

Does Gene Wolfe read Cordwainer Smith?

The Urth list — 7 messages, 5 voices, 09 Sep 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3455>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Michael Andre-Driussi — 09 Sep 2002, 20:21

Hartshorn and Nutria have been talking about Cordwainer Smith and the puzzling mystery of "How can Wolfe not know Smith's work?" and seeming convergent evolution between Wolfe and Smith.

I don't want to rain on the parade here, but I have a new card to lay on the table.

I, too, was puzzled by this strange Smith-gap in Gene Wolfe's reading, so a few years ago I went so far as to send him an old paperback collection (in mint condition!) of Smith stories (fwiw it contained my favorite: "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard"). He never said a word about it, by which I believe that he did not much like it and did not read more than a fraction of it.

If it had been something that he enjoyed as much as he enjoys Tolkien, or even as much as he enjoys Dodie Smith's (ah, another _Smith_!) I CAPTURE THE CASTLE, he would tell people . . . at WorldCon he told me about I CAPTURE THE CASTLE (but I already knew he had it, heh-heh) and he mentioned it to the audience at least one time when he was on a panel at WorldCon.

(Trivia: Dodie Smith is most famous for 101 DALMATIONS.)

So there is, I believe, a strong likelihood that he doesn't really enjoy Cordwainer Smith. As odd as that might seem to us. I readily admit I've never asked him point-blank, so if anyone would like to do that at a convention, feel free to do so.

=mantis=

James Jordan — 09 Sep 2002, 20:54 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

Well, stylistically Smith is quite unlike Wolfe. So he may not really groove on him.

Nutria

At 03:21 PM 9/9/2002, you wrote:

Hartshorn and Nutria have been talking about Cordwainer Smith and the puzzling mystery of "How can Wolfe not know Smith's work?" and seeming convergent evolution between Wolfe and Smith.

I don't want to rain on the parade here, but I have a new card to lay on the table.

I, too, was puzzled by this strange Smith-gap in Gene Wolfe's reading, so a few years ago I went so far as to send him an old paperback collection (in mint condition!) of Smith stories (fwiw it contained my favorite: "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard"). He never said a word about it, by which I believe that he did not much like it and did not read more than a fraction of it.

If it had been something that he enjoyed as much as he enjoys Tolkien, or even as much as he enjoys Dodie Smith's (ah, another _Smith_!) I CAPTURE THE CASTLE, he would tell people . . . at WorldCon he told me about I CAPTURE THE CASTLE (but I already knew he had it, heh-heh) and he mentioned it to the audience at least one time when he was on a panel at WorldCon.

(Trivia: Dodie Smith is most famous for 101 DALMATIONS.)

So there is, I believe, a strong likelihood that he doesn't really enjoy Cordwainer Smith. As odd as that might seem to us. I readily admit I've never asked him point-blank, so if anyone would like to do that at a convention, feel free to do so.

=mantis=

--

Andy Robertson — 09 Sep 2002, 18:11 · follows James Jordan

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

From: "Michael Andre-Driussi" <mantis at siriusfiction.com>

I, too, was puzzled by this strange Smith-gap in Gene Wolfe's reading, so a

few years ago I went so far as to send him an old paperback collection (in mint condition!) of Smith stories (fwiw it contained my favorite: "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard"). He never said a word about it, by which I believe that

he did not much like it and did not read more than a fraction of it.

Hmmm.

Actually I can see that he might not like the religious themes involved. They are powerful and fundamental to the science fiction, but they are not particularly conventionally Catholic: more Teilard de Chardan.

Ignorance is one thing, blasphemy another, particularly when it is blasphemy in a voice as skilled and beautiful as your own.

Also, Smith is *such* a powerful writer that another writer might instinctively reject him as a matter of defence: to avoid being overwhelmed.

There is no accounting for taste, but I cannot believe that Wolfe simply read Smith and forgot to mention the fact.

hartshorn

James Jordan — 09 Sep 2002, 22:23 · follows Andy Robertson

At 01:11 PM 9/9/2002, you wrote:

Hmmm.

Actually I can see that he might not like the religious themes involved. They are powerful and fundamental to the science fiction, but they are not

particularly conventionally Catholic: more Teilard de Chardan.

That's often said, but I'm not at all sure of it. My impression is that this notion started up out of people who were not much aware of Teilhard, and found him kind of like Smith, etc. I've never read that Linebarger actually read Teilhard de Chardin.

Smith is pretty orthodox, allowing for SF conventions, IMO. If Wolfe doesn't groove on Smith, it is likely stylistic.

Nutria

Michael Straight — 10 Sep 2002, 15:25 · follows James Jordan

Count me as another one who doesn't see much connection between Wolfe and Smith.

