokes Ezra's loneliness and the guilt he feels, though there really was nothing he could have done to save his wife. We're marooned with him in a small radio station at night on the great plains and the feeling that humans are very small in the midst of a vast and mysterious universe.

There's fun to be had in Dale Bailey's fantasias on the themes of drive-in horror movies of a bygone age. There's nostalgia for those few who still remember that time. There are chills at the horrifying things that come from outer space or from within the human heart. And there is hope that the world, at least sometimes, doesn't have to be an abode of monsters. ■



COURTESY OF KATIE BROWN

DALE BAILEY is the author of nine books, including *The End of the End of Everything* (Tor Books, 2015) and *The Subterranean Season* (Underland Press, 2015). His story "Death and Suffrage" was adapted for Showtime's *Masters of Horror* television series. His short fiction has been frequently reprinted in best-of-the-year anthologies, including *The Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy*, *The Best Horror of the Year*, and *The Year's Best Weird Fiction*. He has won the Shirley Jackson Award and the International Horror Guild Award and has been a finalist for the World Fantasy, Nebula, Locus and Bram Stoker awards. He lives in North Carolina with his family and reviews frequently for *NCLR*.