

The Devil in a Forest

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 Jan 2001

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Michael Straight — 06 Jan 2001, 23:15

I just finished reading this book a second time and really enjoyed it. I thought of it at Christmas when I heard "Good King Wenceslas" (I'll never hear that carol the same way again!).

A hard book to label: The cover calls it Fantasy, but I can't think of any fantastical elements unless you count Mark's slightly prescient dream about the Barrow Man (which could be entirely accounted for by having listened to Mother Clout) and possibly the Epilogue (although some of us might not consider that fantasy either).

I've also heard it referred to as a Young Adult novel, but it seems awfully brutal for kids with all the death, torture and hints/threats of rape (Clout makes vague references to Joselle having been molested in some way by the soldiers, but not raped). I hesitate to recommend this book to my wife, much less a teenager, but maybe I'm out of step with what kids are reading these days. The book is much more straightforward than many of Wolfe's books, so it may be easier for young folks in that sense, but it definitely has a lot of Wolfe's twists and turns; just when you think you know what story he's going to tell, he veers off in some unexpected direction. And, of course, reading it a second time, you see a few hints that he was going that way all along.

I think one of the most interesting parts of the novel is how Wat manipulates the villagers, dividing them into smaller and smaller factions, promising them less and less for deeds that are more and more evil. The Devil indeed. Interesting too how different the title "The Devil in a Forest" is from "A Devil in the Forest" (which scans more easily and is what I kept calling the book when I first picked it up), as if the forest is the novelty here.

Does anyone think Wolfe was unfair to the pagans in this story? There's plenty of evil deeds among Christians and pagans both, and a lot of it is unrelated to religion (e.g. Wat's greed), but the Christians are better the more faithful they are to their religion while the pagans are the most horrifying when they are trying to revive theirs.

-Rostrum