

John Fleming talks to one of Britain's foremost television writers, creator of the Quatermass series...

NIGEL KNEALE

Thomas Nigel Kneale was born in Lancashire by accident, but he's really a Manxman. His father owned a newspaper on the Isle of Man and young Nigel was brought up on the inward-looking island which is a part of, and yet apart from, the rest of Britain. He tried being a lawyer on the island, then went to London's RADA for a couple of years, followed by twelve months in Stratford as an actor. But he decided he was really a writer. He had started writing in his early teens and, in 1950, his book *Tomato Cain and Other Stories* won the Somerset Maugham Award. However it was as a screenwriter that he became famous.

He joined BBC-TV in the early 1950s and worked initially on children's programmes at a time when very little material was specially written for tv. He stayed on at the Corporation for about five years, working in a wide variety of departments - music, documentary, comedy and drama.

His big television breakthrough came in 1953 with a six-part story *The Quatermass Experiment*, which was

filmed by Hammer Films the following year as *The Quatermass Xperiment* (US title: *The Creeping Unknown*). More furore was caused, though, by his BBC adaptation of George Orwell's *1984*, which resulted in an outcry over the horror of the "rat" scene. That was in 1954. He followed it in 1955 by *Quatermass 2*, another six-part serial, filmed by Hammer in 1956 (US title: *Enemy from Space*). Hammer also bought his 1956 television drama *The Creature* to the big screen in 1957 as *The Abominable Snowman*, but it took them until 1967 to film his 1958 tv success *Quatermass and the Pit*.

By the late 1950s, Kneale was identified as a science fiction writer and so it was with relief that he broke this typecasting by writing the film versions of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1959) and *The Entertainer* (1960). He continued to write extensively for both tv and films. His film work, as an adaptor, included *First Men in the Moon* (1964) and *The Devil's Own* (1966) although in neither case did he have any control over the end result. His tv work included *The*

Road (1963), *The Year of the Sex Olympics* (1968), *Wine of India* (1970), and *The Stone Tape* (1972), all for the BBC. In 1973, the BBC planned to make his new story *Quatermass IV*, but the project collapsed. His excellent six-part series *Beasts* was made by ATV in 1976 but the next year the company dropped his 90 minute play about a Manx slave-trader one week before the rehearsals began—because of rapidly escalating scenery costs, of all things.

In 1978, Thames TV resurrected *Quatermass IV* and their film-making subsidiary Euston Films turned it into a £1 million tv series/feature film *The Quatermass Conclusion* (directed by Piers Haggard, a great-grand-nephew of writer Rider Haggard).

Kneale found the name Quatermass by glancing through a telephone directory, but that is about the only random factor in the work of a writer whose highly-visual plots and ideas are tightly-controlled, constantly fascinating and always intelligent. Piers Haggard says: "Kneale is the best science fiction writer in Britain".

Starburst: Rudolph Cartier was your producer on all three BBC Quatermasses and on 1984. How did you meet him?

Nigel Kneale: Well he moved into the BBC at the same time I did. I realised he was a man who never took no for an answer – which is a great thing. All he needed to know was that it was practically impossible and he'd immediately go off and do it. There was certainly no other director-producer who would ever



have got those Quatermass things on the road. In those days television was live, wasn't it?

Yes – you had to have film inserts, of course, if you had an exterior scene, like someone walking through a park. The studio we shot that first Quatermass in

"The Quatermass Experiment started as an accident."

was that old one at Alexandra Palace, where the cameras were literally the oldest electronic cameras in the world. They were the ones that were put into commission in 1936.

How did Quatermass start?

It was really an accident. They had a gap in the schedule and somebody said *Oh! you must write something!* So I wrote it as far as I could and it was being trans-

mitted before I'd actually written the end of it. It wasn't a rave success. I dug up old notices recently and they're quite funny because they say *This dreary programme started last night – it's scientifically*



incorrect . . . and so on. Now, of course, it's been transmuted into having been a great success.

You did 1984 after that.

I suppose they felt that, if we'd done one, we could do another. Technically, that was a very difficult one indeed – to get it into a studio live. (The rats were on film.) In a two-hour show like 1984, you would pre-film perhaps a quarter of an hour and the rest would be live, which was very heavy going.

