

Why I don't like TBOTSS

The Urth list — 15 messages, 9 voices, 23 May 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3275>

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Adam Stephanides — 23 May 2002, 14:30

It's not just the treatment of the inhum; the more I think about TBOTSS, the less I like it. To be sure, there's a lot of good stuff in it, and I myself have tried to make excuses for it in the past. But overall, it's a mess: full of "mysteries" which look more and more like sloppy writing the more they're discussed, ill-digested pulp trappings, and long, tedious descriptions of battles and politics.

And the more I think about it, the more Wolfe's failure to depict Horn's relationship with Krait seems like a cop-out. This relationship is, or should be, at the heart of the book: it mirrors Horn's unhappy relationship with Sinew, and it explains why he befriends Jahlee and other inhum. But instead of seeing how Horn comes to think of Krait as a son, we get snippets of pulp action and a melodramatic death scene. Regardless of what Wolfe's actual motives were, it feels like he didn't show the developing relationship because he couldn't figure out how to make it plausible. If (as I once suggested) Wolfe was attempting, as with PEACE, to give us a narrator whose "story" lies in what he fails to tell us, he has failed. While Weer emerges as a convincing character, even though virtually every scene we'd expect in a "life story" is missing, for me Horn never coheres as a character.

I'm not suggesting, I hasten to add, that those who like it are deceiving themselves or others. But I don't understand the seeming consensus that TBOTSS is a masterpiece, and equal to TBOTNS. To me, TBOTSS seems more like a parody of everything that made TBOTNS great.

--Adam

Andy Robertson — 31 May 2002, 20:36 · follows Adam Stephanides

----- Original Message -----

From: "Adam Stephanides" <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

I'm not suggesting, I hasten to add, that those who like it are deceiving themselves or others. But I don't understand the seeming consensus that TBOTSS is a masterpiece, and equal to TBOTNS. To me, TBOTSS seems more like a parody of everything that made TBOTNS great.

Are you sure it is not that you are seeing what is really in TBOTSS and are now disliking it?

In my opinion TBOTSS is a far more serious book.

It is about real, and therefore limited, human beings; not a demigod.

It is about grown-ups - people who have families and children; not a fornicating psychic adolescent.

It is about communities, and the price and failure of building a community; not about a roving

free agent.

In many respects it is dumber, duller. But that is the price of it being more intimate and rougher-grained.

hartshorn

Michael Straight — 23 May 2002, 19:58 · follows Andy Robertson

On Thu, 23 May 2002, Adam Stephanides wrote:

And the more I think about it, the more Wolfe's failure to depict Horn's relationship with Krait seems like a cop-out.

[...]

Regardless of what Wolfe's actual motives were, it feels like he didn't show the developing relationship because he couldn't figure out how to make it plausible.

Or maybe he edited it out because he wanted to show us the similar story of how Jahlee became Silkhorn's daughter, and having both seemed too repetitive.

Of course it's not the same, since Silkhorn isn't just Horn, and Horn loving Krait is probably even more of a stretch than Silkhorn loving Jahlee.

-Rostrum

Timothy Reilly — 24 May 2002, 00:37 · follows Michael Straight

From: "Adam Stephanides" <adamsteph at earthlink.net>

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TBOTSS is a masterpiece, and equal to TBOTNS. To me, TBOTSS seems more like a parody of everything that made TBOTNS great.

Adam, there's no such consensus. While I liked OBW I had grave doubts after IGJ, and these were confirmed by RTTW. I and many others expressed in detail why we did not think TBSS was successful long ago. I don't take part in the ongoing debates about details of TBSS now because I don't like it enough to be bothered, not because I have changed my mind.

Tim

Adam Stephanides — 24 May 2002, 14:30 · follows Timothy Reilly

on 5/31/02 3:36 PM, Andy Robertson at andywrobertson at clara.co.uk wrote:

In my opinion TBOTSS is a far more serious book.

I'm not sure the contrast between the two is as great as you make out; see below.

It is about real, and therefore limited, human beings; not a demigod.

While Horn may not have the miraculous powers of Sev (though he has weird talents of his own), I think that psychologically Sev is just as human as Horn, if not more so.

It is about grown-ups - people who have families and children; not a fornicating psychic adolescent.

Well, the "fornicating" part certainly applies to Horn. And while he has a family and children, he's rarely depicted as a family man. We see very little of Nettle, and Horn doesn't behave

much like a father to Hide and Hoof when he's traveling with them. And he doesn't give much thought to his family on his travels, iirc, aside from his obsession with Sinew, and throwaway remarks about how he misses Nettle.

It is about communities, and the price and failure of building a community;
not about a roving free agent.

Again, while Horn passes through communities, as did Sev, he is not committed to any of them; apart from his unwilling Rajandom, he basically is a "roving free agent."

In many respects it is dumber, duller. But that is the price of it being
more intimate and rougher-grained.

