

Little, Big

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 25 Apr 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2206>

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Jim Jordan — 25 Apr 2000, 18:02

Hey, I know this is not the John Crowley discussion site, but I don't know if there is one. Mantis suggested *Little, Big* as important for Wolfe, so I finally read it. And now I've got a question for those who have also slogged through it. Is this just a trivial and clever story, or is it a horror novel and a cautionary tale? Spoilers follow after a suitable gap.

Taken at face value, this novel seems to be the opposite of *Great Work of Time.* In that earlier novella, Crowley definitely provides a cautionary tale. The only valid world is THIS one, warts and all, and if any limited human being, or group of humans, were able to remake it, they would shrink and stifle it. Human destiny involves all the mess of THIS world, not rejecting it, or running from it. *Little, Big* winds us up in the same kind of world *Great Work of Time* shows as stifling and inhumane, a world of fairies. But it does so in a "positive" way, on the surface at least. In

Little, Big it all just seems so wonderful....

But if so, then the novel is nothing but a clever plot, working through a range of fantasy genres with a charming writing style, and winding up with a "explanation of what has been going on" that is kind of neat and interesting and all, but rather pointless. Not like real literature at all. And not like Crowley's other works.

Yet, if I look at it again, it looks at another level like a horror tale. I was left horrified, anyway. Thinking back, we have a bunch of kooks who are enthralled by theosophical nonsense, who want to live in unreality. Then in a later generation we have a bunch of drug-abusers (Mouse, Daily Alice, Sophie), who seem to be led further into this labyrinth. The last generation seems to have lost all moorings. In the final act, the main characters are losing their memories, and it all becomes a kind of drug-dream. They become completely two-dimensional, cards in a special tarot deck. Read this way, it is very much a cautionary tale, and along the same lines as *Great Work of Time.*

It appears that the characters have progressively opened themselves up to manipulation by forces that have no real love for humanity at all, a point made here and there. The Christian-Humanist, or at least Christian-Gnostic elements found in Crowley's earlier works, are left behind as these generations move farther and farther into fantasy and futility, and lose their humanity.

Even this: They keep thinking that the "world within is larger than the world without." This is presented as something that might well be true. But in fact, the world within is NOT larger, but far smaller. These people's lives are shrinking down, and so is their world. It only appears large to them.

It all seemed quite horrible to me. I might think, "Well, you're just reading this as a Christian humanist," but in the light of Crowley's earlier works, it appears to me that such a reaction is what he designed. De-humanization seems to be a large theme with him, and no something he thinks is a good idea in anything else he has written. (Though I've not yet read any of the AEgypt quartet -- I'd rather wait until it's all done.)

Thus, while this is not a Crowley discussion list, I thought it might be good to bring it up here, since Wolfe evidently thinks highly of Crowley's work and alludes to it. Anyone want to point me

to a good analysis of this book? Anyone want to agree, disagree, or show me what I've missed? The novel seems extremely trivial to me, unless it is really a cleverly disguised horror tale.

Nutria

Alice Turner — 26 Apr 2000, 21:20 · follows Jim Jordan

Like Grandfather Trout, I must rise to the fly.

The Rat wrote (and I have snipped a good deal; I was going to snip all and start from scratch, but I can't):

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GWoT is mantis's subject, and I leave it to him. The "bunch of kooks" is that, of course, but they are also spell-bound and part fairy. (I hope you studied the geneological chart; it's of some importance.) Smokey does not believe in fairies, but he lives amongst them and is even more spell-bound than they, for he cannot leave the pentacle to which he has been sentenced, though he does not know this, and neither (really) do we till the end, though the clues are at least as clear as those in most detective novels. He is Tam Lin, if you will.

Don't be so priggish about drugs. George smokes weed and hash, fairly harmless substances not unknown, I'll warrant, to many members of this list. LB is nothing if not a book of the Sixties, and a comment on that time (also ES is a MUCH druggier book). Sophie is not drugged but under a spell; her sleep has been stolen by the changeling child, Lilac, so that she is in a near-coma much of the time without being able to sleep soundly. And Alice is not a drug user at all (oh, she may have inhaled once or twice, but who hasn't?). They are not losing their memories through drugs, they are being gathered in by the fairies and half-fairies for a purpose that you may well disapprove of but is certainly clearly presented. How you can call it a cautionary tale, I don't understand. Caution against what? The end of the world? Some of the books it borrows from, and I think especially of Charles Kingsley's -Water Babies-, were indeed cautionary tales, but this one is not, IMO.