The play caused a furore. Questions in the House of Commons.

Yes! It was a question of lying low after that one. Nothing like it had ever hit television before. They tended to use three-act stage plays and you got little intervals between the acts. Very well done and beautifully acted, but a little bit sedate. What you didn't get was a purely tele-

vision-type narrative, where you intercut in the middle of scenes: the thing that you do in any film script. That was new. And, I suppose, if one started writing in those terms, immediately the thing had far more impact.

You were interested in that technique?

I suppose I'd have liked to write films but, at that time, it was all locked up firmly in a closed shop. I could no more have got a card to write film scripts than



fly. So I stuck to television.

You didn't script the film of The Quatermass Experiment.

No. There was the usual hurried deal by Hammer with some American people and they insisted on having an American actor and an American adaptor. So this chap came over who worked out some non-

"They turned Quatermass into a screaming person."

sense which turned my poor old Quatermass into a screaming, shouting person – probably like the last film producer he'd worked for. I had no control over it all. I still see that thing turn up and I hate it.

You co-scripted Quatermass 2.

Well, there were some changes to the script – cuts – so it came out like it did.

Why the cuts?

The tv version was six half-hour episodes



Top left: The movie version of Quatermass and the Pit (1967). Top centre: Hammer's Quatermass Experiment (1955). Top right: BBC's Year of the Sex Olympics (1968). Above left: Behind the scenes of First men in the Moon (1964). Above: Andre Morell in BBC's Quatermass and the Pit (1959).



Above: Press men gather round a reconstructed ape-man in Hammer's *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967). Below right: Brian Donley watches makeup man Phil Leskey touching up Tom Chitto's face in Hammer's *Quatermass 2* (1957).

and they all over-ran by anything up to ten minutes. There was no way they could stop us — except by taking us off the air — because we were live. We knew this and took a chance. When you tried to compress those into a 90-minute film version, a lot had to go and too much went and the substitutions were not very clever. The characters are so cardboard you literally have to strain yourself to tell one from the other. It seems to me to be a lesson in how not to do it.

Quatermass 2 was about the evil of science.

No — not science. I'm not a bit anti-science, only occasionally some scientists. After all, old Quatermass himself is one: perhaps a bit more sensitive to his responsibilities than some. And in the new serial his main ally (*Dr Joseph Kapp*) is also a research scientist. Even Kapp's wife is a qualified archaeologist. The whole of the fourth *Quatermass* is about a last-ditch use of logic and dwindling technological resources, pitted against suicidal mysticism.

Quatermass 2 was about the evil of secrecy. It was a time when mysterious establishments were popping up: great radar establishments and nuclear establishments like Harwell and Porton Down germ warfare. All the *Quatermass* things

have been very much tied to their time. *Quatermass and the Pit* was written at a time when there was a lot of building going on. So I thought, well, you dig down to an enormous depth and find a spaceship. Immediate recognition. *It absolutely terrified me on tv.*

Well, we always really aimed at an adult audience for these things. And we hoped that the kiddies would be in bed. It was made very clear that this was not for children.

I don't mind frightening adults. They can take it. But not small children, simply

"I don't mind frightening adults — they can take it."

because they haven't the resources of fact in them to sort out what's real and what's unreal. If a little six-year-old is confronted with some nightmare situation, that little creature is at the mercy of all your special effects, because he really hasn't been in the world long enough to know what is real. And if he sees some dreadful thing — an apparition appearing out of the floor — he's not to know that it's been made by Jack Kine and Bernard Wilkie (of BBC Visual Effects). It may really happen to him and it may happen in his bedroom tonight. That's not a thing to play with.

Do you find that *Quatermass* is an albatross round your neck?

Well, a little bit. It's like an actor being in a series: you get stuck with the image. But I think the worst thing is what people expect things to be. The word "horror". The *Quatermass*s were never meant to be "horror" stories. There's more humour than horror in them, I hope — certainly that applies to this new one.

I liked your *Beasts* stories for ATV.

I liked them very much indeed.

There weren't actually any beasts in them, though.

No! This was the trick! That you would never see a beast.

