

Wolfe and readers

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 20 Aug 1998

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m.driussi — 20 Aug 1998, 16:23

Dan,

Re: "The Books in THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN," yes, that is an important piece (collected in PLAN[E]T ENGINEERING, published by NESFA, and rather hard to find), but to my mind it leads to an interesting new topic (or rehash) on Wolfe and his readers.

To begin: "The Books in THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN" purports to reveal certain quiet mysteries in TBOTNS in a very matter of fact sort of way; like the Purloined Letter, the facts were in front of you (Every Reader) the whole time; sadly, you were so flummuxed by the baroque trappings of Urth you didn't even notice there was a mystery, let alone begin an attempt to solve it.

There is a similar tidbit in CASTLE OF THE OTTER, where Wolfe starts to sketch the connections linking Dorcas to Severian by way of the cloisonne shop she worked in and the enameled pictures within the holy book he fetched for Thecla--then Wolfe stops in order to leave the task for you to do.

Predictably, the Wolfe-mask revealed in these two examples provokes different reactions in different readers.

That Wolfe is a trickster can be agreed upon by all, I'm sure. But there are some readers who feel that the adversarial angle is very strong--to these people, Wolfe is "cheating" in his fiction in order to overawe the audience, and the Wolfe-mask shown above strikes them as finally, conclusively, tipping the hand to reveal the fraud; to show what a subjective, solipsistic sham all literary criticism is. (Similar to the unmasking of the Wizard of Oz.)

Because it isn't nice to tell the Reader that she is stupid for having missed something "so obvious" when it wasn't really "obvious" at all. And it isn't nice to invite people to interpret Rorschach ink blots, extolling them to elaborate further and further, if your goal (perhaps secret) is to trick and humiliate the participants by revealing what the inkblots "really are."

It is mean behavior. It is bullying.

Some readers might give a little more credit and say that Wolfe is highlighting these two points (re: books and enamel) because these are in fact the only two real points of craftsmanship there are, and because they are so dizzying it tricks you (Every Reader) into thinking that the whole Urth Cycle must be full of similar wonders.

It is sly behavior. It is bluffing.

But still--those readers who fall for this stuff are obviously dupes. Wandering in the hopeless labyrinths of a mean and laughing Wolfe.

=mantis=

Michael Straight — 25 Aug 1998, 10:57 · follows m.driussi

On Thu, 20 Aug 1998 m.driussi at genie.com wrote:

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"Be mean, Gene! I'm a careless reader, and I must be punished!"

As long as people are reading Wolfe consensually, what's the problem?

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But still--those readers who fall for this stuff are obviously dupes. Wandering in the hopeless labyrinths of a mean and laughing Wolfe.

Wheels within wheels. Read Eco's FOUCAULT'S PENDULUM to see why, if Wolfe told us the answers, we wouldn't be satisfied. We want more mysteries, not answers.

Any critic worth his citations knows that a novel will have meanings regardless of the author's intent. If Wolfe thinks he can fool people by writing books with mysteries having no answers, he's only fooling himself. The answers will be there whether he knows it or not.

I don't know that I believe anything I've just written here.

-Rostrum

Derek Bell — 25 Aug 1998, 17:42 · follows Michael Straight

In message <199808201631.JAA25195 at lists1.best.com>, m.driussi at genie.com writes:

That Wolfe is a trickster can be agreed upon by all, I'm sure.

In other words, there's a lot of Coyote in Wolfe? ;-)

Derek