

Graves & Orwell, also St. Peter

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

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1216>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Alice Turner — 20 Oct 1998, 07:30

Alex,

Why don't you see if your friend who wrote the St. Peter paper for Kessel can send it to you as an email attachment? Then you could forward it to those of us who would like to read it, me for instance.

1984 isn't obscure, but most of his best writing (Road to Wigan Pier & the essays in general) is. 1984 is an important book, but it isn't all that well written, except for a spots here and there (the opening and the finale).

I wonder why it happened to Orwell. To bring us on topic, Wolfe's talked about his two favorites, also far more obscure than they deserve to be,

Kipling and Chesterton. You can see political/social agendas lurking behind

those falls from critical favor, but that really shouldn't hurt Orwell--I mean,

having argued with Gollancz and criticized Shaw and the Webbs isn't exactly cause for blacklisting now that nobody defends Stalin...

I don't think Orwell is as forgotten as you think. Check out Amazon. Literally dozens of editions of Animal Farm and 1984. Half a dozen biographies within the last 20 years. Oodles of Cliff notes and the rest. And I frequently run into an essay on him in some place like The New York Review of Books. The last one was pretty recent, and the essayist argued that his best book was Homage to Catalonia and his worst (which he admitted) Keep the Aspidistra Flying. But even that is still in print. Serious journalists still study Orwell for form, as well they might. Especially for war coverage. I'd bet anyone that Roger Cohen, researching his new book on Bosnia that is getting such raves, read Orwell.

I'd also argue that Graves still lives. Anyone interested in mythology at all has Greek Myths on the shelf (and learns how to read it---the salt cellar must remain nearby), while The White Goddess practically gave birth to the New Age goddess movement--it has never been out of print. Masterpiece Theater kept the Claudius books alive. Aside from these, he may not be as current as Orwell, but he's certainly hanging in and perhaps will make a comeback once he's in public domain.

Chesterton and Kipling are both in public domain now, and there's a surprising amount of them out there. Kipling will obviously live forever as a children's writer---once you pass the portal in that field you're immortal. There's still a sort of cloud hanging over him as an "imperialist" otherwise, though I've never bought that. To me, Kipling is alive, but I have doubts about Chesterton. (I've never read -The Man Who Was Thursday- though.)

-alga

Alex David Groce — 20 Oct 1998, 12:14 · follows Alice Turner

Alice Turner wrote:

Alex,

Why don't you see if your friend who wrote the St. Peter paper for Kessel can send it to you as an email attachment? Then you could forward it to those of us who would like to read it, me for instance.

I will. Chaffee (author of the paper) is out of town until Friday, but I'll ask him when he gets back if he has an electronic copy. Anyone who wants a copy can write me (off-list).

I don't think Orwell is as forgotten as you think. Check out Amazon. Literally dozens of editions of *Animal Farm* and *1984*. Half a dozen biographies within the last 20 years. Oodles of Cliff notes and the rest. And I frequently run into an essay on him in some place like *The New York Review of Books*. The last one was pretty recent, and the essayist argued that his best book was *Homage to Catalonia* and his worst (which he admitted) *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. But even that is still in print. Serious journalists still study Orwell for form, as well they might. Especially for war coverage. I'd bet anyone that Roger Cohen, researching his new book on Bosnia that is getting such raves, read Orwell.

I suppose so; perhaps it's just that Orwell sometimes doesn't get the full respect that he deserves? I think the most well-read crowd does know Orwell, and especially among literati in England the essays and such are very big. I'd say though that the second-tier of readers does tend to think of him as a one-trick-pony author of anti-Communist dystopias. In other words, if you get your education in English literature from classes at American universities, that's all you'd know about him (someone the other day said she was surprised to see him on the Modern Library list, and asked me "So Orwell was a journalist, too?") As opposed to Kipling and Chesterton who were once very big, and still matter a great deal to a certain crowd (in his day Orwell wrote an essay about the distaste for Kipling, but suggested Kipling would endure), but seem to be completely missing in most English Lit. departments.

I would contend that their importance at the time (think how often Chesterton comes up in other people's writing of his day--Eliot, for example) would merit more of a place in the classroom. But people who have extra-curricular literary knowledge (which does not include most English majors) do tend to know them.

And yes, Graves is still alive & well. I like Graves, but don't think you can argue he's had much less attention than he deserves. Kipling lives everywhere except in the classroom (mainly because he's one of the great English makers of fiction, and thus hard to hold down).

As to Chesterton, I think he's important and a major figure in any complete picture of his time. He appears to be alive for Wolfe in the same way that he is for most real Chesterton fans; we almost speak of him as a dead very good friend we never happened to meet. Chesterton fans in general tend to be people who somewhat agree with his religious and social ideas--thus Wolfe and Lafferty (or myself). Although Orwell was given to defending Chesterton and certainly thought his religious ideas were foolish, and Martin Gardner isn't exactly Catholic in thought. But I think Chesterton should be really annoying if you strongly disagree with him or even are just unsympathetic.

Which leads to a thesis about Wolfe: if you tend to agree with Wolfe's ideas that's icing on the cake, but you could HATE most the religious-philosophical-political matrix underlying his works and still love the writing and be a Wolfe devotee (for instance, John Kessel adores Wolfe's work, but I think I can safely say politically and religiously they'd be at each other's throats in a moment). This does set a writer apart from someone like Chesterton, who is fun, and a master at what he does, but seems likely to be unrewarding to anyone who dislikes his world-view, although lovable in a way that Wolfe isn't to those who agree (Wolfe can be Chestertonian in his essays, though--I admired Wolfe as a writer before I read any of his

non-fiction, but only felt a great liking for him as a man once I'd read some of his essays).

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

--

Alex David Groce (adgroce at eos.ncsu.edu)
Senior (Computer Science/Multidisciplinary Studies in Technology & Fiction)
'98-99 NCSU AITP Student Chapter President
608 Charleston Road, Apt. 1E (919)-233-7366
<http://www4.ncsu.edu/~adgroce>

Kevin J. Maroney — 20 Oct 1998, 12:28 · follows Alex David Groce

At 07:30 AM 10/20/98 -0400, alga wrote:

And I frequently run into an essay on him in some place like The New York Review of Books. The last one was pretty recent, and the essayist argued that his best book was *Homage to Catalonia* and his worst (which he admitted) *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. But even that is still in print.

In fact, the most recent NYROB piece on Orwell was about *The Complete Orwell*, a 20-volume scholarly edition of literally everything the editors could find ever written by Orwell, from juvenalia to, I believe literally, grocery lists.

The reviewer started off by asking, "Why Orwell?" but then quickly admitted that the collection was fascinating and sets a new high-water mark in the presentation of the works of a canonical author.

Wombat, a.k.a. Kevin Maroney [kmaroney at crossover.com](mailto:kmaroney@crossover.com) Kitchen Staff Supervisor, New York Review of Science Fiction <http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>