



Ballroom of the Skies

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Have you ever stopped to wonder why the world is eternally war-torn? Why men of good will, seeking only peace, are driven relentlessly to further disaster? MacDonald's novel suggests a strange and sinister explanation.

Here we enter an intricate future society, in which India rules the globe. The First Atomic War has just ended, and already momentum is clearly building for the second.

People shrug. War is man's nature, they think. Until Drake Lorin discovers the aliens living among us, and begins to divine their sinister purpose.

Ballroom of the Skies Details

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Author : John D. MacDonald

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From Reader Review *Ballroom of the Skies* for online ebook

Peter Sidell says

SF novel with a theme from the fifties

Many reflections of ideas and philosophies that were outgrowths of WW II. While a contemporary writer would write a different story, it will no doubt be retold. Perhaps in a way stories like the Matrix reflect a similar idea - or Elon Musk's idea that our lives and civilization are really an elaborate simulation.

Mark Patterson says

Shame to realize that MacDonald abandoned science fiction after 3 books, because *Ballroom* is pretty imaginative and dense, if a little too short.

Published at a time when the author saw fit to question the hands of authority, *Ballroom* systematically goes through all of our support systems (our governments, our countries, our own minds, our universe) and shows us how little we can depend on them. And how little we're willing to accept change.

He touches on how progress (but who's progress?) is tried to struggle, and how a select, elite few may be able to find happiness. It's a short book, and moves along like a Saturday morning adventure, but there's a deep well of post war anxiety and distrust that MacDonald's not afraid to mine for all its worth.

Mortimer Roxbrough says

One of the best alien invasion novels I have ever read. If you want something a bit different in that line then this is highly recommended, try it

Joshua Buhs says

In a career as prolific as MacDonald's, there's bound to be some clunkers, especially early on.

And this is one.

MacDonald is mostly known as a mystery writer, but he had an itch to write some science fiction toward the beginning of his career, and turned out this one and the earlier *Wine of the Dreamers*, both on the same theme. Judging by the afterword of these editions, MacDonald wasn't exactly familiar with the genre--thinking science fiction necessarily included either bug-eyed monsters, space opera, or mad scientists, possibly also robots--and what he was after was a way of working out a question: why, smart as humans are, do they keep effing up the world.

Here he offers a solution very similar to the one put forth by Eric Frank Russell more than a decade earlier:

because it's in the best interest of aliens. (That's from Russell's Sinister Barrier, but there's also hints of his Dreadful Sanctuary: that sanity means ignoring the alien forces at work on humanity.) The whole story builds to a long lecture at the end. If you're worried about spoilers for a book some 66 years old, skip the next bit:

The rest of the galaxy, we learn, is controlled by an empire, advised by supercomputers. The imperials realize that their bringing peace to the galaxy means that they are no longer growing, working, and competing, making them prey to aliens beyond the galaxy or simply at risk of fizzling away. And so the earth is kept unpeaceful, meaning people have to struggle and compete--only through this process can the greatest minds be found, abducted, and brought to lead the empire, making it always better. Further increasing the empire's strength is that there are various factions within it, meaning even the leaders of it need to continually struggle.

With this as the ending, it is no surprise that our hero, who starts out working for world peace, will instead come to be one of the great potential leaders of the galactic empire.

The rest of the book is mostly set up. There are some nice grace notes: the man we think will be the main character is killed off quickly. MacDonald tries for some structural razzle dazzle, but mostly to no effect. The problem is that the first 2/3 of the book is really exposition heavy. The setting is the 1970s, after another world war, this time atomic, and just as a fourth is being prepared, India is now the leader of the world, which is otherwise divided into three blocs. America is a fringe, decadent place (except for the strong heartland!) MacDonald spends a lot of time simply stating all of this, rather than showing it.

The dialogue tends to be very on-the-nose with a lot of -as-you-knows. MacDonald seems to think stilted dialogue is another necessary component of the genre. Everyone is very earnest, even those with seemingly nefarious plots. Conversations are often heavy-handed bits of more exposition.

