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The Kindness of Women: A Novel

By J. G. Ballard



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In this sequel to his award-winning *Empire of the Sun*, young James returns to England at the end of World War II. He stumbles through medical study at Cambridge, trains briefly as an RAF pilot in Canada, and marries. When his wife dies suddenly, Jim is thrust into the violence and sexual promiscuity of the sixties. Penetrating and wise, J. G. Ballard's biting social commentary and pushing of boundaries make this semi-autobiographical novel a small classic.



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The Kindness of Women: A Novel By J. G. Ballard Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #667199 in Books
- Brand: Ballard, J. G.
- Published on: 2007-11-27
- Released on: 2007-11-27
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .78" w x 5.50" l, .70 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Ballard is a brilliant writer whose *Empire of the Sun* has been his only major commercial success to date in this country. That mesmerizing novel, based on his childhood in 1930s Shanghai and internment by the Japanese, finds a sequel here. It takes the (lightly fictionalized) events of the author's life through three turbulent decades to end, ironically, with the making of the movie, with the narrator as a bemused extra, and his lifelong obsessions--with America, with planes, car crashes and the fantasies of technology--apparently exorcised. *Women* is a poignantly vivid account of Ballard's radically dislocated life in which the only constants have been an abiding love for his children and the variety of emotional and erotic consolations provided by a number of different, beautifully drawn women. Beginning with young Jamie back in embattled Shanghai, the novel follows him through return to England, an abortive fling at medical school and a try at flying for the R.A.F. before he settles into an idyllic marriage and the birth of his children--symbolically, in a Thames-side community next door to the great film studios where *Empire* would one day be recreated. The accidental death of his wife, hitting him, and the reader, with horrifying suddenness, is followed by years of bleakness, including drug experiments in the dizzy '60s, and a gradual return to calm resignation as some of his old friends die off around him. The story's outline may sound banal, but Ballard writing at the top of his powers offers an immediacy that is often visceral. His eye has never been more cinematic, and his love scenes, sexually explicit and often of older people no longer in their physical prime, are touchingly human and moving. But much is moving here: the way Ballard and the children cope with Miriam's death, the changes in a wild bohemian girl as she ages, the cancer death of a friend, the saving of a small girl from drowning. *The Kindness of Women* is full of scenes and moments that linger hauntingly in the mind, a piercingly honest, vibrant record of a very contemporary life.

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From Library Journal

This elegantly structured sequel to *Empire of the Sun* (LJ 11/1/84) begins again with a boy's traumatic experiences in Japanese-occupied Shanghai and ends some 40 years later with his viewing a film based on his novel about those experiences. Before this "last act in a profound catharsis," however, the narrator Jim stumbles through medical study at Cambridge, trains briefly as an RAF pilot in Canada, marries, and suffers domestic tragedy. Jim both documents and participates in the violence and excess of the 1960s, but at various moments of crisis he is fortunate enough to experience the redemptive love of women. With penetrating topical commentary and abiding wisdom, this well-crafted novel should enjoy wide appeal. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 6/1/91.

- *Albert E. Wilhelm, Tennessee Technological Univ., Cookeville*

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From Kirkus Reviews

In *Empire of the Sun* (1984), Ballard turned his searing childhood memories--of prison-camp experiences in WW II Shanghai--into fiercely effective autobiographical fiction. This episodic sequel begins again in Shanghai but quickly moves to England, as narrator "Jim" explores sex, marriage, fatherhood, and friendship through the Fifties, Sixties, and Seventies. The opening chapters return to the horror of the Shanghai bombing and the Lunghua prison-camp; worst of all, at war's end, 15-year-old Jim witnesses the torture-murder of a young Chinese prisoner--a monstrosity that will haunt him always. As a med student at Cambridge he tries to exorcise corpse-filled memories by calmly dissecting a cadaver. A short stint in the RAF--another attempt at confronting the violence within--is equally unsuccessful. So Jim instead forgets the past by settling into a cozy domestic present: marriage to earthy Miriam, three children, a quiet life in

suburban Shepperton (near England's film studios). But Miriam's sudden accidental death, during a vacation in Spain, reawakens Jim's sense of dislocation--just in time for the ``crazed" 1960's. He tries LSD, unorthodox sex (with a rich, kinky young American woman), curates an exhibition of crashed cars--``a potent symbol in the new logic of violence and sensation that ruled our lives." He broods upon the media-ization of postwar society, as embodied by a friend who becomes a TV psychology-guru...and ultimately films his own death from cancer. But the wounds from Shanghai never fully heal, not even when Jim--after the success of *Empire*--has a cathartic (and erotic) reunion with the governess (now 60-ish) whom he lusted after as a teenager. The psychology here often seems simplistic; so does Ballard's socio-historical view of the postwar decades. And the many sexual encounters are stronger on clinical detail than emotional impact. Still: sporadically involving and occasionally disturbing memoir/fiction from an always-interesting writer. --
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Linda Yohe:

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Janet Kline:

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Ella Woods:

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Charles Moreno:

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