

THE GOOD SOLDIER, John Sutherland, and ROGER ACKROYD

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 07 Dec 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 07 Dec 2000, 11:49

Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:

"THE GOOD SOLDIER is, Eugene Goodheart claims, `one of the most puzzling works of modern fiction.' [snip]

It's been a long time since I've read THE GOOD SOLDIER (which mainstream critics seem to regard as the ne plus ultra of unreliable narration), and I haven't read any of the criticism referred to in the paragraph mantis quoted, but my impression is that determining "what happened," as opposed to the motives of the characters or how we should evaluate them, is far more straightforward for THE GOOD SOLDIER than for PEACE.

That's a long quote, but the article gets even better: the title of the piece is "Whose daughter is Nancy?" and it becomes something rather like our Doris enigma. It is in a neat little paperback book (Dan'I and hello there Henry Kaiser, they have 'em at Half Price Books [which is a used bookstore chain based in Texas, Roy]) titled CAN JANE EYRE BE HAPPY? which is a sequel to IS HEATHCLIFF A MURDERER? GREAT PUZZLES IN 19TH-CENTURY FICTION.

I have IS HEATHCLIFF A MURDERER? I actually did consider bringing it to the lists attention earlier, but never got around to it. It's of interest to readers of this list, even aside from the specific books he discusses, because Sutherland is one of the few mainstream critics who asks the sorts of questions of his books that we ask of Wolfe. His general modus operandi is to spot a factual puzzle or apparent error or inconsistency in a (usually) 19th-century novel, and to explain it either by external factors or (as is usual on this list) by a closer reading which solves the puzzle.

Another book which may be of interest to this list, for similar reasons, is a recent book by Pierre Bayard entitled WHO KILLED ROGER ACKROYD? THE MYSTERY BEHIND THE AGATHA CHRISTIE MYSTERY. Not only does Bayard give the classic mystery novel THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD a lupine reading, by claiming that the true murderer is not the murderer the book ostensibly identifies (and he advocates giving a similar treatment to various literary classics); he has an interesting discussion, with typology, of the ways in which authors can conceal the "truth" from their readers.

(Warning: Bayard's book necessarily reveals the (ostensible) murderer in Christie's mystery; but so does the book's back cover. So if you haven't read Christie's book and you don't want the mystery spoiled, keep away.)

--Adam