The series had very ordinary settings: a supermarket, a living room.

I always feel that the most interesting



"strange" thing has to have an ordinary setting. Once you have *Dracula's Castle*, it's totally dead: you've just brought in a huge, tatty, cobweb-hung cliché. Whereas, if it just happens in somebody's house, in a room like this, then it can be very upsetting indeed.

There was a psychological strangeness in *The Road*.

Oh it's a favourite of mine. It's only a little play, but it's interesting. It's set in the 18th century, with a group of people doing what they imagine to be a scientific investigation — trying to bring rational minds to bear in *The Age of Reason* on what appears to be a haunting in a wood. Terrible noises are heard, which are extremely upsetting. What they're actually hearing is a motorway in our time, on which a huge traffic jam has occurred, caused by people trying to escape from thermonuclear war. It ends

"They hear terrified voices — people trying to escape."

with a nuclear blast which has actually blown itself back in time to the 18th century and produced a kind of back-reflection, a ripple. So these people have no conception of what they're hearing... The terrified voices on the motorway, people trying to escape... It's all completely recognisable to us: it's all in our terms. But they don't know what it means.



Peter Cushing appeared as Winston Smith in BBC's 1984, pictured here with Andre Mareil as O'Brien.

Several projects you've worked on have folded.

Well, one of the first ones was when I was working with Ken Tynan again. We were going to do what would have been the last Ealing film — *Lord of the Flies*. We were going to do that on a big scale, but

"We were going to do *Lord of the Flies* . . ."

Ealing folded up. Then it became a property just lying about and Peter Brook decided to do it his own way and simply stuck to the book. It's a very clever book, but very narrow. It seems to me to emerge as a satire on the public school system. We tried to get away from that and make it into a satire on people in general. I drafted a whole lot of girls into it: this was received with horror. Only

girls — and children who were from a secondary modern school. They weren't all trotting straight out of Westminster (School). I thought, otherwise, what are you saying about the state of humanity? You're saying that children who come from Westminster are innately a bit naughty, that's all. Which seemed not to be sufficient comment on the state of mankind. Nor did it seem (so) to Ken Tynan. So we expanded it, but then there were squawks of horror from other quarters. For me, it worked and still does; it would have been, I think, a much better film.

Another project which folded, of course, was *Quatermass IV*.

The previous *Quatermass*s had always rather been attached to their time. So the one in 1973 was to be of an impending



Below: The effects of a horrible accident at the research station in *Quatermass 2*. Top: The effects technician applies titanium tetrachloride (TTC) to achieve the making effect. Bottom: The face of *Big Brother* from BBC's 1964 1954).



social disaster, because there were signs of it. Then the oil crisis hit and it would have had even greater relevance. But it didn't get made for a variety of reasons. Including *Stonehenge*.

That was the one, final, crucial complication. I had lightly written in *Stonehenge* because my last visit to it had seemed to make it very possible. What I hadn't realised was that, in the interim, it had become Big Business and the place was like a factory with tourists there from dawn to dusk. It was the pride of the Department of the Environment and

"They wouldn't let us go near Stonehenge."

they weren't going to let anyone go near it.

It would have been possible to build a polystyrene Stonehenge.

Well, it would have taken a longer time in planning than we had at our disposal and there were budget problems.

What budget problems?

Well, it would have been very expensive. It really would have been. I can see their problems, having watched Thames go through the same agony.

Was the BBC script the same as the Euston Films script?

No, it's quite a lot different. For one thing, it's now a film version entirely. At



that time, the great problem was to get as much of it as possible into tv studios because, in BBC terms, it's always cheaper. And, of course, it's the sort of story that doesn't go very easily into the studio. It was lying around for a couple of years and Thames expressed interest in doing it and then it was a matter of finding exactly what form it could best be done in. And that was this dual format of a tv four-episodic (*Quatermass*) and a

"I wrote three versions of *Quatermass*."

film (*The Quatermass Conclusion*) made out of the same material — which is very difficult to handle.

What did you think when you first heard the format?

Well, I wasn't crazy about it, because you feel you're either going to pad the long one or murder to short one.

So how did you resolve the problem?

