

Greetings and a thought

The Urth list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 19 Mar 1999

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Clifford Drane — 19 Mar 1999, 19:57

I've been lurking around for the past 3 weeks, enjoying the posts and the archives - so it's about time I introduce myself.

My name is Cliff Drane, a New Media Developer in Houston. I'm on my second go-round of TBOTNS (Sev and Agia just entered the Jungle). Between the list archive/postings and the re-read, I'm deep deep deep into these books and their mysteries. In fact, I fear TBOTNS has spoiled me - the intellectual stakes have been raised and other books are failing miserably in comparison.

I've recommended the series to a couple of friends, the first of which failed to catch ~90% of the nuances (which I, of course, wanted to talk about) so she's decided to stop midstream and start over. Wish her luck. :)

One topic I did want to touch on is a point made by a literary critic (I've forgotten who) about The Lord of the Rings. He was very critical of the mythmaking devices Tolkien used, ie. names and places mentioned only once or in passing and in the context of that name/place being extraordinarily important to Middle Earth. Tolkien did employ this, and other 'superficial' means, quite a bit. I understand the devices, can catch them when they happen, but don't get offended by them. It struck me that Wolfe also employed the device in TBOTNS, but for the most part the name/place/thing mentioned actually *is* important or can be researched and debated as to their true meaning, which may have subsequent meanings/relationships, etc. In TBOTNS there seems to be substance behind the device.

Anyway, I thought I'm glad to be a part of the list and would enjoy any added perspective to the above thought.

cd

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Clifford Drane — 19 Mar 1999, 20:43 · follows Clifford Drane

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m.driussi — 20 Mar 1999, 00:27 · follows Clifford Drane

Hello and welcome Cliff Drane.

Right, most (all?) of our arguments (<ahem>, "discussions") revolve around the appropriate degree of "reading between different texts" in interpreting the Urth Cycle as a whole as well as individual sentences. From the relatively early (and with hindsight rather simple?) question of "Who is Dorcas, anyway?" (which the most literal/least heuristic reader can honestly, truthfully, and with full text support answer: "Just some girl--no blood relation to Severian") up to the latest mind-boggling investigation-of-the-day.

And some people, full of distrust to begin with, or despairing of the way that the text wiggles around with "creative ambiguity," some people, I say, feel that the whole thing is a form of "torture" or bullying being perpetrated by author (Gene Wolfe) on readers who are gullible enough to fall for the joke. "There is no =there= there" is the common sort of dismissal among these people (as well as those readers who simply have a blindspot with regard to Wolfe's work); the sense being that the text has no real depth, no real substance, it is all an illusion created with literary tricks of allusion--"smoke and mirrors," if you will.

=mantis=

Peter Stephenson — 20 Mar 1999, 16:41 · follows m.driussi

"Clifford Drane" wrote:

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This is an interesting point, and it seems to me that the critic in question has largely got the wrong end of the stick about worldmaking in fantastic literature in general --- but I agree that the case of BotNS is different from Tolkien, and I'll come to that. I'm building a substantial

counterargument on one sentence describing the position at second-hand, and I apologise if this seems excessive, but I'd like to put my own views anyway so have to run the risk I'm attacking a straw man. Fans of close reading can skip this posting altogether.

First, is your man... er, person... implying that a key piece of background referred to in a novel always needs to be explained in detail? It seems to me that this is a rather heavy restriction on how one treats characters. If the reader is an observer, the characters will always know more; and some of what they say may be both crucial and not fully explained. Not only is this good writing, but actually pretty much inevitable in the way most twentieth century writers (Wolfe, though not necessarily Tolkien in this instance, included) have gone about their business describing a complex world in which not all information is available.

Now, maybe what I've just said would be conceded, but your person would then have to draw a distinction between important events on which everybody agrees (general background) and those on which there can be doubt (specific background). This is where I think fantastic literature is intrinsically different. There *is* no general background common to the reader and the characters, and the lack of one is the key feature of this genre of writing. It seems to me the introduction of such a background by indirection ('it's been like that since the Great Tea Trolley Disaster of '67') can add greatly to the sense of an unknown world, with rules and histories, which we can never know fully, different from ours; and that the sense of difference thus created is essential to the way we perceive the new world from a distance; and that, in turn, this perception from a distance is one of the most important features of fantastic writing, putting our own everyday world into a wider perspective and hence showing the human condition in a way which mainstream literature is unable to. If that sounds a rather bold claim, that's because it is.

In a book of this kind, explaining everything --- even apparently vital background --- is in any case just not on. Some of Tolkien's imitators are poor exactly because they tried that, and the result is at once ridiculous and immensely dull; it sounds like a biblical list of 'X begat Y'. If that's not what we're being asked for, how much history are we expected to produce? You can only decide by context, like so much in writing. (If the argument is just about such contexts in Tolkien, my opposition becomes rather more muted; I enjoy *The Lord of the Rings* but I don't think of Tolkien as a great writer.)

