

Strange Travellers

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 26 Oct 1999

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Allan Lloyd — 26 Oct 1999, 03:13

I've been reading Strange Travellers very slowly, trying to savour every story before jumping on to the next, and have now finished the book. In my opinion (and I'm trying to control my enthusiasm with some kind of rationality) this is Wolfe's best collection since "The Island of Dr. Death..." and possibly the best ever. If anyone is looking for a book to give as an introduction to Gene's work, then this is it.

The reason that these stoies work better for me than some in other collections is that the surface narrative and the characters carry the reader into a deeper involvement with them. They all contain the familiar Wolfeian puzzles and obscure references, but these are balanced by line-by-line writing so powerful and painful (meaning full of pain) that the stories work really well on both levels.

In "Counting Cats in Zanzibar" you can feel the painful dilemma that faces the exiled woman without delving too deeply into the Science-Fictional reasons for her flight. The depth is there, and the information, for those that want to look for it, but the story is carried by the confrontation between the human and aspiring-to-be-human characters.

In "The Ziggurat", for which Wolfe was criticized for his portrayal of the female characters, I thought that all the characters were reacting in a realistically bitter way to their experiences. The bickering about the divorce settlement carrying on while their children were being attacked and abducted brought infinitely more depth to what could have been a hackneyed UFO story. (By the way, did the narrator's treatment of the childlike alien woman at the end bring a nasty shiver of suspicion about his step-children's allegations of child abuse).

And in "The Man in the Peppermill" (a story I liked less than most) the first page is an incredibly affecting portrait of a mother and son trying to deal with the death of a daughter. "...still not sure how Cathy, dead, had become Catherine" That is so spare, not a word wasted, but it sends a chill up the spine.

The one complaint I have had about Gene's work in the past is that although he claims to play fair and give enough information to understand his stories, I'm certain that in some cases he doesn't. Examples from the past would be "The Most Beautiful Woman in the World" and "Lukora" from "Endangered Species". I like both of these stories, but there is simply not enough information given to decipher the mysteries. They both set up situations that beg for a solution, where the characters in the story know much more than they say, leaving the reader ultimately dissatisfied, no matter how much detective work is done.

"Strange Travellers" contains far less of the "puzzles-for-puzzles-sake" type of story, and is better for it. And I loved it.

Allan Lloyd

Alex David Groce — 21 Jan 2000, 12:42 · follows Allan Lloyd

Allan Lloyd said:

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Hmmm... Not for me. The behavior of the twins convinced me that the accusations were false--since they (unless, as John Kessel has proposed, the story is a "unreliable third-person" and we see things filtered through Emery's insanity) seem to be purely JAN's accusations, not the twins'. In fact, I always thought some of the criticism of Wolfe here was misplaced-- if you want to attack Wolfe for being misogynistic, it's not in the possible sympathy of the narrative for Emery's way of seeing things, but in the author's construction of Jan. Basically, Jan is the kind of person who might drive ME to say nasty things about women (and you'll notice that the most damning things Emery says, as in the car ride, he's quick to apply to men as well--and those words seem to me to be Wolfe's opinion, all right), so I can hardly blame Emery for being bitter (Jan, in fact, is the weak point in the story--I've met people not unlike her, both male and female, but such characters always come across as a bit too conveniently villainous--she's the non-pulp equivalent of the black hatted fellow twirling his moustache. On the other hand, to some extent, both types are reflections of a reality--i.e. "When I Was Ming the Merciless" or other Wolfe stories). In fact, Emery's treatment of Tamar strikes me as (A) in part a "parental" desire to protect, etc., but if every relationship that's ever involved such an instinct on one part or the other is indicative of child molestation, well, I'd be surprised and (B) part of his engineer's curiosity! THAT is the thing, it seems to me, that rescues Emery from himself in this story--initially the robbery takes away his instrument of suicide, but in the end what brings him 180 (or 360, perhaps!) from suicide to insane recklessness (in returning to the cabin with Brooke) is engineer's curiosity (or science-fiction reader's curiosity)--he wants to know what's really going on, even if it kills him. In that sense, he really is very much to blame for Brooke's death, although it seems to me that the psychological logic of the story is such that had he not returned to the cabin he'd have eventually found himself eating the barrel of a gun.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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