

everyone gets one good book

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 30 Nov 2004

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turin — 30 Nov 2004, 23:15

Forgot to mention Dan'I, I was completely hundred percent thinking of Starship Troopers when you said military science fiction. How many times have we seen space marines since Heinlein? The film could have been a harsher juvenelian satire of Nazi germany than what it was, but it did an okay job I guess. Verhoeven drops the ball on it I think.

I don't think Hyperion is as complex as Briah, but I really liked Hyperion, the other books get steadily worse, but The Canterbury Tales plus neuromancer, the terminator, star wars with any other bits of scientistically cool and grotesque things we expect from a space opera future. I would say it's the best space opera novel, but I haven't read any, and I dont know if any of you consider Wolfe to be space opera. I really like the way the Shrike pins everyone to his tree and jacks them into the matrix, William Gibson's term actually. Is that the first time people were forcibly inserted into the internet by machines?

Also I liked what Eric said about the Agon. That was a good metaphor, and not trying to reconstruct anyone's biography. The author and the person behind the author are different entities. Shakespeare's work says everything about Shakespeare the author and nothing about Shakespeare as a person. That is difficult distinction to make though, I've been talking about Tolkien's biography ad nauseam, but mostly about his letters. It is not that I think biography is irrelevant like Heidegger said when he said all he need to know about Aristotle is that he loved, wrote, and died, I see his point, but Derrida interprets Heidgeer in this way. He says rigorous interpretation of a philosopher's work is the truest biography over someone who knows the whole story. In other word's the best way to know a writer is to read his work, not that what we are doing isn't valuable, but it's secondary to reading.

And finally, I think everyone only has one story and they keep telling it over and over again. Tolkien's story seems to be about the destruction of great civilizations. Yes I did use entropy, but when he talks about a fallen world, he is obsessed with the passage of time, and that reads arrow of time, heat death. For instance, in the future, elves will not have the energy to stay embodied in middle-earth and will be "houseless spirits". The rings slow time, less time passes in Lorien than in the rest of Middle-earth. It's like Rip Van Winkle, the world of faerie is about relativistic effects on time, usually time is fast here and slow there but not always. Wolfe employs this convention in The Wizard Knight, and Vallee talks about it as well in Passport to Magonia and ideas of "missing time". Galadriel call's history, a "long defeat". Or as Stephen Dedalus says in Ulysses, "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake"

Wolfe's story is about finding God. He was angry when people though Severian was Christ, I know I did, and he said in an interview with a Protestant Christian book publisher or something like that, that Severian was a bad person trying to become a Christian. I thought it was kind of cool that Severian was Christ and Legion. T torturer metaphor made me think back to The Last Temptation and the Catholic occupation with suffering. Well, Mr. Wolfe, you could have fooled me. This is why I like letters but often distrust them. It seems that The Book of the Long Sun was a rewrite of the Book of the New Sun in which Silk was Severian only very moral and a priest rather than a savior or saint and is more overtly Catholic and Christian. Did Silk try to kill himself when Hyacinth died, is that why we has the knife and is covered with blood? I guess so, but this seems out of character for him in the Book of the Long Sun, except when he is about to

jump off the airship. Severian also contemplates suicide a few times. Dan'l, it's true that Wolfe won't narrate the things the narrator does not want to witness. It can be a tease, sometimes it is pleasurable and sometimes annoying, but usually I like it.

I don't see how Wolfe could top TBOTNS. I see how he has improved things and even developed a clearer writing style, but why would he want to top his own achievements in the same way?

And I don't think his later books are pale images of his earlier work, like maybe the Stephen King after the golden age in the late 70s and early 80s, but maybe some people feel that way about Wolfe too. I like the Wizard Knight, it's fun, and the man is 70s years old. It's a little late for a comeback, not that I think he needs to. He also writes about more likable characters. Most everyone in TBOTNS is a terrible person, Severian is only really less terrible. It's not like you could invite him to your house for coffee and cake. I wish I had a dog as good as Gylf.

Not only do I think an author gets one true story, they only get one great book if any and one influential book but they don't have to be the same one. These are just some of my ideas about people we've talked about. Ulysses (at least in English, Finnegans Wake is not in English), Lord of the Rings, The Book of the New Sun, Childhood's End (for me but that's debatable I think), Hyperion. I can't decide with Gibson or Stephenson. Till We Have Faces is Lewis's. I don't know for Chesterton or the rest of the Victorian fantascists. Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep for Dick. My favorite Stephen King is Wizard and Glass, but I think the best book is The Shining, and the scariest Pet Semetary. I read a lot of Stephen King in high school. I haven't read the Lathe of Heaven. My favorite of Neil Gaiman's comics, which are very good, despite what I've said of him, is The Kindly Ones, Sandman 9, I also think it's his best work. Lord of Light for Zelazny. We can fight about all of these Is that better than the Left Hand of Darkness? What other authors do you guys talk about on this list besides Wolfe or have I been killing the mood with non Wolfe related material.

