

Sons and Lovers

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 18 Feb 2003

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Nigel Price — 18 Feb 2003, 23:50

Mantis wrote:

It would be easier (or should that be "possible"?) to approach this if I had some examples of a few authors inside and outside of genre who write fiction about love (monolithic or otherwise). Fictions that you find convincing.

I don't want to get into the "can and does Wolfe write convincingly about romantic love debate", because, as I've tried to explain in my other post, I think the real issue is whether it would suit his thematic and artistic purposes to emphasise happy and contented love in his stories. I don't think so. There are many love stories woven into his books, and if they are problematic and often unhappy, then that's because that's the kind of melancholic story he likes to write.

To underline the point, I need only think of another author I greatly admire and enjoy but who is utterly unlike Wolfe in her output: Lois McMaster Bujold. The romance between Miles Vorkosigan and Ekaterina Vorsoisson that blooms in the later books of the Vorkosigan saga is wonderfully described. It is often funny and sometimes deeply moving, but I find it utterly convincing. Ms Bujold doesn't shy away from serious issues in the stories, but she can't help being warm and life-affirming, and what she creates are wonderful, joyful, light comedy adventures that achieve the seemingly impossible feat of being both funny and exciting while never being in the least bit trivial.

As I say, the result is just so unlike anything Wolfe has ever written that it's hard to get one's head round the idea that both authors are from the same country and allegedly writing in the same genre!

Wolfe is doing something very, very different and in many ways unique. His books have a distinctive flavour that comes partly from their exquisite prose style and partly from their characteristic mood. When he tries to write something lighter and really different, as in "Pandora by Holly Hollander", some of us only see the sinister overtones, while the rest of us complain bitterly of their absence and declare that we don't like this sort of thing nearly as much as his other books.

But I'm rambling here!

I meant to mention that, whatever his track record when it comes to writing about romantic love, Wolfe is extremely good at writing about children, and especially small boys, who feature in many of his stories. They are usually compassionately described and end up suffering horrid fates. The torturers' apprentices are trained to be torturers and are so limited in their worldview that they think this is "normal", Little Severian gets zapped, Tackman Babcock lives with a mother who is a junky and ignores him much of the time, the boy in "When they appear" ends up in the clutches of a paedophile, Little Tib has a fairly miserable time of it...there are probably others, too, that I can't remember.

There's a strong neo-Dickensian element in all this. The torturers' apprentices are distant cousins of Fagin's child pickpockets, and they and the other Lupine boys follow in the unhappy footsteps of Paul Dombey and all the other doomed Dickensian children.

Forgive my subjectivity, but I also get a strong impression that Wolfe puts a lot of himself and his own boyhood into his literary children. I can't prove it, but that how it comes across to me. There's a settled and sympathetic melancholy in his depictions of young people and their plight which, to me at any rate, carries a considerable emotional charge. I may simply be responding to good writing, of course, but my instincts suggest that that good writing draws on something very deeply personal.

And despite all the sorrows which he puts them through, at least in his stories, I can't help feeling that Wolfe is very fond of children.

But what do I know?

Nigel