

Son of Scattered Shots

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 03 Aug 2001

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Aug 2001, 10:48

To John Bishop:

Personally, of the Narnia books I prefer `_The_Magician's_Nephew_`, because it has that wonderful vision of a dying world, and because the Empress castigates the English, "You treat your slaves poorly", to which they reply "But they aren't slaves". That exchange could make a middle-class child of the time `_think_` about the status of the working class.

That was my favorite when I first read them, at age -- well, third grade or so, wossat, about 9? Something like that. Perhaps I reread it too many times, perhaps it has palled as I discovered the more subtle stuff in the two books I mentioned, and just maybe it's a hidden resentment at the renumbering of the books that puts TMN at the front, where it clearly does not belong. But it's a good'un.

But which ever book is your favorite, they're clearly in the short list of "possible best juvenile fantasy of the 1900s".

I concur. It manages to, as Alga says, push an agenda, but does it without direct preaching. Translation: It's `_about_` something. If Pullman (or Alga) happens not to like what it's about, if it ain't philosophically correct, well, tough. I never cease to be amazed at the closed minds of many (what used to be called) "free-thinkers."

To Alex David Groce [re what-if alternate histories]:

I fail to see why they are silly;

Please note I said I considered `_most_` of them silly; that's just a specific application of Sturgeon's Law. I mentioned one specific counterexample (THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE), I could mention others -- you for example mentioned PAVANE, which is also not-silly. (It barely escapes silliness by sheer brutal force of being so damn good.) And I also like and admire the work of Howard Who, but I `_do_` consider much, maybe most, of it silly, in a good way, like Monty Python at their very silly best. (Hint: My favorite Waldrop story is "Save a Place in the Lifeboat for Me.") Silliness is not a bad thing when it is intentional, when it is used for humor -- Connie Willis does this brilliantly (i.e., "Spice Pogrom," "Blued Moon," TO SAY NOTHING OF THE DOG, etc.)

What I consider almost-always irredeemable silliness is a writer who begins by making a fairly dramatic, major change in the past, and then, decades or centuries later, floating the same people, with the same names and (more or less) personalities, to the foreground that we had in our nominally-real history.

It's easy to dismiss this as "the crushed butterfly theory," a name that clearly derives from Bradbury's "The Delicate Sound of Thunder." But if you actually think things through, it's much harder to ignore the basic fact that `_actions have consequences_`, dammit. If Nietzsche hadn't written `_Also Sprach`

Zarathustra_, would Hitler [whom Nietzsche, who detested anti-Semites quite as much as he detested Jews, would have detested] have risen to power? Probably. But if some time-traveller were to strangle Hitler in his crib, I'm willing to bet the Holocaust would turn out not to have happened, at least not in the form and to the extent it actually did. ("Horror, We Got.")

considering them to be science-fiction rather than fantasy strikes me as odd, but that's another story.

I tend to agree, except that I question the distinction. The two are not mutually exclusive; this distinction comes from a tendency to treat genre as a pigeonhole rather than an adjective, a tendency I suspect of coming from the innate conservatism of the SF community, its desire to preserve the "purity" of SF, a purity which (simply) never existed and never will exist. You can't have pure SF any more than you can have pure blue. It has to be blue _something_, even if it's blue light.

Alternate-history can be SF depending on how the writer thinks of (and, possibly, justifies textually) the existence of the alternate world -- is it one of them ol' debbil quantum manifold things? Then it's science fiction. (But only if the fact that it is a quantum manifold thingy actually has some effect on the story -- whether it be style or plot or whatever.) Are we just playing make-believe, what-if? Then the terms "sf" and "fantasy" (at least in the sense of generic fantasy) are pretty much irrelevant.

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,

Agreed.

which often _is_ silly (I'm thinking of some Baby Boomers obsession with putting JFK and other historical figures through every possible profession,

... and so am I. To me, most alt-history books seem to be more or less this sort of thing.

Okay, there's a kind of blurry line. Is TGC, is TAD an alternate history? I think TAD isn't and TGC shouldn't be but is, which is precisely my point. For all its many and varied flaws, at least TAD doesn't try to make its alternate world look as much like ours as possible: I think it should have been _more_ different, but the failure is of degree, not kind. In TGC, the failure is of kind; Pullman can almost be seen bending over backwards to make his otherworld as much like ours as he can get away with, given the differences and the points he wants to make.

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 do not expect fantasies to follow the logic of our world; I expect them to follow the logic of the world the writer has created, whatever that is. If the writer chooses to create a world where there are no rational numbers, I can go with that, but I want to see the consequences. If the writer wants to create a world where the concepts of "true" and "false" statements are not useful, I can go with that too. (In fact, that may be _our_ world.)

But if the writer wants to create a world that is radically different from our world, and then make it so much like our world that the differences almost seem not to have made a difference -- no, I won't buy that.

See my response to Tony Ellis below for an example of the kind of logic I am talking about.

