

some comments

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 26 Sep 1998

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John Regehr — 26 Sep 1998, 22:01

Hi all,

About a week ago I ran across the archive for the Urth list. Four somewhat daunting megabytes later, I've finished reading it, and I'm impressed. You people have picked up on a lot of things that I missed (and I recently completed my third reading of TBotNS).

For several years I've recommended TBotNS to friends and acquaintances, in the same way that I evangelize the rest of my favorite books. Although several people have read it, none have become what I'd call Wolfe fans. This seems odd, since these have been intelligent and literate people who generally enjoy the same sorts of books that I do. So why would Wolfe appeal to such a narrow audience - is it just because he places so many demands on the reader?

Many Wolfean books have been discussed, but let me throw out a few less obvious ones that haven't:

Paul Auster's New York Trilogy contains three haunting and surreal novels about alienation, confusion of identity, and the inadequacy of words. They're gripping enough that I read each in a single sitting.

Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian is a violent story about a band of bounty hunters on the Texas/Mexico border during the 1850s. McCarthy is an amazing writer, and this book is more than a Western in much the same way that TBotNS is more than SF.

Richard Powers's The Gold Bug Variations is about a librarian who gets involved with an ABD art history student who works with a man who was a promising researcher in genetics 30 years earlier; their story and his are told alternately. Calling TGBV Wolfean is a bit more of a stretch than the other two; I do so based on its focus on puzzles and ciphers, its intricate plot, and because of the slight twist at the end that changes how we look at the book.

Finally, I feel compelled to add to the recent thread about good comic books. Besides the previously mentioned works of Moore, Miller, Spiegelman, and Gaiman, I would highly recommend DeMatteis's

Moonshadow, Matt Wagner's Mage and Grendel, and the Hernandez brothers' Love and Rockets. Although I'm a huge fan of L&R, I picture the others as being more to Wolfe fans' tastes.

John

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CRCulver — 27 Sep 1998, 02:27 · follows John Regehr

jdr8d at cs.virginia.edu (John Regehr) said:

<About a week ago I ran across the archive for the Urth list. Four somewhat daunting megabytes later, I've finished reading it, and I'm impressed. You people have picked up on a lot of things that I missed>

Welcome to the list! Thanks for your praise of our close reading, though I should warn you that our conclusions are by no means truth. <g>

<and I recently completed my third reading of TBotNS>

Was it truly different than the first two times? It wasn't until the third reading that I understood the events in the stone town with Apu-Punchau and Severian.

<This seems odd, since these have been intelligent and literate people who generally enjoy the same sorts of books that I do.>

I know what you mean, I've tried recommending the Book of the New Sun to a friend of mine really into fantasy, but it didn't catch. I guess that reading any book by Wolfe is quite a heavy task, and it is only a fluke that a few of us can muster the effort to tackle it. Because Wolfe doesn't write crap, this is true of all his books, and it is hard to find an accessible one.

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John Regehr — 27 Sep 1998, 00:00 · follows CRCulver

Was it truly different than the first two times? It wasn't until the third reading that I understood the events in the stone town with Apu-Punchau and Severian.

The third reading was definitely different! The first time around was my first encounter with Wolfe, so I had no idea what I was getting into. I read it in escapist fantasy mode - quickly, that is - and by the end I knew that I had read something great, but only understood the work at the most literal level. Unfortunately my second reading took a long time because real life intruded, and I didn't get much out of it. My most recent reading was the first time I read carefully, so I finally picked up the Sev1/Sev2 distinction, the full Apu-Panchau story, and several other things. I still couldn't figure out who the beautiful woman in the House Absolute is, who Severian encounters just before raising the assassin.

I'd have undoubtedly gotten more out of my second or third reading had I previously read _The Castle of the Otter_, interviews with Wolfe, Clute's reviews, _Lexicon Urthus_, and this list. However, I'm somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of using external sources to help understand literature. It feels like cheating, especially when the material comes from the author.

Has the lit crit community come to any meaningful conclusions about what it means when the author offers an interpretation or an explanation about a book? Didn't Tolkien explicitly say that in TLoTR an orc is just an orc, and don't some people still insist that the war of the ring is a metaphor for one of the world wars? Although I wish Mr. Wolfe nothing but the best of health in the future, it seems like things are more tractable academically when an author is no longer able to offer new interpretations, or to contradict existing ones.

Also, I'm slightly wary about over-analyzing books. It's possible that this is just bad attitude left over from bad english classes, though, since I've never ruined a book by thinking about it too

much. I guess my position is that one's choice about whether to use external materials or not, or to spend a lot of time analyzing subtle points or not, should be made in order to maximize one's enjoyment of the work. That's what it boils down to, right? The lit crit people probably don't get to say this, since they could put themselves out of a job :).

John

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