

Planarian Worms

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 03 Nov 1999

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Dan Parmenter — 03 Nov 1999, 17:05

From: Paul C Duggan <pduggan at world.std.com>
the memories contained in a single cell certainly doesn't have a scientific basis. There was some speculation about rna-memory transfer (based on statiticy invalid samples) from planarians fed other planarians who had learned to do t-mazes did the t-maes faster than other planarians.

Larry Niven made alot out of this memory-rna transfer schtick in his stories, but AFAIK, its a scientific dead end.

This was also one of Alan Moore's earliest conceits in his stint on SWAMP THING. Before Moore took over, the essential premise of the character was that he was a man transformed into a plant being. By means of the Planarian Principle we discover that the Swamp Thing was actually consumed and replaced by a plant being, complete with the memories of his predecessor.

I had been meaning to bring up Moore again for a few reasons actually. Regarding Wolfe's lack of popularity among "mainstream" AND "SF" readers, it occured to me that despite the similar approaches of Moore and Wolfe at some level (taking tired genre cliches and doing interesting things with them and indeed, making you fall in love with the cliches themselves all over again), Moore, unlike Wolfe was very popular and did in fact win over both non-comics fans and comics fans. Indeed, Moore became one of a small number of celebrity comics writers (Art Spiegelman and Frank Miller who both also achieved a lot of fame at around the same time Moore did were rather significantly writer-artists rather than pure writers). So is WATCHMEN simply more "accessible" than BOTNS? Perhaps it is, although in its own way it is every bit as obscure as Wolfe with lots of symbolism ("everything means something, but not everything means much" was the quotation), important information dropped casually in odd places (each issue of the series included text pieces that illuminated the world of the WATCHMEN: excerpts from books mentioned in the comic itself, spurious PLAYBOY interviews with Ozymandias etc.) and other "lupine" touches. In short, I think there's a lot of basis for comparison. But for whatever reason, WATCHMEN really doesn't alienate readers the way BOTNS seems to. The "genre" parts of it are so good by themselves (a contrived superhero pastiche with a plot device lifted from an OUTER LIMITS episode, for the record) that even if a reader ignores a lot of the really interesting details (some readers have told me that they skipped the text pieces and the "comic within a comic" TALES OF THE BLACK FREIGHTER), you can "get" the essence of it. I would have thought that this was the case with BOTNS too (I first read it at age 16 and loved it but missed a lot) since it really does deliver on the "genre" goods (plenty of fight scenes, a cool sword, lots of sex, an appealing "world") but perhaps with Wolfe there's simply too much of that feeling that one has missed something.

Re: Wolfe and Moore and the place of "genre" writers in "literature"

One other thing I thought I'd mention: I've been re-reading a lot of Moore (and reading his first novel, THE VOICE OF FIRE for the first time, more on this in later posts) and it occurs to me that if his stuff does survive and enter the "canon" of "real literature," it will not only serve to keep

his stuff alive, but in the cases of his "pure genre" stuff he may also ensure that a lot of less-worthy stuff, the very genre cliches that he revels in, will also make it into the canon simply by dint of the fact that these were the things he wrote about. For example, Moore wrote exactly four Superman stories. Each of them makes extensive use of the "Superman mythos" that DC largely jettisoned when they did their "revamping" of the character in the mid-eighties (e.g. Krypto the superdog, the Bizarro world, things like that). Moore included these things because he loved them, but he also made them come alive and seem incredibly interesting and even poetic (any writer who can make me cry with a scene involving Krypto the superdog AND the Legion of Super-Heroes is pretty skilled IMO). So perhaps someday when no one writes about superheroes any more, Alan Moore's vision of them will be the one that people remember and the one that shows people why anyone would ever want to write about such things in the first place. To make a highfalutin (and perhaps overly pat) literary comparison, when we study Shakespeare's plays we learn that some of them (e.g. Romeo and Juliet) were based on existing stories/plays of the time, but it's the Shakespeare version we're reading. His is the version that survived.

And so it may be with Wolfe. When the time comes (if it ever does) when no one writes about robots, spaceships, time travel, sword-wielding barbarians and dying earths, Wolfe's vision of those things may be the only one that future readers are aware of. So in a sense, writers like Wolfe and Moore become literary guardians of their genres, not just exemplars of them.

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