

Wolfe's little stories

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 16 Apr 2003

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James Wynn — 16 Apr 2003, 00:46

alga wrote:

And I don't think Wolfe is a very good short story >writer, by and large.

Some of his fables are marvelous in >-Just-So- kind of way, and a few of the longer stories, >novellas really, are very good. But if you're pinching pennies, skipping a Wolfe collection is not unwise.

Crush sort-of disagrees:

Well, for the stuff I've read online, yeah, true. And I haven't read "Strange Travellers" yet although it is on my shelf. But "Endangered Species" (speaking as someone who isn't usually impressed by any "single author" short story collection and doesn't typically like the short story format) was the second book I read of Wolfe's (if one takes tBotNS as one book), and I found it quite enjoyable. I've often wondered if Wolfe deserves a cut of the profits of the movie 'The Last Action Hero' since it seems so blatantly inspired by "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story" (no comments desired about the merits of the movie -- I LIKED it). This story, aside from being fun, it is an interesting analysis of how a character can hijack a story, how a plot can develop beyond the genre intended by the author, and how story plotting is often governed by unwritten rules. A very "inside" writing story.

In that vein, a friend of mine was positive that "A Toy Story" was inspired by "The War Beneath the Tree".

Let us not forget the "The Cat" and "The Map" which are two elaborations on "The Book of the New Sun". Honestly, I can't remember the plot of "The Cat" right now but I thoroughly enjoyed "The Map" and still think about it to these many years later from time to time, speculating on what happened in key plot points. Tim already mentioned "The Detective of Dreams" which is in this collection. But what about "The House of Gingerbread"? Good, good stuff.

"The Island of Dr. Death and Other Stories and Other Stories" also has some real surprises (the title story is IMO not one of them): "IBEM," "Tracking Song," "The Death of Dr. Island", "Werewolfe as Hero" (I'm operating entirely from memory here).

There are some duds in both collections but frankly one has to expect that. One will often put up with a chapter in a novel that falls flat, goes nowhere, or is just not one's cup of tea -- and still give the work a hearty thumbs up (I never really enjoyed the play in tBotNS). When reading short story collections (especially those all by one author where some less than premium examples inevitably make their way in) I tend to take the same attitude -- expecting only that the collection on a whole be enjoyable. In these two cases, I'd say they cut muster.

-- Crush

Michael Straight — 16 Apr 2003, 15:30 · follows James Wynn

Wolfe's short story collections are a mixed bag. Some stories I really like, some I don't enjoy that much. Island of Doctor Death has some fantastic novellas: Seven American Nights, Tracking Song, Eyeflash Miracles.

Here's the order I'd rank the collections, with my favorites:

Island of Doctor Death
The Death of Doctor Island
Tracking Song
The Eyeflash Miracles
Seven American Nights
Alien Stones

Endangered Species
When I Was Ming the Merciless
The Last Thrilling Wonder Story
A Cabin on the Coast
Thag
The Other Dead Man
Peritonitis
The HORARS of War

Castle of Days
Forlesen
How I Lost the Second World War
The War Beneath the Tree

Storeys from the Old Hotel
Westwind
The Marvelous Brass Chessplaying Automaton
A Solar Labyrinth

Strange Travellers
My least favorite. "And When they Appear" and "The Ziggurat" are good stories, but kind of grim. "To the Seventh" is fun and I like "Bed and Breakfast," but they aren't great.

-- Rostrum