

Introduction Not Rocket Science

MY OWN FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORK OF NIGEL KNEALE CAME VERY late on in his career, and strictly speaking it's a non-encounter. In 1979, when I was seven, ITV screened *Quatermass*, Kneale's belated 'conclusion' to the 1950s serials about the character of that name. I wasn't allowed to watch it. My parents, who'd grown up in the fifties, associated *Quatermass* with nerve-fraying fear and decided it would be too much for my young mind. I can't remember ever being stopped from watching any other programme.

A good friend of mine — he'll forgive me for mentioning that he's a shade older than me — tells a similar story. His mother, whilst she'd been a WREN in the fifties, had gone on an outing to see the Hammer *Quatermass* films. They scared her out of her wits, and even today the mention of the name *Quatermass* turns her white as a sheet.

An entire generation seems to have grown up petrified by the work of Nigel Kneale. In the days before 'genre television' had been identified and compartmentalised, audiences en masse thrilled to Kneale's unique and inventive style. It had elements of what we now call horror, and a dash of science fiction, but it was more straightforward than that. It was just *good*. It's tempting to over-simplify Kneale's career, though, along the lines of 'he wrote *Quatermass* and it was scary'. Over fifty years he's wrote a staggering amount of original work, taking in film, television, radio and prose fiction. His quality control remains inspiring. It's possible to argue that the *Quatermass* scripts are just the tip of the iceberg.

Writing for television might not be rocket science, but back in the early 1950s, it might as well have been. This was an entirely new field, a blank page, devoid as yet of techniques and established approaches. Many of today's leading television writers revere Kneale as the undisputed forefather of British TV drama. His work exerts a staggering and palpable influence even today, several decades after much of it was lost forever when the transmission tapes were wiped and reused. Nigel Kneale is not a household name in this country, as the likes of Dennis

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Potter and Alan Bleasdale are. This book is an attempt to explain why not and, more importantly, why he deserves to be.

Before we begin this biography, we'd like to say that, in our opinion, it is not suitable for children, or for those of you who may have a nervous disposition.

Prologue **The Martian at the Top of the Stairs**

IT'S 2003. HAVING RECENTLY TURNED EIGHTY, NIGEL KNEALE LIVES WITH his wife Judith in a leafy-green district of South London. Their neighbours include the actress Geraldine McEwan, the presenter Peter Snow and the composer Howard Goodall. This same house has been the Kneales' home for over forty years. Their children — daughter Tacy and son Matthew — grew up here, and have since moved away. The Kneales' living room is a quiet, understated testament to the extraordinary creativity of their family. There's a discreet shelving unit housing video copies of the many films and TV programmes that Kneale has scripted. There are a host of beautiful works by his artist brother, Bryan — including sculptures in the garden and an impressionistic portrait of Kneale himself above the sofa. Three rows of shelves hold books written by the family; volumes of Kneale's scripts and stories, the best-selling children's books that Judith has written over three decades, and the more recent addition of the award-winning novels by their son Matthew. Going right back to the early years of the previous century, there are collections of pieces written by Judith's father, Alfred Kerr, a German Jew who fled the country during the rise of the Nazis. Recently rediscovered and republished, Alfred's works are something of a publishing phenomenon in modern Germany.

The stairs leading up are lined with striking photographs taken by Matthew on his travels around the world. On the second floor, at the top of the house, are two workrooms. One is Judith's, where she still writes and illustrates phenomenally successful children's books. Right next door is Kneale's study. Due to his advancing years, he doesn't get up here much anymore. The room has a wonderful view of a nearby common. It now contains a rocking chair, meant for the Kneales' new grandson. On the wall, there's the familiar three-legged emblem of the Isle of Man. There are more rows of books, from volumes on standing stones and Celtic traditions to Elizabeth Bowen novels and the plays of George Bernard Shaw, as well as several issues of *New Scientist*. There are also many stacks of scripts that Kneale's written over the years — some produced,

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A martian from BBCTV's *Quatermass and the Pit*. One of these models went on to take up residence in the Kneale household.

some not. There are pictures of his children, and his beloved wife, and there's a home-made wall-chart, documenting the relative heights of the then-growing Tacy and Matthew through the sixties and seventies.

And then, there in the corner, virtually obscured by the door when it's open, there's a Martian.

It stands at a height of three foot, and dates back to the late 1950s.

Why do the Kneales have a Martian living in their top room? Well, it's quite a story.