

Wolfe's Carrollian Drabble

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Adam Stephanides — 26 Jul 2001, 21:38

While digging through some of my old, packed-away books, I came upon an anthology entitled THE DRABBLE PROJECT (ed. Rob Meades and David B. Wake). This is a collection of one hundred Drabbles: i.e., short stories (or occasionally poems) precisely one hundred words long. One of the sf luminaries and non-luminaries contributing is Gene Wolfe.

Despite its brevity, Wolfe's Drabble, entitled "Read Me," is characteristically Wolfean: it is a pastiche of the Alice books, complete with wordplay, and thoroughly enigmatic. What happens (while it would be easy to post the whole thing, I'm reluctant to violate copyright so blatantly on this list) is that Alice meets a pack of Tarot cards, one of whom--the Fool--tells her that because they are curious, they have troubled (i.e. disturbed) the Future, and now they tell the Future they're sorry. When Alice protests that they foretell the future, the Fool replies: "'No,'...'We four tell it.' And he indicated the Falling Tower, the Devil, the Magician and himself." And that's the end of the story.

The story's title, "Read Me," may provide a clue. I take the Tarot pack to represent science fiction writers, who once "troubled" the future and now tell it they're sorry. I'm tempted to go further and say that the writers who "troubled" the future are the Campbell-era writers with their technological optimism, and the ones who apologize to it are present-day, less optimistic writers. But I wouldn't stake the ranch on this reading.

If this reading is correct (or if it isn't) why are those particular four cards mentioned? That they are inventoried at the end of the story suggests that they are somehow key to the story's meaning, but I'm at a loss to see how. Devil, Magician, and Fool could plausibly be intended to signify types of sf writers, but this is as far as I get.

--Adam