

A Pullman Car on the Wolfe Train

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 01 Aug 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Aug 2001, 16:42

Quoth the Alga:

I don't think that, with a real writer, it's quite so cut-and-dried. (Most writers of commercial fantasy are not, by my definition, "real" writers; Pullman, otoh, most certainly is.)

Without prejudice to the categorical dismissal of generic fantasists, I am in wholehearted agreement about Pullman.

About the term "daemon," which I find irritating:

Can't you accept that he is, at one level, joking?

I could accept that he was joking if there were anything in the text to give me a clue that it was intended as a joke. If there was, I missed it; in fact, I found very little humor in `_TGC_`, or perhaps it was simply so dry it evaporated (to which extent I suppose it bears comparison to Ursula K. Le Guin, another fabulous writer who seems to check her sense of humor at the door when she sits down to write).

And at another being deliberately provocative?

I certainly perceived that; however, it seems a rather childish sort of provocation, akin to saying "fuck" because you know it drives your parents crazy. Really, anticlericalism has been done so much better by so many writers, if he can't do better than this, he shouldn't bother.

This is quite okay by me, more so than Madeleine L'Engel maundering on about mitochondria and God in a rather better known fantasy series for children.

...splutter, koff... I `_liked_` that book.

Well, okay, the maundering, as you put it, got a little heavy in places. And the seraphim [why couldn't she have used the singular?] was a bit of a dweeb, come to think of it... And no, it is not on a level with TGC (though I will happily proclaim that the first volume, *A WRINKLE IN TIME*, is as good as and possibly better than TGC: but will also admit that my own childhood fondness for AWIT may be involved here).

Pullman is quite genuinely (imo) repelled by the efforts of a lot of classic fantasy to push religious agenda, and he's deliberately countering it--but with humor.

Humor that I, alas, could not detect. He plainly `_refrained_` from a certain very low level of humor (for example I was grateful that nobody made any remarks about righteous arms-keeping bears ... though perhaps that's something which wouldn't occur to a Brit anyway), but if there was humor at a higher level, it was far too high for me. Or too subtle.

Frankly, I'm unlikely to go digging for subtle humor unless the author troubles to give me at least a hint it's there. Perhaps what I took as the grim seriousness of the whole thing, Pullman intended as a kind of pokerfacedness? If so, well, it didn't work for this reader.

Okay, I asked:

On a larger scale: does anyone, can anyone, believe that in a world this different -- where every human has an externalized animus/anima, where bears are sentient, etc. -- the history of the world would be similar enough that someone called John Calvin would become something called Pope of something called the Catholic Church?

Dan'l, that is a **joke**. Maybe not the best joke in the world, but still.

No. Once is a joke. Twice might be jokes. Three or four times, let alone the dozens of things that have similar quasi-referentiality to our world For example: all the places with same or similar names

-- I could almost grant that if only as a conceptual "translation" to give readers a clear sense of the geography. But the titles of persons [various Oxonian titles], the references to historical persons [i.e., Manicheism] ... the fact that the [European] culture of TGC's world is so similar to ours, I suppose, is what bothers me most. It seems to lack a certain kind of inventiveness that I would hope would go into working out the ramifications of such a radically different Earth.

And that's it, really. He doesn't. He works out just enough to make his plot tick, and the rest of it is allowed to go hang, or at least to lay fallow. So what he's done is taken a really radical set of speculative ideas and extrapolated them in a deeply conservative, nearly reactionary, way.

Oh, yeah, there are little references here and there -- to "atomics" that sound almost like a handcraft, for example -- but those are loose, unattached to the fabric of the world they're happening in.

(This could work, but there's a whole set of techniques and tactics that need to go with this. You can create a lot of these differentia, and then their unattachedness works as a kind of kaliedoscope to make the reader mistrust things that sound like they ought to be familiar. Or you can create only a few, and then meticulously attach them to the fabric of the world in which your story is taking place in, so that they distort things things that would otherwise seem familiar.

But Pullman doesn't come near to creating this level of alienation, by either tactic. There aren't nearly enough random novelties to create the kaliedoscopic effect. On the other hand, the novelties he introduces aren't given anywhere near enough attachments to make them distort the rest of the landscape. For example, he might have given us some sense of how "atomics" affects warfare, power generation, knitting, or, most especially, "experimental theology" -- and vice versa. But he doesn't, and "atomics" just lies there like a beached flounder, looking at the sky with both eyes and wondering why it's there.)

It also serves another purpose--it's a signal that he is not targeting Catholicism or Anglicanism or any other ism, that they're all in it together.

Well, no. It's distinctly anti-clerical, but without reference to any particular flavor of Christianity. (One could call it "Mere Anti- Clericalism," I suppose, since Pullman seems so bent on casting himself as the anti-Lewis.)

