



Cocaine Nights

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In the resort of Estrella de Mar, Charles Prentice has just arrived from London to save his brother, Frank, who has confessed to setting an explosive fire that has taken five lives. Convinced of Frank's innocence, Charles uncovers a vast network of drugs, pornography, and theft.

Cocaine Nights Details

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Author : J.G. Ballard

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From Reader Review Cocaine Nights for online ebook

James says

After enjoying *High Rise* so much, we went on a bit of a spending spree and bought several Ballard novels to follow it up. In part because it was recently the work book club choice (although I'm not actually a member) *Cocaine Nights* was the first one out of the pile. As with *High Rise* this is the tale of something we think we know, British ex-pats moving to Spain, but somehow corrupted beyond our expectations by some trigger event. With *High Rise* it was the loss of power; with *Cocaine Nights* it is the presence of the tennis coach – Bobby Crawford.

Charles Prentice arrives at Estrella de Mar to rescue his brother Frank, who has been wrongfully imprisoned for the starting a house fire that killed several people in the resort. Except when he arrives he is confused to discover that while almost everybody claims to believe Frank couldn't have committed the crime, his brother has already confessed to the police; and when Charles presses him to explain himself refuses to allow him to visit any more. Charles decides to launch his own investigation and is drawn into the community of Estrella de Mar – its residents, its clubs and committees, and its surprising underbelly of exciting crime.

Estrella de Mar isn't like any of the other resorts. Instead of tired ex-pats hiding away in their apartments watching satellite TV, it houses a vibrant community of friends who party, learn tennis, have affairs; and as we slowly realise sell drugs, engage in prostitution and commit petty thefts. They don't though, burn down their friends houses with their friends inside. Instead of clearing his brother Charles comes to understand (he thinks) how Estrella de Mar is such a success, and he starts to buy into Bobby's ideas of the link between crime and creativity. The resort has to maintain a low-level of crime in order to get people out of their apartments and forming committees and becoming active. The problem that Charles seems to miss is that, like the drugs that are circulating, the low-level crime slowly stops being enough. Eventually you need a larger event to push the community over the edge and into a permanent state of activity and creativity. Was the fire just such an event, and if so, why is Frank taking the blame for it?

While the story is delightfully clever and sociopathic, the book does feel a little slow in some of the middle sections. Whether this was Ballard's attempt to slow the conversion of Charles Prentice down a little (it does seem a little fast even then) or not I don't know, but I quite liked the speed with which Charles was won over. To me it added more credence to Bobby's cult-like charisma. The whole resort have been taken in, if Charles takes too long to join in it feels like he's being convinced through rational arguments. The speed makes much more of a statement that it's almost somehow viral. That just by being in Estrella de Mar and being in contact with all the other residents, he could get caught up in the whole thing within a matter of weeks.

R. says

Okay, let's look at this: Marc Bolan recorded "Dandy In the Underworld" which had lyrics which referred to 'cocaine nights'...then died in a car crash because his usual Rolls was loaned out to Hawkwind, an offshoot band project of sci-fi author Michael Moorcock, who was friendish with J.G. Ballard who wrote a book - **three** years earlier - about car crashes and then, you know, *this* book **twenty** years later.

Vanessa Wu says

This book started out with tremendous promise. That sounds more patronising than I would like. It blew my mind. Is that better? I couldn't believe I had avoided this author for so long. If you are an avid reader, not reading J.G. Ballard is like depriving yourself of air. Each sentence glitters with intelligence. The rhythm, the poise, the vocabulary, the imagery are all perfect. He has a fine sense of character and there is passion beneath his hard, cynical edge.

But as the book goes along it degenerates. Not because of the language, which continues to be perfect: perfectly judged and perfectly paced. The similes come just as thick and fast as before. The words still glitter. The images still haunt your brain.

But something happens to the credibility. J.G. Ballard is not like other men. He is aloof from ordinary human motivation. His psychology is not quite sane. He has a pathological empathy with weird conditions. He imagines humanity differently from the rest of us.

So I stopped enjoying it. He lays the groundwork for his plot very thoroughly. He is like an advertising man. He is very persuasive and very plausible. But his words are a veneer laid over a corrupt underbelly that failed to convince. The twist at the end also didn't ring true.

