

genre fiction

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Oct 1999

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Alice Turner — 25 Oct 1999, 13:45

Daniel Fusch brings up--re the inconsistent or unreliable narrator (Sev) that we've been discussing--the modernist novel. Well, actually, that's not quite accurate, as he brings up -Moby-Dick- and -Paradise Lost- too. But I think that M-D can stand as a modernist novel ahead of its time, and Milton was certainly striving to do something different with PL. The point, and the Faulkner novel is included here, is the effort toward originality.

Wolfe's three series (I'm leaving out the Soldier series, but you can easily make the analogy there too) fall into three tired genre cliches (what Hollywood calls "high concept," which means that even a studio clone can "get" them): In order, the sword-and-sorcery quest, the generation starship sequence and the planetary adventure. You might not like the simplification, but it's recognizable construction. What he has been doing is to bring real originality to very established (over-established) forms, and in order to do that one of his techniques is to rely on our familiarity with the form and then to pull some surprises. And I am not talking about *sensa wundah*, though that may be a side-effect.

People who read science fiction, like people who read any other of the accepted "genre" forms, are used to, in fact are looking for (to a large degree), predictability. We (I'm mostly talking about myself) kind of read with one half of our brain listening to the radio, another quarter playing with the cats and the rest lazily attempting to remember which character is named what. And that's just about all that's required. But Wolfe has taken these very standard forms and demanded attention. In only one book (IMO) has he attempted something entirely new, and that is -Fifth Head-, a truly original work. But to take a standard form and work magic--magic that necessarily involves effort from the audience, as Alex points out--with it is masterful as well.

It seems to me that very few books of 20th century science fiction are going to last, except as children's books. (The 19th c. will last longer as historical relics.) But Wolfe's may, simply because they soak up, present, and then transcend the sub-genres. The huge majority of sci-fi readers today don't read them, wouldn't like them, but they're not who's going to determine the future. We are. Very likely. Think about that.

-alga (who apologizes for pomposity)