Directness works better in some forms of 'ordinary' SF, and particularly near-future SF, when there is often more in common between the reader and the characters, including more understanding of the way the universe works, but indirection about points of substance is still often necessary. Suppose a writer was expected to fill in background of a malevolent alien race whenever its history was alluded to by one of its members ('We must destroy the humans because of the VlaHarGurk, whose history I will now relate' --- this is a caricature, of course); it can largely destroy the effect of bringing in an alien culture.

Offhand, unexplained mentions of something vital are very good at creating a nameless horror, as in Lovecraft: there is a sudden, crushing feeling that everything you thought you knew is missing something that would change the way you thought about it. Furthermore, more general ignorance, as against indirect reference, is absolutely vital in a lot of SF. Why are these apparently intelligent blob-like things attacking us? You don't know, in this non-existent case, any more than you know why Joseph K. is being tried. I realise I've failed to draw a proper distinction between passing mentions, and repeated mentions which still carry little information; but a good writer knows the latter can easily become tiresome to readers unless, as in Kafka's case, the very existence of the superficial workings is itself obscuring the inner substance --- think of the Parable of the Gatekeeper in *The Trial*.

In a well-crafted world created in this fashion, the occasional piece of directness can be even more startling. There's a sentence in *A Wizard of Earthsea* which stuck in my head, not quoted exactly: 'There is a wall of stones at a place along the bourne, and there a man's spirit goes at death'. This seems a pretty crucial piece of information about the way things work, but if it were accompanied by a complete guide to the underworld (more a London Underground Map than a *Book of Coming Forth by Day*), as the hypothesis is that it should, the effect would be wrecked.

I've been slow coming to Wolfe, and why I agree that his position is different from Tolkien: and that is because so much information, of all kinds, in all his works, is carried by passing mentions. It is a prime source of his incredible subtlety, and goes far beyond the ordinary confines of fantastic literature. I would go further and say that the distinction between specific and general background is blurred: you don't know what the rules are, but the characters themselves are caught up in a strange world which they can't properly describe, either.

For example, Severian and the office of the Autarch: the latter is a key part of Urth's history, and also a key part of Severian's; both aspects are introduced in the same gradual way, by occasional references which may not even be remotely correct.

A more specific example in the *Eyeflash Miracles*, which I was only reminded about by William H. Ansley's excellent articles: the nameless government in Niagara, from which Little Tib's father comes. Do we need to hear 'The government of the country, now known as the People's Republic of America, was transferred to Niagara in ...'? I strongly suggest not.

So I beg to oppose.

(As Flan O'Brien once put it:-

The Plain People of Ireland: Another day and no jokes. Myself: Yes, curse you.)

corncrake

Roy C. Lackey — 21 Mar 1999, 18:39 · follows Peter Stephenson

cd,

Greetings. While I am not in the "smoke and mirrors" camp that mantis describes, it isn't hard to understand why it exists. Most people who read at all do so for pleasure, regardless of the genre. Those who enjoy a little meat with their potatoes, something they can get their intellectual 'teeth' into, want to leave the table satisfied, regardless of how tough the 'meat'. Take 'who-done-its' or any other sort of 'puzzle' book; when the tale is told the reader must be able to say: "Ahah", or "Damn, I should have seen that!" or some similar response that elicits satisfaction for a tale well told. But the 'clues' have to have all been there, no matter how subtle, else the reader cries "foul". The writer may pull as many rabbits out of hats as he chooses, but when he starts pulling hats out of rabbits the reader's focus often shifts to the rabbits. Thus this Urth list.

Other readers--often closet vegetarians--close the book, take off their hat, look at it, say: "Huh? What was that all about?", and resolve never to eat rabbit stew again. These are the readers who, as others on this list have lamented, are often resistant to or indifferent to Wolfe's work. They aren't interested in catching, killing, skinning, and cutting up rabbits. Even those who aren't vegetarians at heart find the meat too tough, too much gristle. Wolfe invites this reaction with his style of writing, because not all of the clues--er, ingredients--are in the recipe.

Clearly in the *Jungle Garden* scene, for example, Wolfe had something in mind, but what it was is still there, in his mind; it's not in the book, hence the speculation. I am not criticizing him for it; I like his work or I wouldn't be here and I wouldn't keep re-reading it. But the very qualities I

and, I suspect, others on this list appreciate in Wolfe's work are the same qualities that keep him from commanding a larger audience. I fear that fifty or a hundred years from now Wolfe's place, even within the SF&F genre, to say nothing of 'mainstream' fiction, will not be as high as many lesser-talented writers. Who reads James Branch Cabell today? Not many, I suspect, and for similar reasons.

Roy