I was disappointed. I was bitterly disappointed. Because when he is good he is breathtakingly good.

Erik says

The perfect book, I suppose, has three things going for it: (1) great, realistic characters, who are transformed in believable, often desirable ways, (2) an interesting and perhaps unpredictable plot that holds our attention, not to mention holds water in whatever stream of reality the story finds itself, and (3) eloquent writing.

And then we have *Cocaine Nights* by J.G. Ballard, author of *Crash* and *Empire of the Sun*.

"Crossing frontiers is my profession," Charles Prentice states at the book's opening. He is a travel writer who has come to a strange Spanish resort to figure out why his apparently innocent brother would plead guilty to murder. Charles goes through a bit of a mind trip as he starts to solve the mystery.

I drove back to Los Monteros and walked along the beach, a forlorn shelf of ochre sand littered with driftwood and waterlogged crates, like the debris of a ransacked mind.

Perhaps it's the reader who ends up with the ransacked mind after finishing this disappointing, sloppily-written book. Ridiculous, unrealistic scenarios. One-dimensional characters. Plot contrivances. And worst of all, I thought the whole premise was questionable. Art, culture, and community involvement comes directly from crime? It's an interesting idea, but one that Ballard did not begin to sell. I'm not sure how this book made it to press; I suppose that's the book's greatest mystery.

Maria Borland says

I wanted to like this book far more than I did. As with 'Crash', Ballard confronts the excesses of contemporary society with unflinching conviction and a knack for nauseating medical details. The story rests on the intelligent conceit of an expat mediterranean society that utilizes crime as a means to wake itself up from valium induced stupor. Instigated by an evergreen ex tennis pro who envisions a world where people are forced to connect with their surroundings in a manner that involves both creation and destruction. Sculpture classes and Pinter revivals alongside filmed rapes and a group murder; the latter becoming the focus of an imaginatively subverted thriller.

Two main obstacles prevented me being as impressed with this book as I felt I should have been. The first was that as a thriller I found it unsatisfying. Ballard uses the genre to structure what is essentially a book of ideas, and in so doing loses the requisite surprise revelations, twists and satisfactorily closed ending. This wouldn't have been a problem had the characters sustained the story, as the ideas certainly make for a more interesting work than your average thriller. But this is a book written in the first person where the author is clearly far more intelligent than his central character. As a reader I understand the ideas and the depiction of vice and the flawed characters that inhabit this seedy world. As a protagonist Charles Prentice is astonishingly naive. I always feel unsettlingly detached from Ballard's characters, but in this case I also felt superior. It was this disbelief in the protagonist's actions throughout the story that prevented me from becoming personally implicated in what could have been an uncomfortable attack on certain aspects of advanced capitalism as experienced in daily life. Ballard is often classified as a sort of 'science-fiction' writer, in that he seeks to portray other possible realities or rather other versions of our own reality. The problem here is that I did not view this particular reality as 'possible'. There wasn't enough, particularly in the case of the protagonist, that I recognised.

Ana says

Before reading this, I read a lot of reviews about it and most of them said that yes, it starts well and the pace picks up a bit, but then, some 80 pages in, it starts to lose it. Like the author just ran out of fuel and decided to take the flight without it.

They were *sorta* right. Its beginning is really nice and you get the feeling that this is going to be such an amazing story and wow-how-much-fun-you're-gonna-get.. but then there's no enthusiasm anymore. It's just.. gone.

This Estrella De Mar place, or Residencia Costasol, these seem to be such fake places that even I wouldn't believe them. Yes, it's dystopian, and by definition it should have an unrealistic feel to it, but that's a bit too much. I mean, come on, it's just not possible!

On to Charles, the main character of this work. I felt like he believed them too much. And by them I mean anyone. When Paula told him anything that would counterfeit what he was previously thinking, he was happy to believe it. When Crawford told him he didn't set fire to the Hollinger's house, he believed him.

He was perfectly happy believing in anyone, so long they gave him the answer he was secretly hoping to

hear. That was fine, for about 50 pages. But then I started thinking Charles was really dumb. (view spoiler)

Crawford. I hated him. (view spoiler) From the very beginning. Too confident, too much of a smart mouth.. And how everyone seemed to give him the prize for Saviour of the Year! Oooh, how cute.. not.

