



North American Lake Monsters: Stories

By Nathan Ballingrud

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Nathan Ballingrud's Shirley Jackson Award winning debut collection is a shattering and luminous experience not to be missed by those who love to explore the darker parts of the human psyche. Monsters, real and imagined, external and internal, are the subject. They are us and we are them and Ballingrud's intense focus makes these stories incredibly intense and irresistible.

These are love stories. And also monster stories. Sometimes these are monsters in their traditional guises, sometimes they wear the faces of parents, lovers, or ourselves. The often working-class people in these stories are driven to extremes by love. Sometimes, they are ruined; sometimes redeemed. All are faced with the loneliest corners of themselves and strive to find an escape.

Nathan Ballingrud was born in Massachusetts but has spent most of his life in the South. He worked as a bartender in New Orleans and New York City and a cook on offshore oil rigs. His story "The Monsters of Heaven" won the inaugural Shirley Jackson Award. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina, with his daughter.

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North American Lake Monsters: Stories By Nathan Ballingrud Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

World Fantasy, British Fantasy, and Bram Stoker Award finalist.

"Pain has a rich and varied language, both mundane and transcendent, with infinite variations and many subtle flavours. Pain is one of the most private experiences people face, and yet a universal experience. North American Lake Monsters uses this palette to create most of its narrative hues and textures, to sharpen and heighten the characteristics of its profoundly human, deeply flawed characters. What sets this collection of short stories apart is the way the supernatural, magical and horrific are utilized like a light source, illuminating dark places while casting even deeper shadows. Ballingrud's writing is piercing and merciless, holding the lens steady through fear, rage and disgust, showing a weird kind of love to his subjects, in refusing to turn away, as well as an uncompromising pitilessness. Angels and vampires are placed next to lost white supremacist boys and burnt-out waitresses. All are equally, horribly ugly and real."

—*Toronto Globe and Mail*

"Each one of these nine stories has the capacity to seduce and terrify you like any of the most heavyweight horror authors out there."

—Andrew Liptak, io9

"Ballingrud's work isn't like any other. These stories are full of sadness and sorrow, but they're not merely sad. Like Tom Waits, Ballingrud is an expert at teasing out every delicious shade and nuance, every fine gradation of misery and pain. It's a heady and fantastic cocktail mixed from roughnecks and down-and-outers and flawed people who find in their ordinary and terrible world monsters, magic, and the strange. Ballingrud's fantastic elements are never seen full on, but always out of the corner of your eye, and it makes them all the more haunting."

—Cory Doctorow, BoingBoing

"Nathan Ballingrud's *North American Lake Monsters* is an exceptional fictional debut: It deserves a place alongside collections like Peter Straub's *Magic Terror*, Scott Wolven's *Controlled Burn*, Dan Chaon's *Stay Awake*, Raymond Carver's *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*. Like those works, Ballingrud's stories delve into the damaged psyches of American men, with a distinctly twenty-first-century awareness of the world we now inhabit, itself as damaged as the shellshocked figures that populate it. Ballingrud's tales are ostensibly tales of terror, meticulously constructed and almost claustrophobically understated in their depiction of an all-encompassing horror that, despite its often unearthly shimmer, is human rather than supernatural in origin; Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" or Charlotte Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" as reimagined by Robert Stone or Cormac McCarthy."

—Elizabeth Hand, *F&SF*

"Matched to his original ideas and refreshing refurbishments of genre set pieces, Ballingrud's writing makes *North American Lake Monsters* one of the best collections of short fiction for the year."

—*Locus*

"The beauty of the work as a whole is that it offers no clear and easy answers; any generalization that might be supported by some stories is contradicted by others. It makes for an intellectually stimulating collection that pulls the reader in unexpected directions. The pieces don't always come to a satisfactory resolution, but

it is clear that this is a conscious choice. The lack of denouement, the uncertainty, is part of the fabric of the individual stories and of the collection as a whole. It is suggestive of a particular kind of world: one that is dark, weird, and just beyond our ability to impose order and understanding. These are not happy endings. They are sad and unsettling, but always beautifully written with skillful and insightful prose. It is a remarkable collection."

—*Hellnotes*

"Ballingrud's language transforms known quantities into monsters again. . . .

"You Go Where It Takes You," the opening story of the collection, sets the tone and, with its shocking ending, frames the moral of *North American Lake Monsters*. Transformation carries a shocking cost. Two recent, disastrous transformations of the American landscape reverberate through the book: Katrina and the financial crisis. New Orleans is felt as a lost love. So is the American Dream, which seems now to have vanished for good along with Bear Stearns's collateralized debt obligations. The transformations of Ballingrud's characters echo these cataclysms. And yet—despite all the blame that's flying around the landscape, and in the teeth of our contemporary hysteria about anything resembling reckless behavior—he refuses to judge them. These people do some really terrible things. They suffer. But there's no sense of comeuppance earned, much less deserved.

This is the most striking quality of this extraordinary collection: the compassion of Ballingrud's gaze. He makes no excuses for his characters, never comes near to glorifying their bad choices, and yet never looks down on them. The reader is left with the scarcely bearable knowledge that in the end, the subjects of *North American Lake Monsters* are human."

—*Amazing Stories*

"What Nathan Ballingrud does in *North American Lake Monsters* is to reinvigorate the horror tradition."

—John Langan, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

"Dark, quirky stories."—*Charlotte Observer*

"A good horror story stays with you long after reading it. A great horror story doesn't simply stay with you, it haunts you, and Nathan Ballingrud's fiction does just that. He breathes life into rough, blue-collar characters and places them in some of the best dark fiction being written today. Every single story in this collection is an emotional gut punch. The despair that saturates these tales is rich, and often it is not the supernatural elements in these tales that is horrific."

—*Arkham Digest*

"For those willing to go down the dark road that's laid out here, and those willing to feel complex patterns of sympathy, disgust, and horror for (often bad) people, this is an interesting collection. Uncomfortable a read as it is, it has the tinge of reality to it: a reality that often we'd rather not look at."

—Brit Mandelo, *Tor.com*

"A diverse, highly-engaging collection from a grossly under-appreciated author. "

—*Twilight Ridge*

"It's Raymond Carver territory, beautifully written and right on target for today: construction work, waitressing, tattoos, and white supremacists. And shattering each story is the luminous, the terrifying, the Lovecraftian otherness that reveals what it really feels like to be alive in this moment in time. Ballingrud's fantastical werewolves and human skins and Antarctic staircases evoke the truth of our own fears about life."

—Maureen F. McHugh (*After the Apocalypse*)

"One of the best horror short story collections published during the last couple of years."

—*Rising Shadows*

"Nathan Ballingrud is one of my favorite short fiction writers."—Jeff VanderMeer

"Nathan Ballingrud's 'The Way Station' is another story of the sort I've come to expect from him: emotionally intense, riveting, and deeply upsetting in many ways. It deals with loss, with the aftereffects of Katrina on a homeless alcoholic who's haunted by the city itself before the flood, and in doing so it's wrenching. . . . It's an excellent story that paints a riveting portrait of a man, his city, and his loss."—Tor.com on *The Naked City*

"But the two most remarkable stories in *Naked City* are by relatively new authors: 'The Projected Girl' (Haifa) by Lavie Tidhar and 'The Way Station' (New Orleans and St. Petersburg, Florida) by Nathan Ballingrud are both heartbreakers."

—John Clute on *Strange Horizons*

About the Author

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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