

Child of the River

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Peter Stephenson — 22 Sep 1999, 13:28

Ciao Leute,

Someone was remarking a few weeks ago about Paul J. McAuley's `Confluence' series. I've finished the first one, `Child of the River', quite recently, and rather than wait till I've read the second one, I think it would be more fun to say what I make of the first, then eat my words later.

I've had my eye on McAuley since I read `Four Hundred Billion Stars' in the early nineties: it wasn't perfect, but it showed a lot of imagination, and the much rarer ability to put it all together into something like a whole. It also showed a large range of SF influences: I thought I detected Wolfe even back then, but it was mixed in a sea of Clarke, Niven, Simmons, Bear, Cherryh and various other possibilities, so it was hard to be clear. The ending, in particular, was very well written, and gave me high hopes.

Until recently, however, they hadn't been fulfilled. I was disappointed with `Red Dust', which seemed a fairly generic nanotech story (Queen of Angels mixed with your favourite Martian novel) with, not incidentally, far too much about Elvis; I haven't read `Pasquale's Angel' since it seemed a bit superfluous with Florence an hour away by train; and unfortunately `Fairylend' turned up just when I was thinking `if I read another near-future dystopia I'll scream'. Hence or otherwise, the last named seemed a bit cluttered, and the Shakespeareans references he hinted at at the end didn't seem to come off.

`Child of the River' is another step in the right direction. It's set on an artificial world which we don't explore all that much of yet, except for the large river which seems to be a central feature (more Riverworld than Whorl). There are Wolfean elements from the word go which continue through the book; the small town is by a vast necropolis (McAuley uses the literal translation of that, City of the Dead); the society is post-historic in that it seems to have been left to its devices by the race that created the world; the technological gradient is from slightly above medieval to star-spanning; there are outlaws called Heretics rather than Vodalarrians; the central city is a sprawling metropolis on the river; the Citadel of the Autarch is called the Palace of the Memory of the People (Citadel of the Mainframe??); there is an apparition in something like a sacred window; even the epigram (`Praise the Lord! for He hath spoken / Worlds His mighty voice obeyed / Laws, which never shall be broken / For their guidance he has made') recalls Wolfe's use of `A thousand ages in thy sight / Are like an evening gone, / Short as the watch that ends the night / Before the rising sun.'

There are mysterious entities in control, too; this reveals one difference from Wolfe, whose superior forces have a religious slant, while McAuley's are explicitly technological. Maybe this is a strange thing to say, after the lines I've just quoted from at the front of the book, and certainly the dividing line isn't so clear in either case. What I mean is the veil of superstition is present, but easily seen through: McAuley seems to have no interest in using Clarke's Third Law to blur the reader's viewpoint, only internally to keep the characters in awe. This element is more like the Long Sun, where Wolfe's computer-based intelligences are similarly transparent to the

reader, although the subtle grades of life, from primitive fishermen to starship crews, and the byzantine complexity of the society put the broader background much nearer to the New Sun. The religion of Confluence seems to be little more than the usual pulp SF exercise in population control based on treating the world's creators as gods, a view which the reader, who expects technological solutions and gets them, is unlikely to be able to endorse; there is no Outsider here.

The hero is also more conventional than Severian. His main interest through the novel is a quest to find his roots; this is often mentioned but without much being discovered --- we know Yama's bloodline is that of the world's engineers (maybe a touch of Ringworld there) --- so we'll have to wait for later books for more revelations. Interestingly, his quest, like Severian's, takes him upriver rather than down --- a comment I might have more to say about if my great work of time in the New Sun ever happens, though thematic use of time is not as strong here.

This brings me to the characters generally. McAuley's style is very good, with something of the straightforward but formal feel of the New Sun. What's lacking is the final touch of humanity and humour; his characters are slightly missing something, not because they're badly drawn, but because they're shaped a bit too precisely to fit the plot. One of my favourite features of David Zindell's 'Neverness' --- a more esoteric book than 'Child of the River', more a philosophical romance than a narrative, but not a million parsecs away in terms of theme and setting --- is the cynical, willful narrator, Mallory Ringess; it's just the sort of touch McAuley needs (and the same goes for 'The Broken God', Zindell's next book, which was a sad disappointment; the moral seems to be 'don't let your main character become a deity'). It's maybe a subtlety, but it can make a big difference: for example, the characters' visit to the inside of a starship would be extremely sinister --- the senior elements of the crew use mind control to communicate, and seem to be in part parasitic --- were it not for the fact that the characters themselves don't seem to notice, being too intent on their own business.

Perhaps where McAuley most touches Wolfean levels is in his ability to write about strange things in a way that hints at higher levels of meaning. Here's the opening of chapter 20, where Yama meets a renegade sailor from a starship who's borrowed someone's body. (The 'machines' mentioned are small, high-tech maintenance units left by the original architects of the world, so it's no great surprise, and very convenient for the plot, that Yama has some control over them.)

Even before Yama reached the bottom of the stairs, he knew that there was a large number of machines ahead of him, but the size of the room was still surprising. Golden pillars twisted into fantastic shapes marched away across an emerald green lawn, lending perspective to a space perhaps a thousand paces long and three hundred wide. The lawn was studded with islands of couches upholstered in brilliant silks, and fountains and dwarf fruit trees and statues --- these last merely of red sandstone or marble, not petrified flesh. Displays of exotic flowers perfumed the air. Constellations of brilliant white lights floated in the air beneath a high glass ceiling. Above the glass was not air but water --- schools of golden and black carp lazily swam through illuminated currents, and pads of water lilies hung above them like the silhouettes of clouds.

Thousands of tiny machines crawled amongst the closely trimmed blades of grass or spun through the bright air like silver beetles or dragonflies with mica wings, their thoughts a single rising harmonic in Yama's head. Men in scarlet and white uniforms and silver helmets stood in alcoves carved into the marble walls. They were unnaturally still and, like the

fallen guard at the gate, emitted faint glimmers of machine intelligence, as if machines inhabited their skulls.

One final, rather satisfying Wolfean moment occurs at the end, as the hero and his girlfriend ride, at the last minute before they close, inside the gates, not of the city, but of the Palace of the Memory of the People:

A woman screamed and the crowd began to yell again, ten thousand voices shouting against each other. The discs which bore the soldiers swooped towards the crowd as Yama and Tamora raced their horses across the square and plunged through the gates into the darkness beyond.

Maybe more SciFi-Western than Wolfe, in fact, but it makes you want to read the next one.

corncrake