That [Pullman] disdains fantasy except for Terry Brooks is what should really worry me...

If this is true, I'm ... shocked. That is one of the most astounding lapses of taste I have ever heard of. I mean, the man clearly has a sensitive ear for style; he clearly understands plot and character. (The only possible conclusion is that he has not read The Lord of the Rings.)

To Joel Sieh:

I noticed that a few people listed A Wizard of Earthsea as one of their best books. I was just curious why....

Personally: because I found it incredibly engaging; because the whole trilogy (again I implicitly condemn myself for judging TGC on its own!) is, perhaps, the best demonstration I have ever seen that one can write for children about serious matters (growing up, responsibility, identity, love, death, impermanence, balance...) without preaching or talking down -- better at that, in fact, than the Narnias; and, while it suffers from Le Guin's characteristic humorlessness, that's actually a relief when compared to the Narnias' broad, guffawing humor (which I have never found terribly funny; I think it must be a British thing).

Also because, though a Christian, I have always been deeply drawn to the Taoist view of life, which I consider to be the highest form of "natural" wisdom to which humanity has ever aspired, and Le Guin's work (especially here, and in her three great adult books of the same period [THE LATHE OF HEAVEN - a glorious exception to her humorlessness - THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS and THE DISPOSSESSED]) beautifully encapsulates the Taoist view. No, not "encapsulates," you can't do that -- illustrates? Demonstrates? I dunno. If I could find the right word for it, it probably wouldn't be the right word.

... I didn't feel like I could get close to the characters or even really know them or see them as anything more than 2-dimensional.

How odd. I felt quite the opposite; I felt that I knew Ged better than many of the people I was going to school with when first I read it.

I did read Susan Cooper's The Dark is Rising, however, and at the time was more impressed with some of the books, most notably The Grey King than I later was with A Wizard of Earthsea.

They are darn good books. Now go read KING OF SHADOWS; it's much, much better.

I guess I'd put The Hobbit and maybe even the rest of LotR, even though LotR is probably better suited for adults.

The reason I excluded THE HOBBIT is that (a) it is full of awful moments when he talks down to his reader and (b) it isn't really a twentieth-century novel at all, it's a Victorian fairy-story.

Mind you, I love it, but it's deeply flawed in a number of ways...

To Tony Ellis (who quotes Michael Straight):

All of human history and society would be very, very, very different if men died immediately after having intercourse.

Different, certainly. "Very, very, very different" is conjecture.

Ummmm... no. For example, the following things are absolutely true of such a world:

- o There would be none of the historical contests between two sons of one king by different mothers.
- o While there might (possibly) be some concept of marriage, they would certainly not have the concept of marriage

as a chattel ownership of the woman's sexuality that protects the "right" of the father to make sure that all her children are his.

- o In fact, the concepts of legitimacy and bastardy, as we know and hate or love or ignore them, would not evolve.
- o No father would ever raise his children.
- o The entire concept of the Oedipal conflict (however you choose to interpret it) would be missing from the culture. (The psychology of sex and sexual competition would be very, very different in general.)
- o There would be no, or very few, old men. (These would probably be either revered (as wise) or reviled (as cowards who didn't perform their "duty").)
- o Hell -- _marketing_ would be radically different 8*).
- o The classic problem of a (straight) woman trying to find a "good man" would be greatly exacerbated. (On the other hand, men probably wouldn't worry very much about whether they were "good in bed.")

Would the changes you describe necessarily all work in the same direction, and shift history onto a completely different track, or would half of them cancel out the other half, and the overall shape of history remain more or less the same?

Possibly there would be some "cancellation," but given the absolute differences that _must_ follow from the premise, I can't see history simply healing over.

Mythology, literature -- all the arts except music and maybe painting would be very different in their form and content.

I don't see how dismissing two of these theories in favour of a third, when in fact no one knows what happens when human history is altered, has anything to do with logic at all.

Well, it's like this. If you postulate something, you have to accept what follows from the postulate, or you are not playing the game honestly. If you create a world of the sort Wolfe creates in TAD and then show a father raising his children in that world, you are either stupid or dishonest

Unless, of course, you have something more in mind (he's not from that world, a la Green in TAD; or he's some kind of mutant or other bushwah -- though I should think that simply exploring the ramifications of the differentia would be interesting enough without having to screw around with an additional improbable mutation; or something of that general sort...).

I am trying to hold a space open for that "something else in mind" in Pullman's case. If the subsequent books convince me that Lyra's world is so similar to ours because they influence each other, I'm jiggy with it. If not, then I will conclude that Pullman is cheating his readers and -- more importantly -- his work.

To Spectacled Bear:

I have always suspected that the climax of NOVA was influenced by the shower scene in PSYCHO.

--Dan'I

William Ansley — 06 Aug 2001, 00:51 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

At 10:48 AM -0700 8/3/01, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
It's easy to dismiss this as "the crushed butterfly theory,"
a name that clearly derives from Bradbury's "The Delicate Sound
of Thunder."