They have some similar interests, both address them from a Christian perspective, and they are perhaps equally distant from the SF mainstream, but, I think, distant in different directions.

I think Wolfe's prose is the most beautiful in SF; Smith strikes me as overly mannered -- effective in some cases, particularly the Crime and Glory of Cmd Suzal (my favorite Smith story -- the bit where he is rescued sent a shiver up my spine; just a couple sentences that slowly exploded in my head into a vast, amazing story -- but not in a way that would necessarily remind me of Wolfe, I've had parallel experiences with Greg Egan, Vernor Vinge, Brian Moriarty, and others) -- but more often I find it distancing.

Wolfe is sort of post-mainstream-SF, playing with, subverting, reworking SF ideas and conventions; Smith almost seems to be re-inventing SF from scratch, more like Stanislaw Lem than Wolfe (but not in the sense of some non-SF writers who try to write SF without much knowledge of the field and end up reproducing old cliches).

Wolfe is more of a hard science fiction writer, with an interest in technological details -- much of it may actually be magic (or miracle), but he plays the game of trying to convince you that there is real science in there; Smith seems to take much more of a handwaving approach to technology, with more of an interest in the wild things the technology can do than in producing any illusion that you have a sense of how it works.

But for me, the main difference is that I love Wolfe but don't care much for Smith.

-Rostrum

Alice K. Turner — 11 Sep 2002, 01:47 · follows Michael Straight

Rostrum rote:

Wolfe is more of a hard science fiction writer, with an interest in technological details -- much of it may actually be magic (or miracle), but he plays the game of trying to convince you that there is real science in there; Smith seems to take much more of a handwaving approach to technology, with more of an interest in the wild things the technology can do than in producing any illusion that you have a sense of how it works.

Hmm. Considering when he wrote (he died in 1966), I've always thought that Smith had a far better grasp of computers than any of his contemporaries. Rod McBan's Norstrillian antique still seems plausible: what has changed is that in a story written today everyone would have a computer--that wouldn't have flown in the 50s--and Rod today would have to have a custom program like no other. The little computer powered by a mouse-brain in "Think Blue, Count

Two" still seems like a niftily possible biotech gadget, and so does the dead Lady Panc-Ash in "Clown Town." The computer hack that Lord Jestacost and C'mell run is pretty sophisticated too. I remember reading a 60s magazine story by Pohl, I think, certainly a tech-minded writer, that bleated on and on about computer technology--completely outdated by the 80s, of course. But Smith's stories aren't. Even the "Alpha-Ralpha" fortune-telling machine is not out of date if you think of it as primarily an entertainment device, and the same would be true of the items at the Museum of Heart's Desire. And there are computerized devices run by Mother Hitton and T'ruth and somethingorother on the Sand Planet, and other places that I don't remember.

Furthermore, no other writer but Stapledon actually charted developments in space travel. Yes, they're handwaving, but they are also thought out--again, remember when he was writing. Space travel began with the scanners (cranching), moved on to the oyster ships and pinlighting, then to sail ships with their oblivious passengers, then to planoforming, then space3. (I've probably got some of this wrong--I'm not going to go back to read it all again just to make a point.) Smith's future was dynamic, evolving as he learned more or imagined new techniques. And though you can chart this in Wolfe too (LS is full of his delight in his new knowledge of computer uploading and downloading), Smith was way ahead of him.

He also seemed (and seems) to me to be more sophisticated about drugs, medical techniques and their future applications than most of his peers; this turns up more than once, but I am thinking of "Shayol." And there's stroon, of course, which is a debatable long-life potion, but surely an sf allowable, especially as it is treated politically and economically.

I also think that he is quite sophisticated politically, given that he is using the old pulp device of a galactic empire, or Instrumentality as he calls it. His model is 19th century China (I know this because, like him, I grew up partly in China and have done some reading) with its huge bureaucracy, mostly conservative, but sometimes surprisingly open. Wolfe's bureaucracies, in all three series, are simplistic by comparison.

But for me, the main difference is that I love Wolfe but don't care much for Smith.

Now there I cannot argue. What you probably don't like is the tone, which is consciously romantic and fabulous, and which undercuts the tech sophistication. I like it myself--but then I'm not a techie. And I was the right age when I got to him.

cheers,
-alga

Andy Robertson — 11 Sep 2002, 04:30 · follows Alice K. Turner

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

From: "Alice K. Turner" <aturner6 at nyc.rr.com>

Hmm. Considering when he wrote (he died in 1966), I've always thought that Smith had a far better grasp of computers than any of his contemporaries.

I suppose we had better be careful not to make this a debate on the merits of Smith vs Wolfe. However I will remark that they are indeed stylistic opposites - Smith has an almost Biblical laconicism which has served him very well. I love them both.

hartshorn