I'm not sure why the one should follow from the other. There are certainly tons of books about ordinary humans, families and communities which are neither dumb nor dull.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 25 May 2002, 14:42 · follows Adam Stephanides

on 5/23/02 7:37 PM, Timothy Reilly at treilly at ozemail.com.au wrote:
Adam, there's no such consensus. While I liked OBW I had grave doubts after IGJ, and these were confirmed by RTTW. I and many others expressed in detail why we did not think TBSS was successful long ago. I don't take part in the ongoing debates about details of TBSS now because I don't like it enough to be bothered, not because I have changed my mind.

I did remember that there were people who disliked TBOTSS. It was (and is) my impression that they are in the minority, at least among those who have spoken up on this list. And among professional reviewers, I don't recall reading a negative review. (It was Clute's enthusiastic mention of RTTW in his year-end wrap-up in LOCUS that provoked me to post.)

--Adam

Allan Lloyd — 25 May 2002, 21:04 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam,

Way back in the archives there is a post from me expressing deep dissatisfaction with the Short Sun books, and because of this, I too have not been taking much part in the discussion of the books.

My main point was that in the final book, I expected some sort of resolution to some of the problems and questions that Wolfe had been setting in the previous two books. Maybe this was unreasonable of me when dealing with Gene, but I was frustrated with the fact that he just kept raising more questions without giving enough clues in the text to solve any of them. (I also find some discussions in this group lately to be speculating more and more freely in trying to invent solutions that may fit the facts, but have no textual support.)

It could just be me, but I am feeling that in his more recent works, Wolfe has not been playing fair with his readers. I still think that he and Crowley are the best writers in the science fiction field, but I really don't think that his recent work has been up to his own high standards.

Certain stylistic habits are getting harder to bear. If I read one more narrator telling me that there are three reasons why he is doing something, but just happens to get sidetracked before he tells me all of them, or starts to explain a major incident in the plot, but veers off with a description of ways of growing cabbages, I may have to be restrained from tearing pages from books. Too many narrators are children, or people who don't write very well, or are not very

intelligent, just as an excuse to obscure facts and with-hold information that would normally be provided in the text. I find this a contrived and unnatural way of creating puzzles. A problem that arises through plotting, or genuine lack of knowledge on the part of a character, seems to me to be a proper part of a story, but having the narrator forget to tell us is becoming a contrivance.

Is it just me feeling particularly grumpy tonight, or does everyone else feel that these are justified ways of provoking thought and reflection on a story?

Allan

Andy Robertson — 25 May 2002, 22:20 · follows Allan Lloyd

----- Original Message -----

From: Allan Lloyd

Is it just me feeling particularly grumpy tonight, or does everyone else feel that these are justified ways of provoking thought and reflection on a story?

It's just you feeling grumpy. ;-)

No. I can see it. I have even had the experience of reading the SS books and having it come out like that. They are hard books to read and they take a lot of effort, continual effort, to read.

hartshorn

William Ansley — 26 May 2002, 04:45 · follows Andy Robertson

At 11:20 PM +0100 5/25/02, Andy Robertson wrote:

----- Original Message -----

From: Allan Lloyd

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hartshorn

I agree with Allan. I didn't care for the Short Sun books and I still don't.

Andy Robertson, in his passage above, suggests I have not put enough effort into reading the books. This may be true. In fact, it is very likely.

But writing is a two way street; I expect to get some kind of return for the effort I put into reading something, some kind of satisfaction. I have gotten that from most of what Gene Wolfe has written, enough, at least, so that I feel that I was part of a fair exchange. (And in many cases, the return I have gotten from reading Wolfe's work was much more than fair.) But I don't feel that way with the Short Sun books. They seem a bit slip shod, between mysteries being piled on mysteries and the seemingly unnecessary shoe-horning of the Urth of the Old Sun into the final volume. It may be that I am totally missing the grand design. But if that's the case I doubt I will ever see it; I am not likely to re-read the series.

Of course, someone on this list could post a revelatory message that makes me see the light, but I haven't been convinced by any attempts so far.

William Ansley

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Steve Strickland — 26 May 2002, 13:52 · follows William Ansley

TBOTSS is my favorite of all Wolfe's works. Though I can't claim to have solved every mystery the books have to offer, I don't think the "grand design" is nearly as difficult to grasp as some of the posts claim. I can't even begin to describe how rewarding these titles have been for me.

I cast my vote in favor of the SS.

Steve Strickland

----- Original Message -----

From: "William Ansley" <wansley at warwick.net>
To: <urth at urth.net>
Sent: Saturday, May 25, 2002 11:45 PM
Subject: Re: (urth) Re: [urth] Why I don't like TBOTSS
At 11:20 PM +0100 5/25/02, Andy Robertson wrote:

----- Original Message -----

From: Allan Lloyd

Is it just me feeling particularly grumpy tonight, or does everyone else feel that these are justified ways of provoking thought and reflection on a story?