I'd have liked to see more of Frank (Charles' brother) in the story. He just doesn't appear, at all, and a confrontation between the two would have been a nice thing. Also, the ending was a bit .. well, lame. It lacked substance. It wasn't the worst ending, but surely Ballard could have come up with something better!

What I really did like about this book, actually what I like about Ballard, is the language usage. He is one fine writer, from the technical point of view. Maybe he doesn't have his story all set up, but his expressions are priceless and his jokes are so subtle and beautifully crafted! Really, really nice writing!

Here are some quotes I love:

Here on Costa del Sol nothing would ever happen again, and the people of the pueblos were already ghosts of themselves.

The faint scent of bath gel still clung to my skin, the perfume of my own strangulation that embraced me like a forbidden memory.

"Too well". She laughed at herself. "I sound mean, don't I? You'll be glad to hear that he's not a good lover."

"Why not?"

"He's not selfish enough. Selfish men make the best lovers. They're prepared to invest in the woman's pleasure so that they can collect an even bigger dividend for themselves."

Remember, white is the color of silence.

"Residencia Costasol is pure 1990s. Security rules. Everything is designed around an obsession with crime."

"I take it there isn't any?"

"None. Absolutely nothing. And Illicit thought never disturbs the peace."

Josh Friedlander says

Definitely feel the need to justify this rating, and my disappointment with Ballard (who feels like a "writers' writer") in general. Got pretty far into a review using John Updike's nexus of critique, but then the internet happened, and GR decided to erase it all. I'll try and replace the loss soonish.

Update:

Firstly, I'm planning to read *The Drowned World*, and I listened to *My Dream of Flying to Wake Island* on The Guardian's fiction podcast, but beyond that this novel is my first foray into Ballardian territory. Wouldn't

have been my optimal choice, but it's available for free on the avant-garde storehouse UbuWeb, adapted from cassette(!)

The book starts out as a pretty generic crime thriller, involving a murder of in tropic island paradise Estrella del Mar. The narrator, a travel journalist whose brother has inexplicably copped to the crime, investigates what turns out to be a far deeper conspiracy than he'd suspected.

...
...

It stretches out for a long time, and it doesn't really feel like there's much of a payoff. I understand some of what Ballard might be going for here: a world devoid of morality, anodyne, soulless automatons going through anhedonous lives as metaphor for the modern condition.

But this book is neither fun nor meaningful: it's too long, flat, bland and pleasureless, which makes me think that it might just work as performance art: the struggle of getting through such half-assed hackery as metaphor for a very bleak existence.

Anyway, I found it kind of distressing to be so underwhelmed by a book I'd been so looking forward to, so I availed myself of John Updike's criticism rules to see if I'd been fair, or at least to make my opinion completely clear in my own mind.

1. Try to understand what the author wished to do, and do not blame him for not achieving what he did not attempt.

As an airport paperback, it's OK - though not enough to keep me from compulsively checking how much was left.

2. Give enough direct quotation—at least one extended passage—of the book's prose so the review's reader can form his own impression, can get his own taste.

"Crossing frontiers is my profession. Those strips of no-man's land between the checkpoints always seem such zones of promise, rich with the possibility of new lives, new scents and affections. At the same time they set off a reflex of unease that I have never been able to repress."

That style is pretty much two thirds the book.

3. Confirm your description of the book with quotation from the book, if only phrase-long, rather than proceeding by fuzzy précis.

Can't do this one as I don't have a physical copy. (Maybe that was the problem?)

4. Go easy on plot summary, and do not give away the ending.

?

5. If the book is judged deficient, cite a successful example along the same lines, from the author's œuvre or elsewhere. Try to understand the failure. Sure it's his and not yours?

Well, it's hard to find a comparable author. Maybe a crime writer like Raymond Chandler? Maybe after *The Drowned World*, I'll have a better grasp of what I'm dealing with.

I think the failure is in subject matter, making a creepy, alienated feeling into a book length murder mystery. I could have done without a lot of the exposition. I just want to read enjoyable prose, or find some kind of *recognition* in what I'm reading - even a Kafkaesque sort of recognised alienation.

