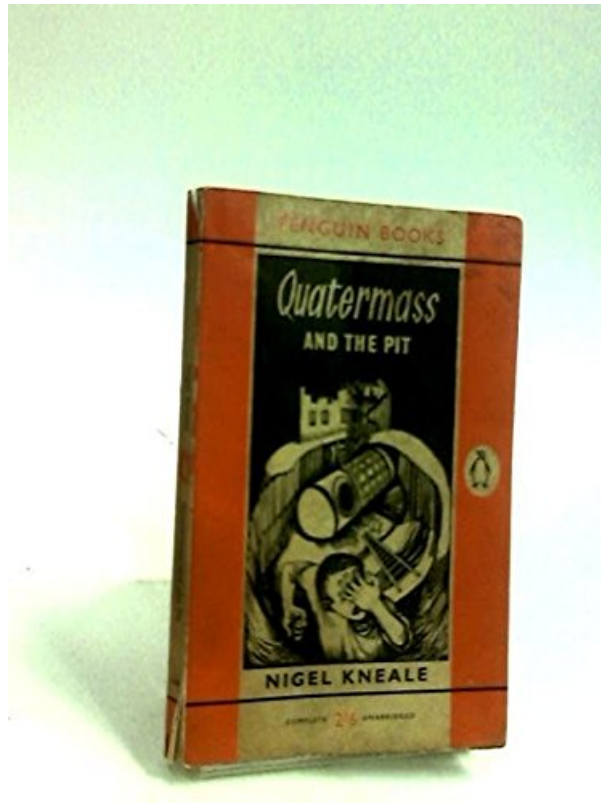
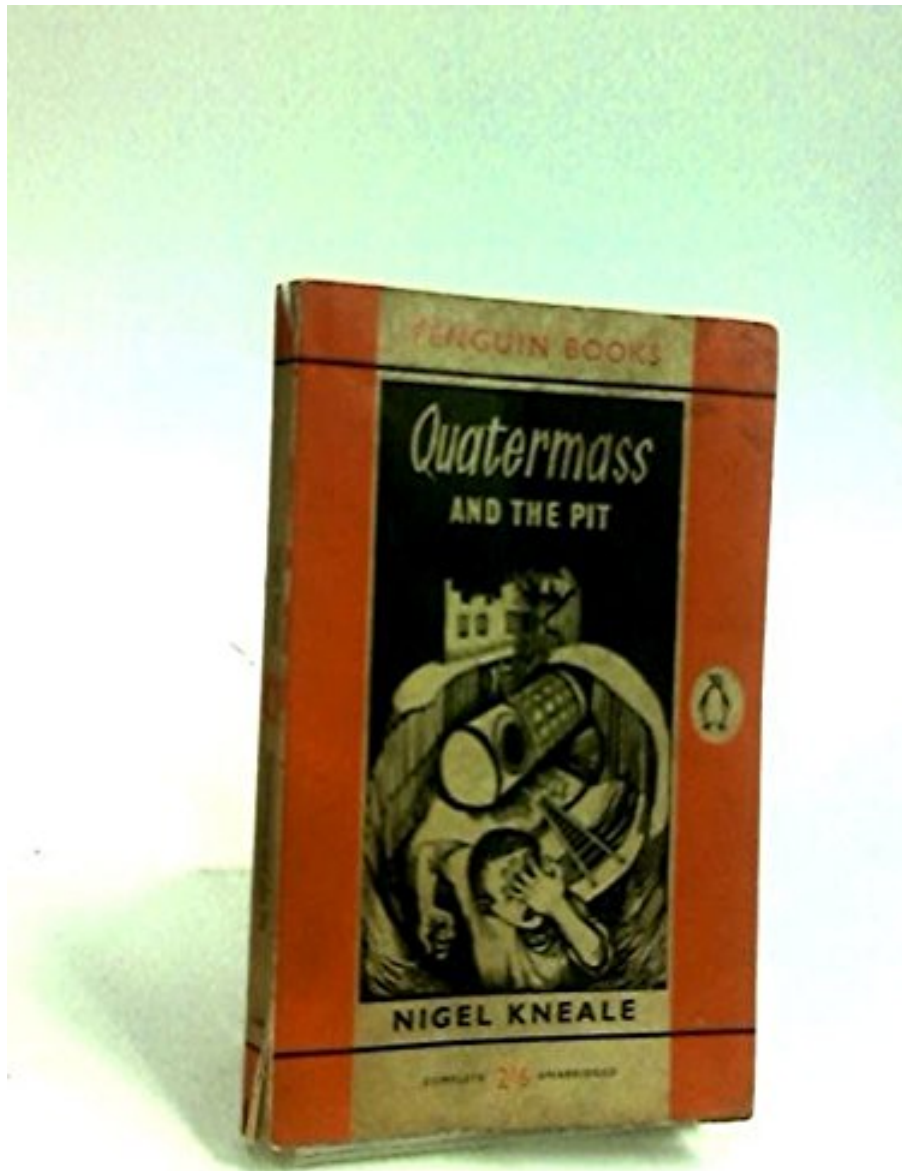


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Final Quatermass Trilogy

By Timothy L Mayer

"The third Quatermass teleplay, in which an ancient Martian spaceship is unearthed during expansion of a London tube station. Kneale can blend science fiction and the supernatural better than any other writer living today. Later this was refilmed as Five Million Years to Earth."