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William Ansley

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Adam Stephanides — 28 May 2002, 18:13 · follows Steve Strickland

on 5/25/02 4:04 PM, Allan Lloyd at allan-lloyd at lineone.net wrote:

Adam,

Way back in the archives there is a post from me expressing deep dissatisfaction with the Short Sun books, and because of this, I too have not been taking much part in the discussion of the books.

Yes, I remembered that post. I reread it the other day, and it's a good one.

(I also find some discussions in this group lately to be speculating more and more freely in trying to invent solutions that may fit the facts, but have no textual support.)

Yes, this was another of the things that provoked me to articulate my dissatisfaction. Of course, people have done this with all Wolfe's works, but the Short Sun books seem to particularly invite it. Take, for example, Pig's being a godling, which has been confirmed by Wolfe thanks to Nick Gevers. As far as I can tell, this is a completely arbitrary detail. You practically have to make up a story of your own to give it any meaning.

Certain stylistic habits are getting harder to bear. If I read one more narrator telling me that there are three reasons why he is doing something, but just happens to get sidetracked before he tells me all of them, or starts to expain a major incident in the plot, but veers off with a description of ways of growing cabbages, I may have to be restrained from tearing pages from books.

Lol!

Too many narrators are children, or people who don't write very well, or are not very intelligent, just as an excuse to obscure facts and with-hold information that would normally be provided in the text. I find this a contrived and unnatural way of creating puzzles.

I don't think think the problem is the techniques Wolfe uses. Unexplained details, narrators who omit crucial information, pulp-SF elements: Wolfe has used all these before, in many of his best works. The difference is, as you said in your original post, that here they don't convince. In his earlier works they served to deepen and enrich; here, as you say, they come off as contrived and unnatural.

--Adam

Jerry Friedman — 28 May 2002, 20:32 · follows Adam Stephanides

--- Andy Robertson <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk> wrote:

----- Original Message -----

From: Allan Lloyd

Is it just me feeling particularly grumpy tonight, or does everyone else feel that these are justified ways of provoking thought and reflection on a story?

It's just you feeling grumpy. ;-)

No. I can see it. I have even had the experience of reading the SS books and having it come out like that. They are hard books to read and they take a lot of effort, continual effort, to read.

No doubt, and (or but) I get the feeling that they could have been similar but better books and easier to read at the same time. A feeling I don't get from the New Sun books.

Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman — 28 May 2002, 20:36 · follows Jerry Friedman

--- Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote:

On Thu, 23 May 2002, Adam Stephanides wrote:

And the more I think about it, the more Wolfe's failure to depict Horn's relationship with Krait seems like a cop-out.

[...]

Regardless of what Wolfe's actual motives were, it feels like he didn't show the developing relationship because he couldn't figure out how to make it plausible.

I liked the scenes we saw, and I didn't really feel the need for more.

Or maybe he edited it out because he wanted to show us the similar story of how Jahlee became Silkhorn's daughter, and having both seemed too repetitive.

Of course it's not the same, since Silkhorn isn't just Horn, and Horn loving Krait is probably even more of a stretch than Silkhorn loving Jahlee.

Not for me, since Krait has Sinew's soul, and the intense reasons Horn has to dislike Krait are not the years of habits that keep him from getting along with Sinew.

Jerry Friedman

Alex David Groce — 29 May 2002, 17:11 · follows Jerry Friedman

Allow me to weigh in on the "likes SS" side, but with the caveat that while my visceral reaction is favorable, and many passages I love deeply, most of the criticisms people have aimed at it I don't have an argument against. I quit discussing Short Sun on the list because I liked it, and discussion made me like it less because it brought up the irritating aspect over and over, and I don't have much to _say_ fruitfully about the parts that I loved. "Whereof we cannot speak" and all that.

Dan'll's post on souls is a case in point: certainly Short Sun is all about this, and that's part of why it is in so many ways so unresolved, but so are New Sun and Long Sun--which don't have the same feeling of a failure to get to grips with things.

I've put off a reread because I'm fairly sure I will enjoy it, but I don't feel likely to resolve anything I didn't last time, and that frustrates me.

Here's hoping The Wizard Knight is such that it inspires a more coherent admiration in all of us, and a little less blind men describing an elephant when it comes to our delving into its mysteries. And that any never-before-seen words Clute uses in reviewing it are ones I'll find useful.

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

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Andy Robertson — 29 May 2002, 17:49 · follows Alex David Groce

----- Original Message -----

From: "Alex David Groce" <Alex_Groce at forlesen.modck.cs.cmu.edu>
mysteries. And that any never-before-seen words Clute uses in
reviewing it are ones I'll find useful.

Now then, let's stay within the bounds of reality, shall we?

hartshorn