



Earthworks

Brian W. Aldiss

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Out of Africa comes a dead man walking upon the water - a portent of the political adventures into which j Knowle Noland, ex-convict, ex-traveller and captain of the 80,000-ton freighter Trieste Star, is about to tumble headlong.

Choked, disease-ridden towns, robots and prison gangs tending the bare, poison-drenched countryside are all characteristic of Knowle's world; only in Africa is the soil still fertile and the people still relatively vital. On the coast of Africa, near Walvis Bay, Knowle runs his freighter aground; and there he meets Justine and the destructive destiny that purges him of guilt and frees him from hallucination.

Cover Illustration: Karel Thole

Earthworks Details

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From Reader Review Earthworks for online ebook

Jan-Maat says

[those are still to come (hide spoiler)]

Stephen Theaker says

An extremely depressing book - all about pollution, overpopulation, disease and mania - but none the worse for it! I found it very hard to read Aldiss when I was younger - good to find I'm now grown up enough to enjoy his work. I'll have to try Ballard next.

Simon says

Started out quite well but quite a lack-lustre finish. It was like; yeah everything's so bad for humanity that the best thing we can do is start a nuclear war. That'll help.

blake says

This is the sort of book that illustrates why I stopped reading SF published after about 1950 or so. It's well written enough, though the main character suffers from hallucinations (leading to some pretentious feeling passages), but it's negative in that Soviet-influenced way of the latter half of the 20th century:
Overpopulation, not enough food, Africa ascending while the rest of the world wallows in despair.

The can-do spirit that informed SF from the first half of the 20th century is nowhere to be found—in fact, the very antithesis of it is here, so much so that the ending becomes obvious as soon as the necessary fact of the story is revealed. It might've passed for edgy in 1965, but it's just misanthropic and nihilistic. All compounded by the fact that it was bad prediction fueled by the non-scientific Malthusian catastrophe.

But a lot of people like this sort of thing, and (as I said) the craft is good and the book is a quick and easy read.

Roddy Williams says

‘The world had degenerated into a disease-ridden, over-populated rubbish dump. Chemicals had poisoned the landscape and reduced most of the people to the edge of starvation.

Ecology had become a meaningless word from the past. The planet earth speeds on its collision course with disaster. there is a solution but it is so frightful that man cannot conceive of it ever being put into operation.

Only one man, Knowle Noland, ex-convict, ex-traveller, and captain of the tramp freighter Trieste Star, is prepared to try. He alone is prepared to fire a shot that will throw the world into hideous war, but may leave a brave new world for the survivors. If there are any survivors.'

Blurb from the 1972 NEL paperback edition.

This brief, poetic and powerful novel is typical of Aldiss' talent for using the medium of SF to explore complex characters, moral dilemmas and indeed to take a good look at the world in which we live. This, of course, many would argue, is the true purpose of SF, to hold a mirror to ourselves and see, perhaps from a different perspective, at least part of the truth of the human condition.

In an overpopulated Earth of the near future where Man has raped the planet to the point where ecology is breaking down, Knowle Noland begins to tell us his tale.

Noland is the Captain of the Trieste Star, a ship which transports sand from the African coast to England. As the ship approaches Africa, a bizarre series of events is set in motion by the sighting of a dead man floating over the sea toward the ship. the dead man is held above the waves by an anti-gravity harness and, when the body is brought on board, Noland discovers letters on the dead man's person from 'Justine' to a man named Peter.

Shortly afterwards the ship runs aground on the African coast and Noland takes us back to his time working as a landsman for The Farmer, the fate of many people who fall foul of the law.

Noland is a complex character who throughout his life has not been much of a hero. As a child, working for a Fagin-like character, he hid beneath the table with a friend when the authorities raided his home and arrested his master. Later, temporarily absconding from the Farm he visits an abandoned village in search of books and is abducted by the nomadic Travellers (criminals in the eyes of the authorities) rather than running away. When the Travellers are captured he betrays them and is taken to The Farmer who gives him a job aboard the Trieste Star, although Noland never sees this as a reward or an opportunity that the Farmer gave him. He remains resentful.

