

literary forensics

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 14 Apr 2002

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maa32 — 14 Apr 2002, 23:39

A bit off any discernible topic, I was home last weekend and read an interesting article in Reader's Digest entitled "Word Sleuth", which details the literary forensics of the man who successfully identified the Unabomber and the author of Primary Colors based on style comparisons with candidates. The fascinating thing about the whole thing was the manner in which he identified the Unabomber - Ted read a lot of British novels and used some of their spelling, coupled with several of their expressions: "You can eat your cake and have it too."

However, as I thought about the novels we read affecting our style (obviously there are still some individual differences), I was even more intrigued after making my mother read Mr. Gevers' article praising Wolfe. She said, "Are you sure you didn't write this?" (I will take that as a compliment to my writing rather than an insult to yours, Mr. Gevers). "You write almost exactly like this." (The list is a rather poor place to see examples of my writing style, since here I strive for clarity rather than beauty in prose - and my very fast and inaccurate typing (coupled with no spell check) often leaves me disappointed in the quality of my posts).

I wonder how much of the echo in our styles (the maternal eye would be able to catch those similarities, right?) can be caused by our exposure to Wolfe? And do we in turn owe our style to some dim source that we could not possibly comprehend directly? (like, say, C.K. Scott Moncrieff or even Constance Garnet) Obviously, the article stresses that we all have a unique, distinctive composition style, but I wonder how much is ripped unconsciously from outside sources. For example, for years I realize I tried to fashion the opening lines of any story I thought about writing after Mike Moorcock's introductory sentence to *The War Hound and the World's Pain*, which went something like, "It was in that year when the fashion in cruelty demanded not only the crucifixion of small peasant children, but also their small animals, that I was transported to Hell; it seems Lucifer wanted to strike a bargain with me." (Obviously, another paraphrase, but isn't that a great line?) I've also always admired the closing lines of Zelazny's *Lord of Light*.

I just thought it was kind of interesting to think about how much our style might be shaped by what we emulate (and Wolfe also made the claim that his style hasn't changed over the years, I believe, which seems odd when thinking about the choppy sentences that proliferate throughout *The Book of the Short Sun* in comparison with the longer and more difficult to follow sentence structures Wolfe employed frequently throughout *Peace* and *The New Sun* books).

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