

And When They Appear

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 20 Sep 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 20 Sep 2000, 11:50

I finally got around to reading STRANGE TRAVELLERS, though I'd read a number of the stories in it before. On a first reading, I'd say the major one I'd missed is "And When They Appear." This is one of Wolfe's grimmest stories (which is saying a lot), made more powerful by the matter-of-fact narration and by the deceptive "Christmas story" atmosphere of the first half. (It just struck me that this first half reads a lot like a Bradbury pastiche.) It's also one of the most effective uses of a child narrator by anyone that I've read. In some ways the story is like a reprise of "The Death of Doctor Island," with a boy protagonist in an enclosed setting controlled by an AI, but the new story stands on its own.

Anybody else have any thoughts on it? (Forgive me if I've been redundant; I don't recall anything being said about it during the STRANGE TRAVELLERS discussion, but I can't download that volume of the archives onto my computer.)

--Adam

Peter Westlake — 20 Sep 2000, 16:32 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 11:50 2000-09-20 -0700, Adam Stephanides wrote:
Anybody else have any thoughts on it? (Forgive me if I've been redundant; I don't recall anything being said about it during the STRANGE TRAVELLERS discussion, but I can't download that volume of the archives onto my computer.)

Tony Ellis recently offered the comforting observation that Mouse, inoperative but still containing a deadly blade, is under Sherby's pillow at the end. Look for "The mirror crack'd" in the most recent archives for that article and James Jordan's follow-up.

Peter.

Adam Stephanides — 20 Sep 2000, 15:25 · follows Peter Westlake

Peter Westlake wrote:

Tony Ellis recently offered the comforting observation that Mouse, inoperative but still containing a deadly blade, is under Sherby's pillow at the end.

I'm not comforted, since he's already been molested (Charlie tells him "'We'll take off our clothes and have some fun, Chris. _Then_ we'll go to bed.'" (195, emphasis mine)) and there's no indication that he knows the blade is there (the owl-slicing is "the first time [the blade] had been used since Mouse had been made" (170) and Sherby doesn't see it). Besides, the most horrific moment is not the molestation, but Sherby's throwing a rock at Smoky.

Look for "The mirror crack'd" in the most recent archives for that article and James Jordan's follow-up.

Thanks for pointing this out; I'd forgotten about it. Now that I've read the story, I have a couple of comments.

On Tony Ellis's point about hiding in the freezer: yeah, that had niggled at me. We're told explicitly that Sherby can't open the door by himself (170); Eddi says that House will open the door when it's safe, but if House is destroyed, how can it (of course, the AI core might survive, but it might not, and apparently it doesn't)? And even Eddi (House) thinks there's a good chance of Sherby freezing to death before being rescued: the best he can say is "If you snuggle up with Smoky, you might stay alive until they leave." (188) It looks like Sherby's refusal to take House's advice saved his life, although it wasn't based on any rational calculation.

On Jim Jordan's point that by leaving House, Sherby will be able to meet Jesus (or Yeshua, as he's called in the story): but according to Eddi, the real Yeshua is in House too (185).

--Adam

akt — 21 Sep 2000, 20:05 · follows Adam Stephanides

From Adam:

I finally got around to reading STRANGE TRAVELLERS, though I'd read a number of the stories in it before. On a first reading, I'd say the major one I'd missed is "And When They Appear." This is one of Wolfe's grimmest stories (which is saying a lot), made more powerful by the matter-of-fact narration and by the deceptive "Christmas story" atmosphere of the first half. (It just struck me that this first half reads a lot like a Bradbury pastiche.) It's also one of the most effective uses of a child narrator by anyone that I've read. In some ways the story is like a reprise of "The Death of Doctor Island," with a boy protagonist in an enclosed setting controlled by an AI, but the new story stands on its own.

I don't think it's a quarter as good as TDoDI. It's too disjointed; the gothic elements don't come together. Mouse and Owl, Smoky, the parents in the freezer, Corporal Charlie, the folklore figures, the gratuitous Jesus, the angry mob--why?. Even the gnomic sentence at the end: "'I don't like it,' he said [regarding Christmas], but as soon as he said it, he knew it was not true." This is, we are led to believe, is after Corporal Charlie has had his way with Sherby. Messy stories irritate me. From Bradbury too, who, in later work, epitomizes mess.

Besides, the most horrific moment is not the molestation, but Sherby's throwing a rock at Smoky.

Me too, as it happens. But more annoying is that Smoky is never used properly in the story. He and Cpl. Charlie are the only "real" figures, and they're virtually thrown away.

While I'm thinking of it: the man who takes Sherby is referred to several times as "Corporal Charlie" (as he instructs Sherby) but once as "Uncle Charlie." Is this last a typo?

Given what I feel to be the general carelessness throughout, I'd say yes.

-alga