There is much here that is strange and slightly baroque. Noland is prone to fits in which he experiences vivid hallucinations. In his conscious life, however, there is a phantom who follows him, who he calls The Figure. This appears to be not part of his hallucinatory world since other characters can see it too. Justine, whom he subsequently meets, tells him that this phantom appears when he is close to death. Because of the letters Noland is carrying, he is suspected of being an agent of the enemies of Justine and Peter Mercator (who turns out to be The Farmer).

They have a plan to solve the world's problems. Their aim is to assassinate the President of Africa and plunge the world into another global war, thus relieving the Earth of the burden of its millions of people and allowing it to heal while the Travellers are destined to become the survivors, and the nucleus of a second chance for Humanity.

It's a tribute to Aldiss' writing skills that Justine's plans make a horrible kind of sense. Noland has to be convinced of the rightness of it and, ultimately, steps up to the plate to become, if not a hero in the classic sense, then at least an antihero and gain his place in history.

There are some sections which seem very Ballardian, particularly the scenes with Justine, a beautiful but deadly sociopath, who in one scene fills a watering can with poison and calmly waters the plants within a room while conducting a conversation with Noland.

Another surprising character is The Farmer, a man that Noland sees as a capitalist monster, but who turns out to be – at least at the finale- a compassionate man trying to hold a crumbling business empire together whilst attempting to do the best thing for the good of everyone. The Farmer considers that he did Noland a favour by essentially giving him a chance to make something of himself and indeed, Noland started on the bottom rung and in the Trieste Star and worked his way up to the Captain's role.

One can only speculate as to what wonders would be unleashed if only more genre writers paid such attention to characterisation and detail as Aldiss.

Jon says

Not sure that I really understood it

Paul Bryant says

Well Earthworks has put something of a *dent* in my plan to read all of Brian Aldiss's SF novels because it was *extremely silly*. The blurb says this version of our future is full of

choked, disease-ridden towns, robots and prison gangs tending the bare, poison drenched countryside... a moribund ecological disaster, ruined by poisons, greed, unsustainable development and overpopulation. Mankind is broken, starving, wracked with disease and divided by bitter social injustice.

I mean, what could possibly go wrong? I would have thought with a set up like that it was guaranteed to make me smile and dutifully shell out 4 stars. But it was just.... Ridiculous. *NOTHING MADE ANY SENSE!* The characters (all four of them) were so thin they make cardboard look really fat, and we all know that cardboard is thin. Although I have bought some electronic stuff with really fat cardboard packaging that takes forever to saw through with a big knife. So maybe that comparison doesn't work. Anyway, I digress. Fiction is supposed to suspend your disbelief but Brian Aldiss cut the lines holding up my disbelief and it crashed down and chipped a bone in its ankle. Doctor says I won't be able to believe anything for at least six weeks now.

Kenneth says

A dystopian scifi novel of when the planet's ecology has gone really bad and politically the world was a police state.

Fred says

An odd 140 page novel concerning a dystopia where environmental scarcity has reduced the population to mainly agricultural serfs/slaves/prisoners. The protagonist escapes his work farm but crashes on the African shore and gets involved in an assassination plot.

This book is rarely mentioned in the Aldiss oeuvre, but it has so much of what makes his writing distinctive, and is a nice bridge into the New Wave works to follow in just a few years. First, you have an "exotic" setting, a Moroccan city which seems desolate, but is actually in the process of being built rather than decaying, as would be the case in most SF. I don't know who first began using non-European/American locales for Earth-based SF, but Aldiss must be one of the earliest. First came *Equator* in the fifties, using basically a futuristic Singapore, followed by this book several years later, with a futuristic Northern Africa. Of course the sites of the decayed British empire would make for excellent scientific romance, but Aldiss seems to have spearheaded the idea which Ballard more famously ingrained in his work.

