

In defence of "Operation Ares"

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 09 May 2002

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Nigel Price — 09 May 2002, 23:55

Christopher Culver wrote:

Does anyone know where to track down a copy of OPERATION ARES? It is supposedly an awful book, partly because of Wolfe's not yet mature style and bad editing, but I'd like a copy to make my Wolfe collection a bit more complete. Hey, I actually liked "Copperhead", so maybe I'll be thrilled at anything that has Wolfe's name on it.

I hope you find a copy, Christopher. Dobson, the UK publisher, who put it out in an incredibly drab and nasty hardback edition, were doing their best to shift the final copies out of their warehouse a while back and you could find hardback copies going cheap in remainder bookshops all over the place. I simply ordered mine from my local bookshop in Cirencester and it cost less than a paperback. I suppose that, if Dobson was successful, it may now be hard to find a new copy, but I see that a viable route to tracking down a second-hand edition has already been suggested.

I too have heard the adverse comments on "Operation Ares" and yes, sure, it's not a masterpiece, but I'd really like to defend it. It's a while since I read it, but I enjoyed the book and thought that it was fascinating, both in its own right, and as an introduction to some of the themes that would appear again in Wolfe's later novels. For example, you've got an early treatment of the political and spiritual decline of the West and the United States in particular, this time dealt with in the near future, rather than in the infinitely distant future. If you like, Wolfe gives us hear a sketch of both Ascia and Urth in embryo. Then again there's an explanation of how exotic wild animals come to be running free in the Americas. In "Operation Ares", the animals are from other continents rather than, as in TBotNS, from other worlds, but a similar principle may be thought to apply.

Most interestingly, though, there's an early example of Wolfe writing about a false religion which nevertheless may - possibly - be used by God and may contain some grain of distorted truth amidst much error. This, obviously, was going to be a major theme later on in the Long Sun books. Here, it's a popular but fraudulent Africanesque religious cult celebrating the inner beast in humanity and featuring a certain amount of cynical sleight of hand on the part of the cult leaders and, if I remember rightly, a former circus lion. Although the veneration of the latter is idolatrous, it also carries bizarre echoes of the role played by Lewis' Aslan, not to mention an alternative take on themes explored by Charles Williams in both "The Place of the Lion" (neoplatonic angelic entities manifesting themselves in the physical word as archetypal animals) and "Shadows of Ecstasy" (African idolatry and beastliness invading a smugly complacent Britain). And there's just the chance that an appearance of the lion saves the life of an attempted suicide. (Did I get that right? If not, someone's bound to correct me.)

There's an attempted revolution against a corrupt government and all sorts of interesting things going on, and if there are infelicities in the style and structure, then I still feel that these have

been exaggerated and many of the book's strengths overlooked.

Nigel