And the final rule:

6.Do not accept for review a book you are predisposed to dislike...never try to put the author "in his place,"...Review the book, not the reputation. Submit to whatever spell, weak or strong, is being cast. Better to praise and share than blame and ban.

The communion between reviewer and his public is based upon the presumption of certain possible joys of reading, and all our discriminations should curve toward that end.

I spend a lot of time these days thinking about what it is that makes fiction enjoyable, and why we pursue it so avidly. Whatever that mysterious factor is, here it is absent. Reading this book was a pleasure I'd gladly have yielded.

Rebecca McNutt says

Cocaine Nights isn't something everyone would enjoy. It's gritty, sometimes disturbing and dark, and at times almost depressing. That said, it's a unique crime novel with a setting I've never really seen used in this type of genre before, and the characters were all very well-written if not sometimes tropes. They seemed very much like human beings, flawed, imperfect but real, bringing the book to life all-the-more.

Megan Baxter says

This will be the first of three reviews that center around a world that has lost its moral and ethical compass. I didn't plan this as a reading theme, but it came up! Of the three, this is probably the most realistic (not hard when the other two are G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*, and C.S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength*,) and also the most pessimistic. This is likely because the other two authors are deeply Christian, and so have a solution for the world's woes. Ballard, writing far more recently, has no such comfort.

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Guy Portman says

A house fire in the upmarket British expat enclave of Estrella de Mar on the Costa del Sol results in five deaths. Frank Prentice, the manager of the popular Club Nautico, pleads guilty and is charged with murder, but no one believes he committed the crime, not even the police. Frank's brother Charles travels from the U.K. to investigate the crime and find the culprit.

Charles discovers that Bobby Crawford, Estrella de Mar's amoral and charismatic head tennis coach, is the orchestrator of a society rampant with crime, drugs and adultery. Over time Charles becomes increasingly immersed in resort life and less concerned with his brother's plight.

Cocaine Nights is a combination of crime thriller and dystopian fiction, in which the plot provides a context for a study of how crime proves to be a catalyst that transforms a stupefied population faced with unlimited leisure into a functioning, cohesive and vibrant community.

Rife with descriptive prose and replete with similes and satirical observations, Cocaine Nights explores how society might fragment in a dystopian near future, a recurring theme in much of Ballard's writing, and one which the author tackles adeptly.

Although this reader found Cocaine Nights to be unabsorbing at times, the characters unrealistic and the events unconvincing, it is an eminently readable book with a memorable and unpredictable ending.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

All My Ideas Run to Crime

I've always enjoyed J G Ballard's novels in the past, but this one lost me about three quarters of the way through.

Ballard was prescient about the world of the future in his fiction. However, once the premise of this novel resolved into how the expatriate British, French, Swiss and German residents of gated communities on the idyllic Mediterranean coast of Spain turned to crime (hard drugs, both taking and dealing, prostitution and pornography) to overcome their leisure-induced boredom, I felt that it became more far-fetched and improbable than insightful or persuasive.

The novel is as structured and as tightly paced as a crime thriller. About a quarter of the way through, it seems to question whether an investigative process can ever determine the truth, especially when everybody, even the police, seems to be deliberately withholding it from you. The narrator's brother, Frank, has indicated that he will plead guilty to criminal charges of arson and murder. Nobody, let alone the narrator, Charles, believes that Frank committed the crimes, and Charles sets out to prove that he is innocent.

Surely, Frank has no motive (or does he?). However, instead of finding evidence, Charles gains an understanding of the community and social set in which his brother moved. (High) society is to blame! Bit by bit, a la Antonioni's *"The Passenger"* and Polanski's *"The Tenant"*, he takes on Frank's roles and responsibilities in the community, even romantically. Charles crosses frontiers, only to transgress in his own

right. Despite the humour and doubly vicarious pleasure in this situation, it stretches the imagination a little too far.

It's Kafkaesque, only, instead of waking up as an insect, Charles wakes up as his brother in a community that manages itself on the basis of perversely incomprehensible rituals and conventions that recall *"The Trial"*.

Ultimately, for most of the novel, it walks a thin line between allegory and farce, but towards the end it transgresses a little too overtly towards the farcical. At this point, notwithstanding the quality of the prose, it ceases to either convince or entertain, and therefore to reward the reader. Well, at least this reader!

