

Star vampires ate my hamster!

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 19 Apr 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3179>

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Nigel Price — 19 Apr 2002, 23:08

I too followed Jerry's link to the Google discussion group earlier this week, though the main source of my surprise when I got there was that I actually recognised the names of one or two of the contributors to the discussion as members of our very own dear Urth list. Goodness, it was almost as if they were real people, with independent lives outside the confines of these virtual pages! Surely not?

Anyway, despite the superurthly presence of these various lupine literary luminaries, I couldn't see myself wanting to join such a disjointed and variegated discussion. It seemed to go all over the place. Quite unlike our own purposeful and focused deliberations.

Ahem.

Concerning the vehemently adverse response expressed by some of the contributors to the Google discussion: it's a sobering reminder of some of the reasons why Wolfe remains a minority taste. He is difficult and demanding, and most people want easy and diverting. (I think that someone around here recently wrote very cogently about this topic in some sort of American newspaper.) But the question of Wolfe's choice of subject matter should not be overlooked. We all agree that he is a brilliant author, but I distinctly remember being put off by the title of "The Shadow of the Torturer" when someone first recommended it to me. I expected something violent and sordid (though I suppose, actually, that Severian is somewhat violent and certainly sworded), and was astonished by the beauty of the narrative when I did, finally, consent to give it a try. Some readers, though, will not get as far as I did, and will just be put off - full stop.

But it will be a problem for many of those who do go on to read him that Wolfe deliberately, perversely and persistently fills his narratives with what are, in their rawest and most basic forms, the clichéd plots and tropes of the cheesiest of pulp SF and tawdry, trashy fantasy.

You want space vampires? Go to the Short Sun series! You want bondage love affair with imprisoned girl in torture chamber? Go to the New Sun books! You want BIG sublight spaceship, going wrong like they all do because it has been in space so long? Go to the Long Sun series! Lowly orphan boy ends up being king? Yep! Hero goes on big spaceship to strange alien world and has exciting sex with beautiful alien girl? Hero goes off in boat and makes friends with intelligent animal and has exciting sex with beautiful one-armed mermaid? Handsome young priest meets buxom hooker with a heart of gold? (Well, meets buxom hooker, anyway.) Yes, yes, yes!

Put like that, Wolfe might be supposed to have written some of the trashiest stories of the last 40 years, and perhaps that is all that some readers can see.

Now, I would argue, of course, that Wolfe turns all this basest metal into the purest gold but it's worth considering why he is so prone to using this raw material in the first place.

I don't really know the full answer, because he can and does come up with a variety of splendidly original ideas at times, but here are some possible - partial - explanations.

First, then, there is an element of nostalgia. Wolfe has spoken of his boyhood love of pulp SF and of surreptitiously reading the SF magazines while hidden behind a counter or a display in the drug store. He transfers this aspect of his own character and experience to Tackie (Tackman Babcock), the boy at the centre of "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories". He likes this stuff, and regards it as central and perhaps canonical to what science fiction is all about.

Second, perhaps, though, is the element of challenge. The sheer difficulty of transforming this dross into literature seems to appeal to Wolfe. He writes, or rewrites, cod SF but makes it fresh and new, vibrant and infinitely subtle. He takes what he liked in childhood, and while staying true to himself and loyal to his favourite literature, reworks it so that it too becomes mature and fully adult. Yes, there are sex and violence in Wolfe's stories, but his characters also experience remorse, regret, sorrow, kindness, wonder, love, loss and a whole spectrum of other emotions consequent on their actions.

A third explanation may lie somewhere in Tackie's strange experiences, as he seeks escape in lurid adventure fantasy only to find the substance of his fantasy insinuating itself into the everyday reality of his life. Partly it's day-dreaming, partly it's interpreting reality through the symbolic language learned from SF and fantasy (something we perhaps see again in the Oz-derived visions experienced by Little Tib, the juvenile lead in "The Eyeflash Miracles"). But could it be too that, for Wolfe, the cliches of popular literature disguise or contain underlying, archetypal experiences? Life can, after all, be lurid. Life can be frightening. It can imitate art in all sorts of unexpected ways, and in telling what are essentially tales of wonder, it is hardly surprising that Wolfe will draw on sensational motifs to weave into his stories.

In the case of the books in the Urth Cycle (or whatever it is we're going to end up calling the New-Long-Short Sun series), there is also some sort of deliberate typology going on. I've banged on about this too often before, I know (see "Reverse Typology and the Inverse Alchemy of Time" in Urth 26 for example), but when we suddenly find ourselves on the set of the Universal Studios' production of "Frankenstein" at the end of TSotL, complete with mad scientist in castle, monstrous experiments in practical anatomy, and irate villagers with torches, Wolfe has Dr Talos claim that it's not a cliché inherited from the past at all. No, on the contrary, the horrors of Urth's dying days are the real thing, and all the horror film cliches of previous ages merely the premonitions.

"The castle? The monster? The man of learning?
I only just thought of it. Surely you know that
just as the momentous events of the past cast
their shadows down the ages, so now, when the
sun is drawing toward the dark, our own shadows
race into the past to trouble mankind's dreams."
(The Sword of the Lictor, Chapter XXXV,
"The Signal", p277 in the Arrow paperback
edition)

Ah, shadows yet again!

Have ever tired cliches sounded so fresh as when refashioned by the lupine master? Or lurid motifs achieved greater resonance and significance?

I don't claim to answered all the problems surrounding, for example, Wolfe's portrayal of women or his recurrent depiction of sexual violence, but here are some thoughts anyway!

Nigel

James Jordan — 20 Apr 2002, 15:31 · follows Nigel Price

Nigel,

I think you have 1/2 of the reason Wolfe uses this old SF tropes (that he grew up with it and has some nostalgia for it). The other is what he himself has said: that these are also the old tropes of traditional pre-modern literature. All premodern literature, he insists, is fantasy literature. The lurid stuff you mentioned is also in the Odyssey, the Kalevala, Bulfinch's **Mythology,** etc.; though of course not in the SF form.

Nutria