

Scattered Shots

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 02 Aug 2001

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 02 Aug 2001, 10:13

Replies to various persons in a single email 'cause I'm lazy.

To Jasper:

Aaargh. I can't _believe_ I left out Alan Garner. (I'm not sure if I'd have added Diana Wynne Jones, because somehow I have never read her...)

To Alex David Groce:

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

TGC is not just an "alternate history fantasy," in which some random event in the past has historical ramifications. I think most of these (there are exceptions, like _THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE_) are simply silly, and almost precisely to the extent that they do the "what would Richard III or John Calvin have done in this world?" bit.

(Confession: I once worked out just such an alternate history, in almost-excruciating detail, beginning with the assumption that Friar Bacon's researches to prove the nullity of magic had in fact proven its efficiacy. I wound up making Martin Luther Pope. But for ghod's sake, that was just background for a roleplaying game!)

But, as I say, TGC is not such a story. It isn't set in a world where Lincoln survived, or Jesus was a woman, or some other historical counterfactual. It is set in a world where human souls exist as externally visible beings (which, because they're generally of the opposite sex of their human, I think of as animae/animi), where at least some form of magic works, and where polar bears (I don't know about other kinds) have developed sentience, opposable thumbs, glotti capable of forming sounds similar to those of human language, and a metallurgy capable of forging bullet-stopping body armor.

And we're expected to believe this world has its Oxford, complete with porters, scouts, and Masters and Rectors; that there's a Christian Church, complete with (historical) Popes and Manichees ... Hell, just the assumption that this world is dominated by white European culture is damnably hard to swallow, let alone that it's so similar in so many ways to ours.

Pullman just _does not bother_ to work out the ramifications of his ideas.

To Tony Ellis:

N, I'm not daemonizing Pullman; I'm just insisting that he has failed to do something that would make an otherwise-excellent novel also work as an excellent fantasy.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell probably irritated a few easily-irritated Christians in its time too, but what it was supposed to do was make people think.

Which is fine by me. I don't object as such to anti-clericalism, or even anti-Christianism. I object to what I perceive as the rather childish way Pullman does it.

I would hope that a child reading Pullman's book might be very interested to learn that a word used by Christianity to mean an incarnation of evil originally meant something as harmless as "spirit",

I'm inclined to agree. Unfortunately, no child will learn that fact by reading THE GOLDEN COMPASS. The word is just used with no particular explanation. (I wouldn't be terribly surprised if it were explained when Lyra shows up in our world in the later books, but that doesn't help this book.) So I can't really accept that Pullman had such a paedagogical goal.

Given his external statements about Lewis (and, yes, I regard his attitude toward the Narnias as quite childish), I think it's pretty clear that the word "daemon" was chosen specifically for its rather limited shock value.

(And I can't help wondering if there wasn't a rather cynical commercial motive there, too. Perhaps he was hoping to gain some notoriety by having right-wing Christian groups ban the book?)

The Crushed Butterfly theory of time has been tediously fashionable in SF writing for a long time now, but it -is- just a theory.

See above: this isn't an alternate history; it's a world that is radically different. (Radically, in the literal and etymological sense. At the root.)

If [the conservation-of-history] theory leads to more books like Pullman's, or Wolfe's There Are Doors, where the changes are small and thought-provoking rather than huge and predictable, then I for one am happy to give "logic"

a

miss for a while. :-)

TAD is also not an alternate history but a world different at its root. (It is also quite possibly my least favorite of all Mr. Wolfe's novels, partly because his other-world is far, far too much like ours.)

To Rostrum:

You wrote that the title _The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities_ "makes me want to go out and give him a try." If so, it's even more of a shame than

usual that the damn thing isn't available.

I highly recommend its predecessor, _Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand_, and indeed most of his work. I find his "pornotopic" novels quite difficult to take, and some of his early work doesn't stand up quite as well as it might. But he's never written a _bad_ book.

Other good starting points would include _Empire Star_ (quite short, and the only Delany novel that qualifies as just plain fun); _Dhalgren_ (but with the caveat that it's extraordinarily difficult, in a very different way from Wolfe); and _Nova_ (which Algis Budrys once described as a "perfect" book, meaning it in a rather double-edged way -- perfection can become sterile: but which I wish someone with Lucas' resources would film well).

Also, Mandatory Wolfe Content. Regarding TAD, you observe that: "All of human history and

society would be very, very, very different if men died immediately after having intercourse ... No man would have more than one child! Every man alive would be celibate."

To be fair, Wolfe does deal with both these issues, by making it clear that a woman can store sperm for multiple pregnancies, and by making the male sex drive stronger in his alternate world. (Failure to deal with either would have resulted in a world where the population would undergo rapid, radical, and terminal decline.)

Finally, to Spectacled Bear:

You raise the only objection to my "lousy working out of the fantasy world" that I can even begin to accept, when you say:

Things are a lot more connected than she (or we) would expect. No attempt at explanation is made; it's simply beyond our present degree of knowledge. I can respect that a lot more than books that simply ignore the question.

Moi aussi. It doesn't help TGC as a stand-alone novel, but it isn't really intended as a stand-alone. (Hell, it ends with a massive cliff-hanger. What I've said so far is something like criticising *The Fellowship of the Ring* without having read *The Two Towers* and *The Return of the King*.) If it becomes clear in the later novels that the worlds are connected, even though those connections are not explained, well, yes, that would help. (I still think that such a world would be more radically different than Pullman paints it, but this puts him within the realm of conscientiously working out his world rather than just drifting into speculative conservatism.)

