

"The Last Hope of The Earth"

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 28 Sep 2004

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James Wynn — 28 Sep 2004, 13:06

I just finished "The Last Hope of the Earth" (aka "The Creeping Shroud") by Lan Wright. I hunted this book down because I suspected Wolfe may have been paying a tribute to it in the "Short Sun." And I must say I scored. :-)

Aside from that, the story quite good. Anyone who thinks Michael Crichton's SF hangs the Moon will like this too.

I present an overview of the story below to detail the relevant points but it's heavy with spoilers.

The thing is that Lan Wright only seems to have written about 5 novels over a period of 10 years that I can tell; the last being in 1968. He gets no mention in "The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction." Has anyone read any of Wright's other novels? And if so, what is your take on them?

~ Crush

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...TOTAL STORY-KILLING SPOILERS BELOW

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"The Last Hope of the Earth" by Lan Wright

TLHotE features no alien invaders. There are no arrogant scientists or mad geniuses who must be stopped before they destroy the world. The enemy in TLHotE is a plant. Not a plant mutilated by a nearby nuclear power plant or a greedy corporation; but a real life plant that is still a problem even today: the WATER HYACINTH. This is what the Western Aquatic Plant Management Society website says about the Water Hyacinth:

"Water hyacinth is listed as one of the most productive plants on earth and is considered one of the world's worst aquatic plants. It forms dense mats that interfere with navigation, recreation, irrigation, and power generation. These mats competitively exclude native submersed and floating-leaved plants. Low oxygen conditions develop beneath water hyacinth mats and the dense floating mats impede water flow and create good breeding conditions for mosquitoes.

"Water hyacinths are a severe environmental and economic problem in all of the gulf coast states and in many other areas of the world with a sub-tropical or tropical climate. This species has rapidly spread throughout inland and coastal freshwater bays, lakes, and marshes in the United States and in other countries."

In tLHotE the Water Hyacinth began to clog waterways, first the Nile, then the Amazon. Then it mutated to survive in sea water to travel worldwide and clog *every* river, bay, and stream, and in the ocean it quickly formed massive ISLANDS that capture ships and impede navigation.

Wright adds a twist to the real-life Water Hyacinth in that his expels a thick sulphurous mist that eventually reduces visibility to a few dozen feet anywhere near water. The thick smog quickly caused a greenhouse effect that tremendously increases the temperature and humidity world-wide. Another aspect to the climate change that Wright doesn't really justify is that over a period of decades it causes the crust and mantel of the earth to heat up leading to increased earthquakes and volcanic activity. Japan and the US eastern seaboard sink below the ocean.

All this causes civilization to breakdown. At the beginning of the novel, the only outposts left are White Sands, New Mexico in America (the UN meets in Denver), England, Australia, and Kenya. The protagonist Peter Benbow, a biologist, leaves his pregnant wife in England to go to America to be, from there, dispatched on a secret mission that is seen as The Last Hope of humanity. He is to go to Mars to help set up a colony there. Every spare bit of food and manufacturing resources on Earth is devoted to this plan. The leader of the English outpost promises to send

Benbow's wife and child to him as soon as he can. Unfortunately shortly after arriving at Mars, Benbow learns that the English outpost has collapsed just before his wife was to give birth, the leader executed. His wife has managed to get a note to him that she plans to attempt to get to Africa. ... MUCH MUCH MORE MASSIVE SPOILERS BELOW!! ... Those on Earth have heard that the Marsian colony is a futuristic Eden with towering sky-scrapers and all the comforts of the by-gone Earth. When Benbow arrives he learns the truth is quite different. The Mars colony consists of about 4000 citizens huddled in shanties beneath cheap plastic domes. They've been working on the colony for about 8 years. Their food comes from hydroponics and yeast vats. It is understood that colony has about a year to become self-sufficient before supplies from Earth cease entirely. Benbow shortly becomes disenchanted with the prospects of the colony. THIS IS WHERE THIS NOVEL SETS ITSELF APART FROM ALMOST EVERY OTHER SF NOVEL. Benbow meets with the colony leader and makes an excellent case for why the Mars colony will NEVER be self-sufficient. For example, the hydroponics and yeast vats require water -- but there IS NO water on Mars. He makes a trek to the ice caps and is aghast. One of his team members says "What did you expect? Giant glaciers and hundreds of feet of ice like in Greenland?" The ice caps consist of about 3 inches of surface ice. Actually, the picture Wright paints of Mars is far less hospitable than what we now know to be the case. But even so, he has convinced me of the total impracticality of colonizing any other planet without enough breakthroughs to put off any consideration of the task for the next 500 years. Mars is colder, dryer, and less hospitable than a mountaintop in Antarctica. This is probably why this novel didn't take off during the Cold War struggle to beat the Russians to the Moon. That, and the story's undercurrent of White Supremism. (ho hum)

The colony leader (Mueller) admits that what Benbow says is true. Mueller sends him to the little 5 mile-diameter moon Diemos to discover the great secret of Mars...a secret unknown to anyone on Earth and to very few of the colonists on Mars BEWARE!!! BIGGER SPOILERS BELOW!!..... There Benbow discovers two MASSIVE GENERATION ships under construction. Each will hold 2000 passengers. One will go to Sirius. The other will go to Alpha Centauri. Benbow considers this idea crazy. He asks what the ships arrive and find no inhabitable planets? The answer is "They'll continue to the next closest star". No one on Earth is told of this plan for fear that they would stop shipping supplies. No one on Mars is told of this for fear that it would break their spirits. Benbow receives permission to return to Earth to try to find his wife and child -- promising to tell no one what he has seen. When Benbow returns he discovers that his wife has taken a new husband since she didn't think she would ever see him again (paraphrase "Nettle will have found a new husband by now. She was always a very practical woman). ... BEWARE!!! HOW THE STORY ENDS.....

He also discovers that the climate changes wrought by the Water Hyacinth are actually killing the plant worldwide. Earth is on the mend. White Sands has not told the Mars colony because Gen. Kramer, the outpost leader, has plans of world conquest from Earth to Mars. He is stockpiling supplies for an attack on the Martian heaven he has heard of to bring it under his control. There are so many parallels between Gen. Kramer and Typhon, one could bat them back and forth for days.

Benbow explains to him that Mars isn't worth taking; that he needs to bring the scientists back to help rebuild Earth. Unfortunately when they contact Mars, they learn that the ship left 8 weeks previously during Benbow's trip to Earth. They are now beyond contact or recall.