

Hamilton's "Night's Dawn" Trilogy

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 15 Aug 2001

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Nigel Price — 15 Aug 2001, 15:42

How's that for timing?

I've just got back from holiday in France, where I finally finished "The Naked God", the third and final volume of Peter F. Hamilton's wonderful "Night's Dawn" trilogy. The whole time I was reading it, I was thinking, "I wonder whether I should mention this book on the Urth list?" After all, the series deals with so many of the themes that Wolfe has dealt with over the years, but is so utterly, utterly different in its style and treatment from anything Wolfe ever has written or probably ever would write.

I thought that the books might be of interest to some of you, and wondered what fellow Lupines would make of the whole thing. Then I got back yesterday and started reading through my e-mail, and found that the topic had already been raised on the list.

OK, it seems it is all right to mention Hamilton here, so here goes!

* Warning! Mild spoilers ahead! *

To start at the beginning: "Night's Dawn" is a single if highly discursive novel in three huge volumes. These are called:

The Reality Dysfunction (1996)

The Neutronium Alchemist (1997)

The Naked God (1999)

In the UK paperback edition, "Night's Dawn" is over 3,600 pages long, so that even the individual volumes consist of over 1,200 pages each. I understand that the US editions are slightly differently divided to those published here in the UK, so you need to make sure you read a uniform edition from whichever country you source your reading matter from.

There's also a fourth, related, volume of short stories called "A Second Chance at Eden" (1998). These stories are set in the same universe as "Night's Dawn", although they take place before the events recounted in the longer work.

Not to give away too much at this stage, the plot of "Night's Dawn" is set in the late 26th century and concerns the discovery that souls have a real, physical existence and retain their individual identity even after death, albeit in another, parallel, dimension. This dimension, "the beyond", is a place of continual torment and suffering. Through a convoluted set of circumstances, the souls of the dead regain access to the physical universe, where they can live again if they possess the bodies of living persons. This they do with malicious enthusiasm, exploiting their residual connection with the beyond and the "potential difference" (my terminology) between the two realms not only to possess the living but also to wield extensive "energistic powers" (Hamilton's terminology!) which allow them to mould appearance and, to a

certain extent, reality, to their whim and fancy. They command considerable firepower in the form of bolts of white fire and can, when there are enough of them of one mind and in the same physical place, move whole planets into alternate dimensions.

Stylistically, "Night's Dawn" is a glorious farrago of sub-genres, mixing hard SF and space opera (space grand opera, indeed!) with out-and-out horror and dark fantasy. The whole thing shouldn't really work at all, but does, splendidly, making the dislocations between genre expectations a central part of the story. This is, indeed, part of the "reality dysfunction" described in the title of the first volume.

It is also one example of the ways in which Hamilton is similar to Wolfe but utterly different. In many of his works, and pre-eminently in the New-Long-Short-Sun cycle, Wolfe writes in that mixture of science fiction and fantasy which, as a convenient shorthand, we may call science fantasy. He uses the collision between the genres with great subtlety to explore issues of theology and psychology, providing quasi-scientific rationales for religious phenomena and using naturalistically described, albeit often science-fictional, events to provide symbolic types for key events in Christian sacred history. In Wolfe, reality continually appears to "explain away" the theological while inescapably evoking it symbolically, even as sufficient uncertainty is generated for the miraculous to remain a clear possibility.

Hamilton is an altogether less subtle author. His strong suits are plot and excitement, and I really ought to stress that the main reason for reading "Night's Dawn" is that it is the most wonderful page turner. The vast panoply of parallel plots and subplots zip along at an astonishing rate, and there are all sorts of breathless escapes and cliff-hanging last minute rescues. I am full of admiration for the way that Hamilton holds the whole thing together, meshing the different story lines and making a coherent whole out of so many different narratives.

I should add too that the baroque range of high technology on display is simply gorgeous, and, in so far as a layman like myself can tell, the copious astronomical and astrophysical details bandied about are accurate and convincing.

While many of the minor characters are straight from central casting, the main actors in the story are strongly and clearly depicted, and there is even plenty of sly humour scattered about, much of it highly satirical. There are some interesting sub-themes going on, too, particularly looking at the father-daughter relationship, a topic in which Hamilton seems especially interested (see, too, the disturbing story "Candy Buds" in "A Second Chance at Eden").