Secondly, there are some gruesome murders. SF often has high body counts, but rarely the bloody, knife-

based murder that Aldiss often employs in SF narrative. Realistic murder was certainly part of post-apocalypse based fiction, but in futuristic SF proper you mostly get abstract Death Star stuff, airlock ejections, laser beam lop-offs. In Aldiss, you get straight up, hand to hand murders. They are actually quite chilling; the murder that forms the frame for the Year Before Yesterday is probably the best example. Finally, Aldiss employs the best SF literary frame for my tastes: the first half of the book I'm reading just trying to figure out what is happening, who the characters are, what technology are they using; and the second half finally has a plot, but becomes concerned with philosophical discussion and explicating the morality questions raised by the earlier (difficult to decipher) text. So, start with Sense of Wonder, end with Ethics, and I'm pretty happy. This book does that; many do not - either you figure out the plotline and it becomes a simple story and not much else, or it's philosophical dialogue the whole way through (James Morrow comes to mind), and that's not much fun either (I would just read some philosophy). I enjoyed this book, if you enjoy other Aldiss, you might like it too, but not for everyone.

Evey Morgan says

Un tanto decepcionante sobre todo en su parte final...

Edwin Kort says

Kon niet echt door het eerste hoofdstuk komen. Pakte me op de een of andere manier niet. Dus maar gestopt.

Rhys says

Another remarkable Aldiss novel, first published in 1965, that demonstrates how accomplished a prose stylist he is, as well as proving that he was superb at extrapolating trends. But his work is not really about scientific prediction. It is beside the point that much of the nightmare that forms the background of this story has come true. Aldiss explores the relationships of control and freedom, power and rebellion, and encapsulates a mighty global struggle, in the shape of a man with renegade tendencies and his experiences as the captain of a mostly automated gigantic cargo ship. The ship is wrecked on a remote coast in Africa; and he becomes a key player in a political adventure that might save the world but at enormous human cost.

I remember that this particular edition of the novel was in the school 'library' when I was 9 years old. The cover (by the excellent Bruce Pennington) attracted me, but I never attempted to read the book. Yet I knew that one day I *would* read it, and now I have. It amazes me that anyone thought such a novel could be suitable for children. It is far too poetic and advanced in language, theme and plot for the average young mind.

Paul Vann says

I would give it 3 1/2 stars. They wouldn't let us do that so out of respect for one of my favorite SF author's Brian Aldiss, rest in peace my brother. I gave 4 stars .

May your after life be filled with the adventures you put on paper Mr Aldiss.

GOD SPEED.

Beorn says

I'll be honest, although it had started off well and fairly intriguing, for the majority of the book there was a heavy sense of not really having a clue what was going on beyond occasional moments of relative lucidity. The book seems to be more content to wistfully ponder existential delirium rather than telling a good story. Overall, in short, dont bother.

Lutfi Turan says

This may sound irrelevant but the book reminded me the movie Elysium for the reason they both found a good idea, started with a good set up but could not tie this set up to a good story.

Writer made a good description of a dystopian world, the labour camps antagonist spent his youth was well told and for me that was the best part of the book. I reckon he was inspired by gulags and Nazi concentration camps which were still vivid memories in the decade book was written. The catastrophe of industrial agriculture is such an accurate prediction of the near future. Are not we eating the very same crab products like described in the book grown from genetically mutated seeds and full of insecticides and other chemical remnants. And is not the beef we consume is from the cattle breed artificially which does not taste like meat at all?

The over population must be a great concern of the 60's. Harry Harison's 'Make room ! Make room !', Brunner's 'Stand on Zanzibar' were also telling about this fear, so does Aldiss in this book. It seems no one imagined one day the idea of marriage and family would be absolute and the greater concern of the western world would be decrease in the population and big immigration waves from the poorer parts of the world. As I said the good ideas and worthy predictions told in the book were not tied to a remarkable story. It has been a day I finished the book still I found it hard to remember the conspiracy our anti-hero Knowles was in. Still I think the book is readable and worths attention like everything Brian Aldiss has written for whom in my opinion one of the most underrated writers of all time.

p.s. Kitab? ald??m kütüphaneye Can Abanaz?r ba??lam??, Allah rahmet eylesin de?erli insanm??.