I was very careful not to pad, because I knew that was the obvious thing, but to write in material which can be removed. At a certain point, you can allow it to go in either direction A or direction B. Now, direction A will take you into a kind of loop which brings you back to where it joins direction B and you just exclude the loop. That isn't padding. It's an apparently essential piece of action and it's a perfectly legitimate part of the story, but you can do without it.

You actually wrote two separate scripts?

Yes, but that was only as far as one could guess. Because, as none of it had been shot, one couldn't tell what would actually work out best; some things paid off better than we'd ever thought.

How involved were you?

At that stage, I was busy doing the book version, which is radically different from the film.

The plot's different?

Considerably. In fact, we had three versions on the go — a novel which, I

"The book tries to explain *Quatermass'* family life."

think, will read as though it was the prior piece. The tv version. And finally the cinema version, which is the shortest and meagrest telling of the story. So, trying to juggle these three together could be extremely confusing.

You mentioned earlier that the book is a novel rather than a novelisation.

Well, it was certainly intended to be. Because a novelisation is a cheapie thing of just changing the dialogue and putting "He said" in front of it. Whereas this tries to explain the whole of *Quatermass'* life way back beyond where any of them started. His family life, which we never see anything of in the others.

Did you always have those details in your mind?

No, I think I worked it back logically. What it must have been.

*This *Quatermass* sounds more pessimistic*

than the others.

Well, I don't think it is really: not by the end. I think it's got quite a lot of balancing material. The people are nice and it's all about the people.

The police are mercenaries.

Well, our police have gone and they've hired very nasty people instead. In the book, I've clarified that — a thing which only began as a hint in the tv version — that they're South African mercenaries. I thought that was the most likely source. I think it's quite probable, by a development of events there that they make it too hot for themselves and they'll be all too ready to offer themselves as a mercenary force.

We have a complete breakdown (in the story) — that all the social services have completely gone and there is no petrol or oil. Everything has stopped. The North

Sea pipelines have simply ceased to exist and there's no fuel coming in. The only thing that survives is a minuscule pretence that everything is normal. For instance, television still exists, broadcasting about two hours a day. They simply put on the last remnants of rubbish to show that everything is normal. Hardly anyone is able to view it because, for one thing, there's hardly any electricity. It's a continual series of power

"In *Quatermass* everybody's too frightened to go out."

cuts and everybody's too frightened to go out, so they sit in their houses hoping that perhaps their television set will come on.

Do you think things are actually going in that rough direction?

Well, don't you think they might? There's every indication of it at the moment.



Left: Richard Wordsworth as the possessed astronaut, *Caroon*, in Hammer's *Quatermass Xperiment*. Above: Ray Harryhausen and the late Les Bowie at work on *First Men in the Moon* (1964). Top: Behind the scenes on *First Men in the Moon*. Above right: Lionel Jeffries has a difference of opinion with the Selenites in *First Men in the Moon*. Below right: Andrew Kier as the bearded *Quatermass* discovers a martian in the spaceship. Hammer's *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967).



So what happens? The end of Western Civilization?

It could very well be. I think there are alternatives. One is that the Arabs simply cut the juice off, knowing what will happen and being prepared to watch it happen. And then there's the question of will we let it happen or do we start bombing the Arabs and take "our" oil back? So then what do we do? Have World War 3? Or a great technological

"An alternative to oil is nuclear power . . ."

downturn?

Is that what interested you in Quatermass? Seeing the way things are going and taking them to one possible ultimate conclusion?

Yes. The alternatives are fairly horrid. We've put ourselves in hock to a certain type of technology, which is the Oil Technology. Another option is to rapidly develop nuclear power stations. So you've then stuck yourself with a new technology and you're in hock to that. If anything goes wrong with that or (the reactors) all go critical, we're finished and

"... but then you're in hock to that!"

probably dead in the process. So we're worse off.

The only safe thing is to go back to horses and carts with everybody keeping and eating rabbits and having a Stone Age technology. But that's no real solution. We've too many people to feed.

At the time The Year of the Sex

Olympics was screened (1968), you were quoted as saying that, in ten years, television and computers would be taking over people's lives.

Yes, it hasn't moved as fast as that. Maybe it'll be a technological downturn, in fact.