(Completely off topic, but what do other people make of Hamilton's take on race relations? As he makes clear in the story "New Days Old Times" in "A Second Chance at Eden", he is not optimistic that Earth's different peoples can ever get along together, even when given the additional elbow room of new planets and habitats to live in. Given the grim stories in the daily news, it's hard to say that he's wrong, but his fictional solution, ethnic streaming in Earth's planetary emigration policy, seems to smack of apartheid and the old South African doctrine of "separate development". Unlike many other aspects and injustices of the interstellar society he depicts, this policy does not seem to come in for either direct or indirect authorial criticism. Indeed, it allows Hamilton to exploit some mild national stereotyping in his portrayal of some characters, which, even just sticking to a literary point of view, seems a little lazy. Guiltily, I have to admit, however, that I did enjoy his humorous revenge on the country which inflicted "Neighbours" on us in his ghastly-but-funny portrayal of the gullible Australian teenagers who, as if straight from the script of that egregiously awful antipodean soap opera, get taken in by the advertising campaign mounted by the evil dead who are taking over the Valisk space habitat. I am also ashamed to admit that I enjoyed the comic chauvinism evident in Hamilton's

account of the misadventures of the evil gallic space pirate, Andre Duchamp, who blames all the ills on the future on "those evils Anglos"...)

But, even with everything else that is going on, Hamilton does tackle some of the Big Issues. He ponders on the nature of the soul and even gives science fictional versions of purgatory, heaven and hell. The main socio-political groupings of humanity are Edenists and Adamists, and the story ends with the heroine confronting the devil (all right, a devil) and the hero finding god (oh, all right, a sort of god, but I'm not saying any more at this stage). There is much less ambiguity than in Wolfe, and the science fantasy is much less stable, tending to dissolve into a science fictional rationale rather than maintaining an enigmatic equilibrium between the imperatives of science and religion. Hamilton's mysticism has a distinctly humanistic flavour, and ultimately turns out to have an egalitarian and even a mildly socialist agenda. He is extremely good, though, at posing and answering the question, "So what happens after that?" The three volumes are devoted to such questions as, what happens after death? What happens when a star dies? What happens after a civilisation destroys itself in war? What happens after you've escaped to another dimension? What happens after the universe collapses in on itself? All in all, this willingness to extend narrative after what in other contexts would be the end is one of the major reasons why "Night's Dawn" is so interesting - and so long.

An almost final note: Hamilton seems to have read every major space opera and SF book of the past few years, and watched all the most prominent SF and horror films and TV shows too. He gleefully includes every scene, theme and cliché you can think of somewhere in his own work, often acknowledging the theft with an overt reference to some key word or episode in the original, just to let you know that he knows you know what he's doing. You'll find all your favourites here, from "Childhood's End" to "The Exorcist" to "Ringworld". (Bizarrely, even "The Godfather" gets a look in.) Iain M Banks has clearly been a major influence, and the opening chapter, with its overwhelming techno-jargon and hyper-destructive space weaponry, is written as an amusing homage to E E "Doc" Smith as rewritten by Iain Banks (c.f. the opening space battle in Banks' "Excession"), as pastiched by Peter Hamilton.

While others might want to track down, for example, the nice little C J Cherryh pastiche, or the multiple borrowings from the already eclectic "Babylon 5", for us devoted Lupophiles, the principle interest in this spot-the-reference festival is, of course, tracking down homages to our own favourite author. While the vast cylindrical space habitats such as Tranquillity, with their centrally suspended axial light tubes, will inevitably remind us of the Long Sun Whorl, what about the business of the suspected "secret metamorph aborigines" on pages 224-225 of the standard UK paperback edition of "The Reality Dysfunction". An allusion to "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" or what?

A final, final note. How can anyone resist a book where the heroine lives at a place called Cricklade? The real Cricklade is about five miles down the road from where I live. Sadly, the real Cricklade doesn't evoke L P Hartley in quite the way that the fictional one does (OK, there's another homage for you - "The Go-Between"), and, even more sadly, none of the locals are quite as lovely as the delightful Louise Kavanagh, but I thought that you might be interested to know that the next village to the south of the real Cricklade is called Latton. Not quite the same spelling as the character in the book, but an interesting coincidence even so.

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