--Dan'l

Alex David Groce — 02 Aug 2001, 13:55 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l said:

TGC is not just an "alternate history fantasy," in which some random event in the past has historical ramifications. I think most of these (there are exceptions, like *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE*) are simply silly, and almost precisely to the extent that they do the "what would Richard III or John Calvin have done in this world?" bit.

I fail to see why they are silly; considering them to be science-fiction rather than fantasy strikes me as odd, but that's another story. The examples I came up with and (how on earth did I not think of this?) *There are Doors* are not perhaps in worlds as radically different as Pullman's, but they're not simple "Ghandi becomes a car salesman" stuff, which often *is* silly (I'm thinking of some Baby Boomers obsession with putting JFK and other historical figures through every possible profession, although when Howard Waldrop does it I like it).

Think of the technique as a musical variation on a theme in real history. *The Dragon Waiting* has a Richard III not unrelated to ours, or arbitrarily changed--I think there's a possibility for the study of character and contingent situations in this kind of thing. Garrett's Lord Darcy stories aren't up to that kind of thing, but the altered but near background works well for me, at least. Keith Roberts' *Pavane* would also be in this class, and also changes more than history--in all of these, magic really works, which would presumably (but what does a counterfactual even mean?) alter the world beyond recognition just as Wolfe's reproductive cycle in *There are Doors* would. Actually, Wolfe shows one reason to do this: the whole ambiguity of the Green's sanity would be much less interesting if the other world were completely and utterly different, not just a reworking of themes in our own history.

Expecting fantasies to follow a rigorous logic that (a) is in a sense as hypothetical as the logic of these stories and (b) would destroy the fictional aim of the author and much of the enjoyment of the story for many people strikes me as unfair.

I'll also add that Walter Jon Williams in *_Aristoi_* uses daemon in its classical sense, and that Pullman could be just borrowing a reasonable coinage from Socrates. On the other hand, one reason I've put off reading the series so far is that the anti-Lewis essays struck me as the work of a particularly rude village atheist whose hatred for Christianity moved him to berate Lewis for writing books for children that might (gasp and horror of horrors) move them to think differently than Pullman, and then set out to do the same thing himself, secure that his side wasn't propaganda, it was plain and simple truth. But that's unfair--there are plenty of writers I enjoy despite their utterly wrongheaded opinions, and I shouldn't let the fact that I ran into Pullman at his worst turn me away from trying his books. That he disdains fantasy except for Terry Brooks is what should really worry me...

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

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Spectacled Bear — 03 Aug 2001, 11:25 · follows Alex David Groce

At 18:13 2001-08-02, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
(of Samuel Delany)

I highly recommend its predecessor, *_Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand_*, and indeed most of his work. I find his "pornotopic" novels quite difficult to take, and some of his early work doesn't stand up quite as well as it might. But he's never written a *_bad_* book.

Other good starting points would include *_Empire Star_* (quite short, and the only Delany novel that qualifies as just plain fun); *_Dhalgren_* (but with the caveat that it's extraordinarily difficult, in a very different way from Wolfe); and *_Nova_* (which Algis Budrys once described as a "perfect" book, meaning it in a rather double-edged way -- perfection can become sterile: but which I wish someone with Lucas' resources would film well).

Nova is one of my favourite books of all time. Filming it well would be a challenge: firstly, because if you leave the cinema with all your senses fully functioning, the film probably hasn't done the book justice; and secondly, because of the extraordinary literary special effect used for the nova. I don't know if this counts as a spoiler or not, but most of us have surely had a chance to read the book by now...

**** MILD SPOILER FOR *_Nova_* ****

The book left me with a tremendous impression of heat and light and noise. One day I happened to pick it up, and went to read the fabulous description of the nova. I was quite startled to find that.....

.... it isn't there. There isn't one. They go in and come out again with hardly a word of description. Instead of a futile attempt to convey the sensation of going through an exploding star with a few paragraphs of concentrated Doc Smith-ian hyperbole, there is a gradual build-up of lesser events that are more amenable to description. Scenes like the one in *Gold* leave an cumulative impression that in the end exceeds anything that a direct description could do.

Spectacled Bear

-- waiting for Ashton Clark

Tony Ellis — 04 Aug 2001, 15:45 · follows Spectacled Bear

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

I would hope that a child reading Pullman's book might be very interested to learn that a word used by Christianity to mean an incarnation of evil originally meant something as harmless as "spirit",

I'm inclined to agree. Unfortunately, no child will learn that fact by reading THE GOLDEN COMPASS. The word is just used with no particular explanation. (I wouldn't be terribly surprised if it were explained when Lyra shows up in our world in the later books, but that doesn't help this book.) So I can't really accept that Pullman had such a paedagogical goal.

Hey, -my- hypothetical child occasionally looks words up when it finds them being used in an unexpected manner, or asks a grown-up. I can't help it if your hypothetical child is too lazy. :-)

As for Pullman's alleged "childishness"... We're getting down to personal taste here, and it seems pointless to argue about that. You say "childish", I say "pleasingly irreverent".

The main thing is that you're still enjoying the story. I hope you enjoy the other two books as well.