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JC did not invent the heartless fairy, he has just used the old idea in a provocative and original way. The fairies are manipulating the Drinkwater clan (including dozens and dozens of cousins) to keep themselves alive. The half-fairy sisters use Smokey to father their children. I think that Alice really does love him (so does Sophie in a distracted, off-hand, sisterly way), but the fairy side of her entraps and uses him. Your mistake, I think, is to think of JC as a Christian. A Gnostic he certainly is, no doubt about it (when you get to the AEgypt novels it is no longer subtext), but, though he was raised a Catholic, I doubt that he is a Christian now, at least as you interpret it.

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This is difficult to answer. In one sense, you are right. The world is winding to an end, and only the chosen will be saved (a very Gnostic notion). The fairies (Pharisees) have chosen. Smokey solves the great riddle of the orrery, which makes the universe tick, but he does it too late. I really dislike the Eigenblick subplot, just like Robert Ludlam. But look: Sylvie really is Titania. Fred really is a dryad. Smokey really is a saint, and he believes he has led a good and happy life. I believe it too. We may have made a mess of one world, but another will survive. These are joyous things as well as nostalgic and melancholic. I am surprised that you did not pick up Smokey's saint-like nature (this being your absolutely favorite approach). When Smokey accepts Alice's childhood in his Gladstone bag, he, in a sense, takes on the whole burden of humanity. He lays it down just before he dies--like Moses, he cannot reach the promised land. But, though this is sad, it is also quite won!

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derful, as sacrifice is often seen to be wonderful.

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Mantis and I have written (separately) a series of articles, great and small, about JC. The only one on LB was by me, in the NYRSF, and it was a small one, even cutish, with a cute little sidebar. It was NOT a critical appraisal of the book (which we would like to have, actually, and a discussion here might lead up to). Anyone who wants it/them, however, please e-mail me, and I'll send it as an attachment pronto. (Let me know if you have a Mac or are still in Word 3, etc. etc.; I have a translation device).

If you want to take this further, we should probably take it to e-mail, unless the list votes to keep it here. I know that mantis would join an e-mail discussion, though, and maybe others would too.
-alga

Jack and Melissa Holcomb — 27 Apr 2000, 00:39 · follows Alice Turner

I'm fascinated. I have no problem with continuing to read this discussion on the Urth list.

Jack

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works

Adam Stephanides — 01 May 2000, 09:02 · follows Jack and Melissa Holcomb

alga wrote:

No, I won't argue this. The orrery business is hard to figure, especially considering that Hawksquill has one too.

But Hawksquill's orrery is of a Ptolemaic universe, and therefore doesn't run by itself. Smoky's if of a Newtonian universe, and so does. (At least so Hawksquill says.)

Also, I think the writing on how the house fares afterwards is very lovely. (I see that Rostrum agrees on the last.)

I agree too. One of the best evocations of nostalgia and loss I've encountered anywhere.

Alice does not disapprove of Smoky's adultery because his task is to father children for the fairies.

But Alice is very upset when she thinks that Smoky has fathered Sophie's child (because this somehow deprives her of her starring role in the Tale? or because it indicates that Sophie, not Alice, is the bride picked out by the fairies for Smoky?). It's only when she learns he hasn't that she becomes tolerant of the adultery.

Sophie has been put out of commission by Lilac and anything to get her to reproduce is acceptable.

Don't you have it backwards? The adultery took place before Lilac existed. Or is there a later adultery that I missed.

[on the war:]

This is the part of the novel I disliked most. It seems to be a general Sixties-ish disgruntlement with how things were going. Thoughts here would be appreciated.

The civil war between Eigenblick and his opponents does seem to be a common trope in last 60s and 70s SF (ObWolfe: Hour of Trust, Paul's Treehouse). The war between fairies and humans, which has been going on for a thousand years ("The Worm Turned," Book Four, Chap. One), is more obscure. I can't think of any precedents offhand in myth, legend, or genre fiction. Can anybody?

The blighting of New York City during Auberon's stay seems to reflect the state of New York City in the 1970s, the "Ford to City: Drop Dead" era.

--Adam

David Duffy — 04 May 2000, 00:25 · follows Adam Stephanides

Talking about Dunsany reminded me of the fate of one of the characters in The curse of the wise woman, who may get the choice (he chooses the downward path) of dying and going to heaven, or instead going to Tir'nán'ógh. I think some Irish beliefs offer Heaven/Hell or just fading away here.

David Duffy.