

PW's review of STRANGE TRAVELERS

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 21 Dec 1999

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Patri10629 — 21 Dec 1999, 15:38

In a message dated 12/20/99 10:31:35 PM, Publisher's Weekly is quoted:

<<... there are also several tasteless and misogynistic entries. Chief among them is "The Ziggurat," in which a mother coaches her daughters in the art of false accusation and the father--whose wife leaves him broke--eventually regains all by finding a woman he can dominate and a technology he can steal. All too frequently in this volume, even when women show men 'the pleasures of Hell,' biting them till they bleed, men emerge loutish and triumphant. >>

PW was right to characterize the collection as disturbing. It certainly is.

I read an advance copy and blurbed it thusly: "Strange Travelers reads like an artifact of magic--something hidden, stumbled upon, irresistible and dangerous. A book of nightmares too beautiful to be true, too real to be denied, too vivid to be forgotten. Why doesn't everyone know Gene Wolfe is the best writer alive?"

So. You see.

I am flabbergasted by their take on "The Ziggurat" which I believe is a classic story. One of the most beautiful and moving short stories I have ever read. In its defense I'll say: A portrait of a hateful character (the wife) is not the same thing as a polemic about misogyny. The husband, while sympathetic, is no perfect hero and not just a woman hater. One would have to ignore his relationships to his daughters to come to that conclusion. And PW's interpretation of the ending leaves out levels of ambiguity that are critical to the story. This female alien (which he "adopts") is one of a group that killed his son and pet coyote and kidnapped his daughter and tried to kill him. Is it not some great leap of empathy, some form of redemption that the man binds her wound, attempts to heal her, protect her, and make a place in his life for her? Why no mention of the implication that the alien may be manipulating him? Why no mention of the alien humming "God Save The Queen"? The irony, and humor, and implications of that? Why not say it is a first stumbling attempt between two hostile alien species (Male and female?) at some imperfect form of reconciliation and empathy? Yes, this "female" is totally dependent on him, and he feels comfortable in the old-fashioned male as protector role. Yes, that is pathetic. But it is one of many things swirling around in the ending. Wolfe is never just anything. And it seems to me to be myopic in the extreme to brand this magnificent story as "misogynistic."

Yes, there are other unsympathetic portraits of women and men throughout the volume. This does not lead me to conclude that Wolfe hates humanity.

Patrick O'Leary