

Positive thoughts, negative thoughts

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 27 Oct 1999

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Tony Ellis — 27 Oct 1999, 09:56

Nutria wrote:

Wolfe's writing may be so complex, and so dependent on the tropes of SF, that he will never make it into a "canon." It is hard to imagine non-SF people reading it and thinking much of it, save that it is "weird and well-written, but what on earth is he talking about?"

Anybody have anything more positive to put out against such a negative thought?

Cheer up, Nutria! I gave Fifth Head to my Dad, who's read plenty of SF but only of the Asimov\Clarke\Heinlein variety, and he was wowed.

I gave TBOTNS to my better half, Emma, who has read no SF at all, and she was blown away.

I myself first read TBOTNS when I was a spotty, callow teenager who'd read one Vance book, no Borges and an awful lot of the sort of SF that Wolfe's writing -isn't- based on. I was hooked for life.

The message is, you don't need to be well-read in SF, or any genre before you can appreciate Wolfe. You just need an open mind, and to know good writing when you see it. That's why I believe that if we could only force mainstream critics to actually read a little Wolfe, at gunpoint, they might come around to our viewpoint. The only people who will never come over to our side are the ones who are already reading SF.

I still treasure a quote from Wendy Bradley's review of Castlevue in, sadly, Interzone. The gist of it was: "this book made me feel stupid, and I don't like feeling stupid."

Alex David Groce — 27 Oct 1999, 13:08 · follows Tony Ellis

Yes. Of the friends I've convinced (forced at gunpoint if necessary) to read BOTNS, I've had three reactions: one, very well-read in Heinlein/Asimov/Clarke (and, though he hates to admit it, Piers Anthony) was impressed but irritated by Severian, who he felt was too cold and distant. Another, also well-read (and more literarily inclined) became an instant Wolfe fan and is happily, when MIT gives him five minutes to breathe, plowing his way through the rest of Wolfe as fast as he can. And the English major who is heading to grad school in Theology, with no real science-fiction background (other than having read ENDER'S GAME, which seems to be true for every person interested in math and science who's near my age), was blown away by BOTNS and is amazed Wolfe doesn't get more critical notice. I think Tony's right that the hardest people to convert may be the people who think they know what science-fiction should be, and "this isn't it." The CASTLEVIEW review is the kind of reaction that's hardest to overcome (although, to be honest, if CASTLEVIEW was the only thing Wolfe had written, I'd gladly toss him

to the wolves). The people who "don't read science-fiction" might pull the same trick they pulled with Bradbury and LeGuin, or when somebody like John Updike writes what is clearly a science-fiction novel: "Oh, that's not science-fiction, despite the rocket ships and such--after all, it's good."

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The Clute article in SF ENCYC. is good, as is the article in the ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FANTASY. The OXFORD GUIDE TO 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH LIT. has a generally uninformative article that does boast a very succinct characterization of the worldview expressed in Wolfe's books: "eccentrically conservative, hierarchical, and grave."

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Another thing, while we're on a critical roll, is to point out that Wolfe is, on the one hand, a definitively Catholic writer--all of his books and most of his stories are essentially Christian in their moral and metaphysical underpinnings, and specifically Catholic in their approach to theology. On the other hand, though, he does not belong in any sense to the main tradition of 20th cent. Catholic novelists. Muriel Spark, Evelyn Waugh, Walker Percy, Graham Greene, and even Flannery O'Connor are largely concerned with our present foibles--they all have a strong streak of satire and black humor, aimed at things that are very contemporary (Spark's "abbess Nixon" novel, Waugh's rich young things, Percy's amoral scientists, Greene's evil Americans, etc.) and through these things they allow their religious concerns to show. Wolfe is a lot more catholic than this--except in some minor short stories ("Paul's Treehouse") and in parts of FREE LIVE FREE, Wolfe seems singularly uninterested in scourging the follies of our day--he's after much more cosmic game than that. O'Connor has some of this panoramic view (as in "Revelation") and can, in the midst of gothic Southern weirdness, evoke it in a less somber way than Wolfe, but the others generally avoid the directly visionary. Even in something like "Forlesen," Wolfe seems to be only accidentally satirizing contemporary business practices--the idiotic routines and pointless games are Kafkaesque masks for reality, abstract bureaucratic obstacles to perception. Some of this is a result of writing science-fiction and fantasy, which lend themselves to the archetypal and universal, but Wolfe's contemporary fantasies such as PEACE and THERE ARE DOORS are about things such as identity, story- telling, time, reality, and a man and the goddess.

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

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