SOUNDTRACK:

T.Rex - "Dandy In The Underworld"

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=tX24L7t...>

"Exalted companion of cocaine nights":

<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/trex/d...>

Ed Kuepper - "All My Ideas Run To Crime"

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=SqJg6GV...>

Crime & the City Solution - "Six Bells Chime"

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=zrMRks0...>

Maxime Daher says

The sheer existence of such a publication proves that 1) If there is a God, She is a cruel sadist who makes readers pick up books with funky titles on the weight of the sheer hype of the author and that the book had been actually shortlisted for numerous prizes, before bludgeoning them (the reader) with the most ridiculous plots, the most cliché phrases, the most flat and/or plagiarized characters, and the worst command of the English language coupled with scaling-walls-with-fingernails-awful writing; and 2) That once you've made yourself a name, somehow, the editors don't read your text, don't even pass it through a proofreader, but print it off right away and support it with hype-advertisement. If ever there is one single writer in print that is worse than J.G. Ballard, I would be interested in seeing what THAT could possibly read like!
What a waste of perfectly good vomit...

Lee Foust says

Cocaine Nights is considerably better written--less overwritten--than the other of Ballard's novels that I have read. At 300+ pages of rather traditional narrative, that's a really good thing. While I can't say I loved this

one, since I'm mostly a fan of his more experimental and outrageous work, despite the slightly pompous prose style, this novel is a pretty seamless mix of a kind of mystery plot and the sci fi writer's usual interesting spin on social psychology and philosophy. The novel is therefore quite solid in a traditional or mainstream kind of way. Noting this, I'm realizing that I've read almost exclusively from Ballard's work of the 1970s--with the exception of his very last published novel, *Kingdom Come*--so maybe he got better through the 1980s and into the '90s when *Cocaine Nights* was penned.

I don't want to give away either plot or social commentary since both are part of the mystery to be unraveled here, but it's worth the read if you have the time to put into it. I always enjoy Ballard's thoughtful take on contemporary societal mores, the environment, and humankind's struggles with both itself and the world--both nature and the man-made worlds of urban planning and architecture.

(One small giveaway--I bet he got the idea for this one from Orson Welles's celebrated speech on the Wiener riesenrad in Carol Reed's *The Third Man*.)

Emma says

What is it with ageing male writers and 'disturbing' dystopian visions of the fate of humanity? Along with McCarthy's "The Road" or Houellebecq's "Atomised", Ballard spends the whole novel beating us about the head with another tired, gloomy, and inevitably terminal prognosis for the world.

Cocaine Nights, sadly, lacks the poetic prose of "The Road" or the more robust intellectualism of Houellebecq. It revolves around one central premise. We're all heading towards a future of unlimited leisure, and unless we're stimulated out of it by crime, drugs and deviant sex, we're on a collision course with tranquiliser addiction and brain death. What utter rubbish. Not everyone wants to bake their lives away in gated estates in Spain, even assuming we could afford it. And even if we could, most would rather have a nice little cottage in Cornwall or the Charente than a concrete box on the Costa del Sol.

This silly, facile novel reminded me of nothing more than "Eldorado", that terrible soap opera the BBC treated us to a few years back - not that I ever managed to sit through a whole episode. No one has anything approaching a real conversation. There's no attempt at realistic psychology or motivation. Like bad porn, it's all sex and violence held together by the flimsiest of plots. It's all one great yawning ego trip, summed up by that other old literary misanthrope Camus: "Apres moi, le deluge". After all, when you're the centre of your own universe, how can you endure the waning of your own personal power and influence without the comfort of assuming the rest of humanity is going down the drain with you?

Lou Robinson says

Another J G Ballard that I have really enjoyed. I think it's because although his stories have a fantastical element to them....in that you can't REALLY see how things would turn out as they do in his books...they are at the same time very believable. *Cocaine Nights* is almost more believable than the other Ballard novels I've read, I had no problem picturing the endless Spanish resorts filled with British expat retirees and the complex characters that he has created.

A star down, as the ending unfortunately is a little too predictable and abrupt, there didn't seem to be anywhere else for the story to go. I'd have liked more of a twist.

