

Pynchon (was: One last modernist yap)

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

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Jack Lyons — 27 Oct 1999, 20:08

On Wed, 27 Oct 1999, Robert King wrote:

:I found most of Mason & Dixon one of the most enjoyable :books I've read in the past couple years, although there's :this overly long middle section which seems to exist merely :so he can string along a series of bizarro vignettes that :don't add a lot to the whole.

At least one of those vignettes seems to exist solely so that he can wrap it up with the ghastly "Dutch ado about nothing" comment from one of the protagonists. urk

Robert King — 27 Oct 1999, 19:54 · follows Jack Lyons

I like him, but I'd agree Vineland wasn't one of his best (and neither was Crying of Lot 49, which seems to be the most commonly read of his books because it's the shortest).

I found most of Mason & Dixon one of the most enjoyable books I've read in the past couple years, although there's this overly long middle section which seems to exist merely so he can string along a series of bizarro vignettes that don't add a lot to the whole. But he also pulls this cool loop-the-loop with one episode called "The Captive's Tale" that comes out of nowhere, turns into a story that two of the characters are reading outside the presence of the book's major narrator, then wraps back into the main narration (with it sometimes being hard to tell which one you're reading at the moment). It's hard to explain, but I found it a trick almost worthy of Wolfe himself. Anyway, it's by far his most human and humane book, I think.

Back to the topic: I'd consider Pynchon intensely postmodern, though I probably don't know enough to defend that opinion aggressively. But all of his work has that air of "everything's been done before, so I'm just going to throw all past and present genres and styles in the blender and have fun riffing off them," which is what I think of when I think of postmodernism. Modernism (Joyce being the keystone example) always struck me as a lot more rigorous. Didn't the modernists believe that they were dragging art into a more advanced era, with the postmodern era arriving when people finally decided that this progress was an illusion?

Anyway, I'm speaking out way beyond my knowledge. Please feel free to correct me.

-- Bob

On Wed, 27 Oct 1999, Alice Turner wrote:

Oh my, we forgot Pynchon. How could we? Some people even like him a lot, or claim to. I thought -Vineland- was crap, but I don't think that counts. I guess DeLillo is a modernist too, at least sometimes.

Well, I'm sort of astonished that there's so much interest in this subject, but it's a kick, too. I mentioned -Catch-22-as "pop modernism." I'd like to add to that category the oeuvres of Kurt Vonnegut and Philip K. Dick. Vonnegut was an interesting writer, early on. He's become a lazy hack, and I

think it's great that he's announced his "retirement," since I don't want to read any more of his books. Dick was a hack too, but I think he could be counted among the more interesting pop modernists. I confess that I never could read much of him either. (One of the conditions for joining the club seems to be relative unreadability.) His post-mortem elevation is certainly a phenomenon.

And no, Alex, I don't want to discuss racism yet. First I have to defend my geographical theories!

Oh, and Wombat, thanks for picking out the nugget of gold in my last leaden rant.

-alga