-Karl Edward Wagner, 13 Best Science Fiction Horror Novels (Twilight Zone Magazine, 1983)

The final teleplay of the original Quatermass trilogy, this one was produced for TV at the end of 1958. It's also the best of the three. Many of us experienced it first on late-night TV under the film adaptation, Five Million Years to Earth (1967), although British audiences saw it under the original title. I've seen the original series and the film version, it's hard to decide which is better. The film was able to take advantage of color film, but some of the key scenes are better realized in the serial.

The teleplay begins with the discovery of fossils in a London excavation project. Reading the first section, "The Halfmen" can be a little confusing to those of us on this side of the Atlantic; I don't think I've ever encountered the term "grab" when used for an earth excavator. This episode exists to introduce us to the major characters: Quatermass, his unpleasant colleague Col Breen and Dr. Matthew Roney. Roney and his assistant Barbara Judd are called in to excavate the site when the prehistoric bones are discovered. At the same time, Quatermass is horrified to find his Experimental Rocket Group is being put under military control with the martinet Colonel James Breen in charge. When a possible unexploded WW2 missile is discovered on the site, Quatermass and Breen are called in to examine it.

Tension begins to build in the second episode, "The Ghosts". Roney becomes increasingly convinced there is a connection between the hull found in the site and the primates whose fossilized skeletons they are removing. An elderly couple known as the Chilcots are forced to leave their house because of the "unexploded bomb" threat, allowing Kneale to add a little local color to the teleplay. It ends with one of the military sappers cringing in horror from the demon he claims to have seen inside the hull.

Unable to get the hull open, Breen calls in a civilian drill expert who brings a borazon drill with him. While Roney and Quatermass research all the legends and stories of demons about the site area, the teleplay inter-

cuts with the attempt to open the hull. In this episode, "Imps and Demons", the inhabitants of the hull are revealed: dead things who are connected to it by way of spidery strands. Kneale describes them as:

Insect-like creatures...rather more than two feet high...with tripod legs and stick-like forelimbs hunched like those of the mantis. Each face is a mockery of the human, with a pointed proboscis below its two complex eyes. Above this triangular mask sprout antennae shaped like antlers.

Part four, "The Enchanted" has Quatermass and Roney arguing for the hull as a remnant of a Martian spaceship which crash landed five million years ago. Breen and his fraction refuse to believe them, claiming it was a Nazi terror rocket launched against Britain in the closing days of WW2. Meanwhile, a civilian operator has a terrifying experience while trying to unpack his drill and flees the site to the safety of a church. Kneale spends five pages on directions at the end of this episode, demonstrating his clear vision of the action.

In five, "The Wild Hunt", the action takes a pause when Roney, Quatermass hook Barbara Judd up to a machine conveniently built by Roney to record mental images. By recreating the conditions which caused the drill operator to experience his visions, they are able to record on videotape (a new medium at the time), the same images. Quatermass shows the recordings to Breen and the government minister in charge and argues the hull is a spaceship sent from Mars five million years ago:

Quatermass: Arthropods like those we found. You'll have noticed they were killing-and being killed. I think we may have seen ritual slaughter- to preserve a fixed society- to rid it of mutations. You find something like it on earth among certain termites and wasps. Now my concern is that this stored memory of killing coupled with another power that hull in the pit seems to possess- the power to redirect human energy!

The series concludes with "Hob". Unpersuaded by Quatermass and Roney, Breen and his allies in the government schedule a press conference to push the idea of the hull being a WW2 weapon. To make the situation worse, they plan on making the announcement in the dig site. When a power cable for the camera lights shorts out on the hull, all hell breaks loose and the ancient Martian spaceship comes to life. As Kneale describes it:

Cut to the floor of the excavation Through swirling dust it can be seen that the incandescent hull is almost gone...sublimated to the monstrous shape that hangs above the pit. A shimmering form bursts rhythmically into a blinding glare. It extends upwards for a hundred feet or more, and its outline is defined. It recalls that of the Martian bodies...a terrible horned thing!

Of course, Quatermass and Roney save they day and prevent humanity's destruction at the feelers of alien invaders. I'm sure post-modernists can read all kinds of things into these teleplays. Kneale pounds the message home on the last page where the survivors are speaking at a press conference:

Quatermass [speaking to front]:...That is the full account. Matthew Roney was a brave man and a friend. Much more- it is with his kind that hope lies. For they have outgrown the Martian in us [track to a close up] If another of these things should ever be found. But we also have knowledge of ourselves...of the ancient, destructive urges in us, that grow more deadly as our populations approach in size and complexity those of ancient Mars. Every war crisis, witch-hunt, race riot, and purge...is a reminder and a warning. [he pauses] We are the Martians. If we cannot control the inheritance within us...this will be the second dead planet!

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

The martians are coming... no, wait they've been here longer than we have!

By Quentin

Great sci-fi story that never gets old. It's actually a screenplay instead of a novel but fun to read that way.

1 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

I thought this was a book.

By Don W. Drake Jr.

I bought this book thinking it was a novel but it's a screenplay. I tried to read it once but it's too difficult.

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