

nevermind the holes, whatabout the sails?

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 02 Dec 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2003>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Michael Andre-Driussi — 02 Dec 1999, 11:00

The white holes might stand up to some kind of historical science-lens examination, but the sailing starships have no such fig leaf!

Because of a superficial similarity to the 1964 Clarke model "solar sails," the sf reader is lulled into thinking that they are such. But there is no way that solar sails could do what the mirror sails do; and the sf reader who was thus hoodwinked by his own sfnal knowledge feels a bit put out by it (I can sympathize, even though in this case I was not affected): THE SCIENCE IN SCIENCE FICTION (1982) zeroes in on this:

"Since that time [1964], some writers have romantically, if implausibly, imagined great sailing ships travelling even between the stars, though the pressure of light would indeed be extremely small in the vast empty spaces outside our Solar System [and it ain't all that strong inside the System, either]. Gene Wolfe, in his continuing saga THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN, imagines such a form of travel" (p. 22).

Right. (FWIW Wolfe might have been using similar ships in 5HC.) But prior to Clarke's 1964, any such sails would have been taken as pure fantasy, like Cyrano going to the Moon by birdflight, or Poe's Hans Pfall (sp?) going there by balloon. Didn't Lord Dunsany have some ships sailing between the stars? What about Merrit's SHIP OF ISHTAR, wasn't that a similar contraption?

"Oh, if =only= Gene had used the Bussard Ramjet <tm> instead! After all, the Bussard Ramjet <tm> had been endorsed by =Carl Sagan= (kook hunter)!!" (heh-heh)

Well the serious side to comparing the Bussard Ramjet with the mirror sails is that both are systems that "live off the land" as they travel; both systems catagorically reject fuel-tank rocket systems as being completely inadequate for the task of starflight. So something between Hitler's V2 rocket and Mr. Scott's Warp Drive is required. And obviously "sails" fit the bill perfectly for the sort of story that Gene Wolfe is telling, science be damned!

Anyway, all this is pretty serious stuff for the people who read Wolfe as "hard-ish sf" rather than "science fantasy." And I do count myself in that crowd, or at least I recognize my face in there amongst them.

=mantis=

Jim Jordan — 06 Dec 1999, 20:14 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Sails for flying between the stars are in several Cordo Smith stories, but Wolfe may not have gotten them from him.

Nutria