It's the same impetus that causes him to cast witches as good guys.

Again, I have no problem with that. I like the goose-witch (name is escaping me, I have no mental affinity for Lapp words & names). I have no problem with witches in general; "some of my best friends," quite literally.

The logic of fantasy just isn't there, and irritates me far more than the religious whomping.

It doesn't irritate me. It is, perhaps, a reminder to the reader that he is reading a book, written by an author, who can do as he likes.

An author who can do as he likes? Feh. That's not being an author, that's playing makebelieve. Being an author involves working within the limits of the form you have set yourself - I don't mean the conventions of "genre" (see my essay in last month's NYRSF, I have some very definite opinions on "genre" which that essay just begins to crack open), but the form the author sets.

Or, rather, yes, an author can "do as he likes," but each thing he does because he likes it has consequences. It affects and is affected by the rest of the work in hand. And to fail to work that out is to cheat the work (and, as a less-important result, the reader) of what it is due.

I think it just might be the best juvenile, and even the best fantasy of the 20th century. Contenders, please? (Single books, only.)

Limiting it to juveniles (and I think there are adult fantasies that certainly contend), one might start with THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS (1917).

A few others:

L. Frank Baum's THE WIZARD OF OZ (1900) just barely squeaks in as a contender. Probably doesn't deserve to, but thought I'd mention it.

Susan Cooper -- no, not THE DARK IS RISING, but her astounding 1999 (just squeaking in at the other end) novel, KING OF SHADOWS. Child actor finds a father-figure in William Shakespeare. A two-hanky book, but for emotion, not sentiment.

E.L. Koenigsberg's FROM THE MIXED-UP FILES OF MRS. BASIL E. FRANKWEILER (1967) isn't a fantasy, but nonetheless. Well, maybe not -- it's probably no better than, say, Roald Dahl's better stuff, which I don't think belongs here. But somehow this one does.

I've already said I consider L'Engle's A WRINKLE IN TIME (1962) at least the equal of TGC.

Le Guin. A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA (1968). CATWINGS (1988). Nuff said.

I will probably lose all credibility with Alga, at least, when I name CS Lewis' THE VOYAGE OF THE DAWN TREADER (1952) and THE SILVER CHAIR -- easily the best of the Narnias, imio -- but I do. One can happily read either of these without a clue that the Great Lion is "really" Jesus.

Daniel Pinkwater: THE SNARKOUT BOYS AND THE AVOCADO OF DEATH (1982). Read at your peril, may cause drain bamage.

E.B. White, CHARLOTTE'S WEB. (1952)

There are probably others, but that's what came off the top of my head (with web lookups for dates).

Dan'I wrote:

No. Once is a joke. Twice might be jokes. Three or four times, let alone the dozens of things that have similar quasi-referentiality to our world For examplw: all the places with same or similar names -- I could almost grant that if only as a conceptual "translation" to give readers a clear sense of the geography. But the titles of persons [various Oxonian titles], the references to historical persons [i.e., Manicheism] ... the fact that the [European] culture of TGC's world is so _similar_ to ours, I suppose, is what bothers me most. It seems to lack a certain kind of inventiveness that I would hope would go into working out the ramifications of such a radically _different_ Earth.

Well, I haven't yet read TGC, but this is pretty common in alternate history fantasy. Canonical examples of worlds that would _really_ involve a lot less common names and history would include John Ford's

The Dragon Waiting (which, for on-topicness, Wolfe has said very nice things about, with justification) and/or the Randall Garrett books. Is Pullman doing anything different than that? Restricting the changes because you want the frisson of John Calvin/Richard III/etc. in different roles in your world vs. people nobody has heard of and who have no connotations seems like perfectly legitimate fictional technique.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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Michael Straight — 02 Aug 2001, 09:48 · follows Alex David Groce

On Wed, 1 Aug 2001, Alex David Groce wrote:

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Well, I haven't yet read TGC, but this is pretty common in alternate history fantasy.

I haven't read TGC either, but it can't be as egregious in this regard as Wolfe's _There Are Doors_. TAD may be more tolerable since it doesn't focus so much on the alternate world (which may even be a figment of the protagonist's imagination), but it was a real stumbling block for me. I almost didn't pick up on what was weird about the alternate world because I couldn't imagine something so radically different in a world that was otherwise do much like ours.

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I think it's stupid. An alternate world might have a "Pope John Calvin," but it would have to be an utterly different person that just happens to have the same name. The alleged "frisson" of

"What would Hitler have been like as a Hollywood movie star?" does nothing for me. It's my second-least favorite trope in fiction right after the alleged "frisson" I'm supposed to feel on finding out that the villain is really the hero's brother/father/aunt/long-lost-pet/etc. Not to say that good stories can't be written with these techniques, but for me they have to be good in spite of them.

-Rostrum