MacDonald also tries to keep the reader off balance by monkeying with reality. The aliens have mental powers that allow them to alter perceptions. (Buried deep in this book is an early version of cyberpunk, with drugs and decadence and altered consensual reality, but MacDonald never brings it out.) This technique has a few striking pay-offs, but other times the fact that someone's perception will be altered is told, then the perception altered, and the narrative goes on to describe the person's actions--these amount to extended dream pieces that fluff an already short novel to no real purpose.

Can't really recommend it to anyone but a MacDonald completist.

wally says

26 nov 15, #62 from macdonald for me...just finished The Damned. macdonald rocks the casbah, always entertaining...have read the other sci-fi story...forget the title. Wine of the Dreamers a good one if you're in the market. onward upward

29 nov 15 finished.

good story. i don't remember much about *wine of the dreamers* although i think that one also contained the idea expressed best by macdonald in an afterword in this story:

the two novels are companion pieces in that they provide two congruent methods of accounting

for all the random madness and unmotivated violence in our known world, and two quite different answers as to why, with all our technology, we seem unable to move a fraction of an inch toward bettering the human condition and making of life a universally more rewarding experience.

calls it *science fantasy*...so as not to piss-off the die-hard sci-fi buckeroos who might could draw that laser-beam bead on the story and all who praise its lines...and says it is a human story more so than devices. but the story line here argues otherwise. onward upward.

Jan says

This would have been a two star read until the last 4 pages. It was an odd science fiction story that didn't really make sense to me, and I nearly gave up part way through. However, the last 4 pages pulled the whole thing together in a very clever way. Left me thinking about what an ingenious plot line it was.

First published in the early 50's and re-released in the late 60's, this story is set in the late 1970's after a series of devastating wars on Earth. Interesting to look at the state of the world today, and how similar it is in many ways, to the world imagined from so many years earlier.

Gabrielle says

I enjoyed this book. It lit up my imagination, lots of visuals came throughout the story. MacDonald had a writing style that I thoroughly enjoyed, many choice sentences that could have stood completely alone, which in this day of age, where internet "memes" are all the rage, is a wonderful plus. thoughtful, artful construction of words. which MacDonald also communicates his respect for in the way he illustrates the topic of communication throughout this book.

it was less alien and spacey than most SciFi of that time, perhaps not dressed in all the reliably cliché trends of SciFi of the times, as MacDonald recognized in the afterward, but the scifis that really try to put a mirror on sociopolitical aspects of our world always intrigue me. I'm interested in reading his other work, sci fi or no.

John says

Wasn't sure where this one was going for a while, but the plot turn at the end really made this book for me. I'm really starting to appreciate and enjoy 50's science fiction far more than contemporary. Maybe the ideas were just newer, fresher, more bizarre. Not a "classic" in the most rigid sense, but a great and rewarding read, nonetheless.

Laurie says

Frankly a little disappointing. This is one of those books that has a really interesting build up, but about half way through it fizzles. The first half of the book featured some really interesting scenarios: the political scene with Pak India on the rise, the vivid telepathic illusions, the Matrix-like puppet-puppetmaster chase scenes. But about halfway through he just lost it. The ending was rushed and disjointed, so many avenues that could have been explored were just dropped, and the whole resolution was unsatisfying. Toward the end of the story the main character says, this feels like a giant rationalization. It felt that way for the reader too. I still gave it three stars, because the build up was good, but ultimately a disappointment, especially after "Wine of the Dreamers."

Richp says

MacDonald expressed some interesting and thought provoking ideas about war and peace and progress. What was disappointing for me was the story as a story; I have read roughly a dozen or more books by MacDonald, not just Travis McGee tales, and the storytelling here is the weakest I have read by him.

