

Intro to Wolfe, my viewpoint

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Mitchell A. Bailey — 01 Nov 1999, 20:35

As you probably can tell, I'm not a literature scholar. I'll have to paraphrase Sev's line on this subject: if I sometimes manage to seem a peer of the esteemed contributors to this list, or at least one whose company does not shame them (perplexes? annoys?) it is to a significant extent due to that erudition to which I've been exposed here.

As a chemical engineering major, I tended to shuffle my way through literature courses in college. I did read the more 'conventional' sort of sf such as Niven. Probably the first Wolfe I ever read were the short stories "Continuing Westward" and "War Beneath the Tree", not very distinctive or inspiring. Non-SF fantasy such as Tolkien and Stephen R. Donaldson's Thomas Covenant cycle were also favorites. My late brother and I would pass these back and forth and remark on them.

Then one fateful summer break, my brother unearthed a copy of 5HC from a surplus paperbacks bin at my father's college bookstore, in preparation for a family trip to the coast near Charleston, SC. Finding myself on the porch of the cottage with little to do, I picked up that copy of 5HC and started reading it. It didn't hurt that Charleston and the surrounding countryside have a fair resemblance to some of the places described in 5HC anyway (Chas. even has a Citadel!<g>). I was hooked!

Being used to the likes of Larry Niven, I kept looking for the abo mystery to get cleared up somewhere. I kept wondering when Victor was going to get released, or what the deal was with all the cloning. In the hands of, say Niven, we would not only know if there were any abos and where they went, but Louis Wu or Gil Hamilton would have discovered that the Pierson's puppeteers or the Pak protectors were behind it all.

Gradually, as the sun set over the meadowmeres of the Carolina coast I came to understand that this thing had dimensions I was hardly equipped to perceive beneath its superficially goes-nowhere triple plotlines.

Of course when Shadow started appearing in paperback a couple of years later I snapped it up greedily, mining its multiple layers.

So I say don't be bashful; let your friends take the plunge with 5HC. Either they are thoughtful enough to appreciate it (notice I don't say solve it or understand it), or else not. Maybe the "Doc-Death-Island" or "Dead Man" stories might be a decent intro, just to get them accustomed to Wolfe's distinctive style. After that, they can tackle BNS and UNS and the Soldier series.