This is interesting. When I read the above title, I said to myself, "No, that's not it. It's 'The Sound of Distant Thunder'."

But I thought I had better confirm the title before I posted anything. And I couldn't. The actual title is "A Sound of Thunder" which is found in the collection R is for Rocket by Ray Bradbury.

What makes it interesting is that it seems that Dan'I* and I are not the only ones who misremember the title slightly. While I was searching the Internet in an attempt to confirm my recollection, I found people who recalled it as "A/The Sound of Distant Thunder" and "A/The Distant Sound of Thunder."

Although the story made quite an impression on me when I first read it when I was quite young, I have to say that I now regard the premise as almost completely flawed.

Below is a long quote from the story that explains the premise. This is from
<<http://filmforce.ign.com/articles/36294p1.html>> (Apparently Hollywood is thinking of turning "Thunder" into a film, which raises some questions: Will the film get made? If it does, will it bear as little resemblance to the original story as Total Recall did to the Philip K. Dick story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" that it was based on? Will any of us care either way?)

However, as we all know, going back in time is a risky proposition, as Eckels' guide, Travis, explains: "Say we accidentally kill one mouse here. That means all the future families of this one particular mouse are destroyed, right?...And all the families of the families of the families of that one mouse! With a stamp of your foot, you annihilate first one, then a dozen, then a thousand, a million, a billion possible mice!...Well, what about the foxes that'll need those mice to survive? For want of ten mice, a fox dies. For want of ten foxes a lion starves. For want of a lion, all manner of insects, vultures, infinite billions of life forms are thrown into chaos and destruction. Eventually it all boils down to this: fifty-nine million years later, a caveman, one of a dozen on the entire world, goes hunting wild boar or saber-toothed tiger for food. But you, friend, have stepped on all the tigers in that region. By stepping on one single mouse. So the caveman starves. And the caveman, please note, is not just any expendable man, no! He is an entire future nation.

From his loins would have sprung ten sons. From their loins one hundred sons, and thus onward to a civilization. Destroy this one man, and you destroy a race, a people, an entire history of life. It is comparable to slaying some of Adam's grandchildren. The stomp of your foot, on one mouse, could start an earthquake, the effects of which could shake our earth and destinies down through Time, to their very foundations. With the death of that one caveman, a billion others yet unborn are throttled in the womb. Perhaps Rome never rises on its seven hills. Perhaps Europe is forever a dark forest, and only Asia waxes healthy and teeming. Step on a mouse and you crush the Pyramids. Step on a mouse and you leave your print, like a Grand Canyon, across Eternity. Queen Elizabeth might never be born, Washington might not cross the Delaware, there might never be a United States at all. So be careful. Stay on the Path. Never step off!" Needless to say, Eckels does "step off the path" with chilling results.

(The whole story is on line here <<http://www.sba.muohio.edu/snively/415/thunder.htm>>. What copyright violations or that lack thereof may be involved, I have no idea.)

Anyway, here's the flaw. If you kill a mouse or any other animal** in the past, you will wipe out all of its descendents, perhaps many billions of mice, if you are far enough back in time. But will this cause an avalanche of changes to thunder down the corridors of time? I don't think so. More of the descendants of all of the other contemporaneous mice will live and the mouse population will be virtually (or even absolutely) unchanged, so the mouse predators and those who prey on them will see no difference. Mice are pretty much interchangeable, at least as food, so, unless you kill the "first" or the only mouse (or a mouse that is unique in some other way), it really won't make much of a difference.

Now we would like to think that all human beings are unique, and certainly killing a person rather than a mouse would seem to have a much greater potential for changing history, but I think in most cases that that same argument can be applied. History will be conserved***, but at least some of the individuals involved will be different and the details will very probably be different as well!

So, Pullman's alternate world which is so completely different from ours in so many ways but still has a recognizable Oxford in it and a John Calvin, still in a prominent, church-related role, strikes me as being just plain silly.

William Ansley

*Dan'l, there was a Pink Floyd concert film released in 1989 called "Delicate Sound of Thunder". Might you have been thinking of this?

**The creature actually killed in the story was a butterfly, hence the name "the crushed butterfly theory."

***How many of you remember Fritz Leiber's "Law of Conservation of Reality"? This was a definite attempt to counter "the crushed butterfly theory."

Michael Straight — 06 Aug 2001, 08:46 · follows William Ansley

On Mon, 6 Aug 2001, William Ansley wrote:

Now we would like to think that all human beings are unique, and certainly killing a person rather than a mouse would seem to have a much greater potential for changing history, but I think in most cases that that same argument can be applied. History will be conserved***, but at least some of the individuals involved will be different and the details will very probably be different as well!

Have we so soon forgotten Castlevue? "We are all Arthur's descendents." Go back far enough, and killing one person could effect most of the gene pool of a 20th century continent. All the individuals will be different.

-Rostrum