Merredith says

This is a classic sci-fi book written in the 1950s. By the time it came up on my list and I started reading it, I had forgotten when it was published and was very confused about the timeline, especially when they kept talking about the '70s and things being only fifty years after silent films. I finally figured out this book is set in the 1970s, which was the future. War has shaken up world politics and India is the lead country. Americans are second class citizens. Instead of building skyscrapers, we build downward into the earth for stories. Things are future and antiquated at the same time. Two American men had been working towards world peace when suddenly one ruins their whole work. We find out right away this is because of aliens. This all sounds exciting, but the execution was dull. I tried to force myself through it, but it's too slow and academic seeming. If you are super into sci-fi, you may want to read this as popular cannon, but for a more light reader like me, it's a skip.

Bill says

I'm most familiar with John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee mystery series. I was surprised to find that he had also written a few Science Fiction (or as he calls them, science fantasy) stories. Ballroom of the Skies was originally written in 1951. It's an interesting story and takes a bit of time to get into the flow of what is happening.

We find the Earth working through the First Atomic War and being threatened with the 2nd. The US is no longer a powerhouse, instead it is the PacIndia that is the power.

Dake Lorin, a journalist, has been working for a year with an idol of his, Darwin Branson, to try and stop this imminent threat. But what happens will turn his life upside down. There are powers that monitor everything taking place on Earth and who can impact changes they perceive that will threaten this power. Where they are from and why they are doing this will become apparent as you delve more into the story.

I did find it confusing at time, but it is supposed to be. There are illusions, mind tricks, etc. that throw your

image of what is real and what isn't into a tail spin. I don't think it is a perfect Science Fiction story by any means, but it is well worth reading, for the time period when it was written, for the author who wrote it (to gain a different perspective on his writing) and just for the interesting concept. (3 stars)

Cashmere says

This book was very tough going for me.

I'm a big fan of John D. MacDonald, and have at least started the ambitious goal of trying to read his entire published oeuvre, in chronological order no less.

As many readers no doubt know, John D. is best known for his pulpy crime fiction, and most notably his Travis McGee series. It is those books that really caught my attention and ingratiated him and his writing to me.

Of course I was surprised to learn that John D. did dabble in science-fiction, with a grand total of three novels. I'm in general not especially a sci-fi fan beyond the most mainstream: original and even prequel *Star Wars* and original *Star Trek*. Phillip K. Dick's *Blade Runner* is as "edgy" as my sci-fi tastes tend to go, and even then I strongly prefer the movie to his original book. All that being said, I did read John D.'s first sci-fi novel, *Wine of the Dreamers* and it was alright. It was at least tolerable.

I know that later on, John D. ventured into sci-fi with *The Girl, the Gold Watch & Everything* and with fond memories of the early 1980's TV movie, I look forward to reading it!

Perhaps all of that is why **Ballroom of the Skies** was such a disappointment. I had great difficulty getting into it, and even getting through it. Please forgive me for being brutally honest: after trying to get through the first half off the book, I skimmed through the rest of it. It just didn't catch (let alone hold) my interest. Perhaps if it had been anyone other than John D., I would have given up on the book altogether and simply abandoned it. However, I do have a loyalty to John D. and the ambitious goal of trying to read his entire output, even if that means just skimming through part of this book in order to "finish" it.

So, I continue to heartily endorse John D. MacDonald and the vast majority of his books that I have read. I look forward to continuing my way through his catalog and reading the next in line, *The Damned*. I view this foray of his into science-fiction (or, as he says in the afterward of the book, "science-fantasy") as one big exception.

Kendall says

This interesting tale explains why the world is eternally war torn.

Ed says

This 1952 novel is John D. MacDonald's second science fiction entry of the three he wrote in his long career. AT this point, he had been writing novel length fiction for two years and was still learning his craft.

SciFi - After WWII, the United States has been reduced to a second rate country, tensions in the world are high, and Dake Lorin has taken a year to help Darwin Branson work out a peace accords with all the nations. He witnesses Branson accept watered down conciliations from Irania and knows that will cause the other nations to start waffling. What caused this aboutface?
