

How would you rate Wolfe as a short story writer?

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 25 Jun 2003

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Anthony Ferrara — 25 Jun 2003, 17:06

I believe Gene Wolfe is one of the greatest novelists of any time period. I also believe Wolfe have written some great short stories. However, I don't think his short stories consistently attain to th

Anthony

cilluff1 at optonline.net — 25 Jun 2003, 17:37 · follows Anthony Ferrara

Anthony, we've had this debate before on the list and I agree with you (as did a few other listers, Alga I think began the discussion). I think Wolfe is a superb novelist, particularly when he is writing a multi-volume work. But his short stories IMHO have been good certainly but not up to the high standard set by his longer fiction. Perhaps he is a victim of his own success: his novels set the bar so high that anything less seems rather ordinary. Very few of Wolfe's short stories grab me the way, say, Ted Chiang's do.

But in fairness to Mr. Wolfe I must admit I have not read The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories (and Other Stories), which is generally considered to be his best work in the genre. I'm smack dab in the middle of Alastair Reynold's "Chasm City" and Norman Spinrad's "The Void Captain's Tale" right now, each of which is excellent in its own way. TVCT strikes me, actually, as rather Woflean in style, perhaps because it is baroque and lyrical and filled with metaphors (although slightly more obvious than Wolfe) a la TBOTNS. Chasm City, on the other hand, although it certainly can be read on multiple levels is really just more of an excellent and very well written page turner.

- Joe

Sam Keyes — 25 Jun 2003, 17:53 · follows cilluff1 at optonline.net

I, too, am really still unfamiliar with most of Wolfe's short fiction (though I did just buy Island of Doctor Death). I wonder if this seeming discrepancy is inevitable (and given what Wolfe has said about doing "big" projects, he knows this too). I mean, in the world of fiction, quantity does, perhaps more often than we would like to admit, tend to accompany high quality. So maybe it's not that Wolfe is weaker in short stories, but rather that short stories, formally, are usually weaker--or, I ought to add, weaker at asking the questions and playing the games that Wolfe likes to do, which are usually on a grand scale.

snk

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Tony Ellis — 26 Jun 2003, 09:08 · follows Sam Keyes

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I'm always surprised when I see people post that they don't rate Wolfe so much as a short story writer. If they're expecting the big, multi-layered mysteries of his novels, as you suggest, that might explain why.

Personally I enjoy Wolfe every bit as much for his short stories as for his novels, and I've read about 95% of them. I love a good stylist and I love a writer who knows how to be concise, and Wolfe excels in both these areas.

I agree that some stories are a lot better than others, but I still find the average Wolfe short more rewarding than the average short by most other SF writers. I also find it very hard to imagine an entire canon of 300-odd short stories all as good as Kevin Malone, *The War Beneath the Tree*, *Against the Lafayette Escadrille* etc gems which I have read over and over again simply for the pleasure of the writing

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James Jordan — 27 Jun 2003, 16:03 · follows Tony Ellis

Having read all of Wolfe's short stories, except for recent ones published in odd and hard to find (expensive) books, I would say this: There are two kinds. Wolfe has written some fluffy, often funny pieces, like "The Headless Man." These are fun to read, but hardly "great." On the other hand, there are some excellent stories of full literary quality, and I think they are fully on a part with his longer work.

Nutria