Chris — 01 Dec 2004, 11:22 · in reply to turin

The story you attribute to Tolkien is really a synthesis of mythologies, some elements of which are more straightforward than others. The "entropy" aspect you're talking about is an echo, at the very least, of the Old Testament and more generally, the Hebrew myths. Anybody familiar with the Bible knows that the lifespans get shorter and shorter in succeeding generations. Fewer people are aware that in the myths, Abraham for example was absurdly powerful and destroyed an entire army.

I think the themes of broken civilizations and decline are simply inherent in the raw materials Tolkien is working with, particularly in the Silmarillion. In order to have a fertile mythology, you have to imagine that things were once more fabulous and magical than they are now, which leaves you the necessary problem of explaining why it's not that way now.

I don't agree that Wolfe's story is about finding God in general, although it may well be impossible for him to not put that into his longer works somewhere. The themes he returns to over and over are the problems of identity and problems of memory (usually with the two bound tightly together). Try Fifth Head of Cerberus for a Wolfe story that has everything to do with these two issues, little or nothing to do with finding God.

As far as your take on Severian and torture, all I can say is that I don't see Severian as a Christ-figure, because he doesn't have all the necessary elements - he lacks certain redemptive dimensions. Without delving too far into qabbalistic oddities present in the New Sun series (which others here are more qualified to talk about than I), I would say that an examination of the concept of "geburah" would help to understand better what Wolfe was getting at with Severian - geburah is commonly translated as "severity", though perhaps "necessity" would also be a helpful word.

I do think if you're looking for truly grand scope, it's hard to beat BotNS and I don't expect he

will even try to. But there are a lot of different kinds of story, and some of his simpler one-shot novels are just outstanding in their own right. As far as series, I have high hopes for the Soldier books, if he ever gets the time to finish them.

Turin said:

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Eric Mattingly — 01 Dec 2004, 20:21 · in reply to turin

But first, Dan'l. I think you are right and if I was (and I was) obtuse, it was my fault and was a result of the orgiastic rush to present the ideas I had been sitting on for about two years. Maybe I can clarify my point better if I say that I believe Christianity to be a phenomenon that does not escape the bounds of history. So many things in human culture (like, for instance, "humanism") cannot be explained outside of the actual processes they exhibit. This, of course, is part of my general critique of the idea of transcendence. To put it simply: if a thing is transcendent we cannot know it. If we know it has become immanent and thus has become part of the "world" which implies partiality, prejudice (in Gadamer's sense), limitation, and, finally, definition in terms of the world. Even if there is a God that at one time existed outside of the cosmos, the fact that we can even speculate on it means that he must have joined the cosmos. Anyway, to stay on point, Wolfe may accept the idea of transcendence but that doesn't mean that it is justified. No one can truly be "christian" in the sense that "Christianity" implies unworldliness-- which cannot be expressed (or known, I would argue). I appreciate your comments, especially since they helped me to clarify myself.

And now, about the One Good Book. For Wolfe, I think that tBotNS is the framework from which he ironed out the other two series'. As I said in my other email, I interpret that novel (I will call the whole thing one novel, since you did and I agree wholeheartedly) as a mythos toward gnosis and restoration (which become one and the same-- salvation through knowledge, the ultimate heresy in early Christianity). The succeeding two novels emphasize different aspects of the ascent-- like epicycles traveling around their original. The Book of the Long Sun is, I believe, a meditation on the specific moment of knowing ("Patera Silk received enlightenment on the ballcourt: nothing could ever be the same"), while the Book of the Short Sun is concerned with the struggle to conform oneself with the knowledge gained.

The Book of the Short Sun is also the most personal thing of Wolfe's I've read since it concerns the struggle of a regular man to conform himself to an impossible ideal (the ideal held in his book, though not necessarily in Calde Silke). God, while obviously the idea to which all the heroes aspire, also remains curiously distant. He remains always the outsider (see above re transcendence). I think that the Book of the New Sun is definately Wolfe's one commanding book. But, I like the Book of the Long Sun better than any fantasy/sci fi. I've read that's not Wolfe, Tokien, or Lewis, and I think that The Book of the Short Sun is utterly fantastic (I am still reading Return To the Whorl, and that is impressing me more than the other books in the series). Also, we cannot forget about "Fifth Head of Cerberus."

I agree with you on Joyce. For Chesterton, probably "The Man who was Thursday." Tolkien, yadda. Lewis, any one of the Chronicles of Narnia or "Out of the Silent Planet" (not a fan of the other two space novels at all). Proust, yadda. Borges "Ficciones." And it goes on.

This is great stuff. Has anyone read Borski's book yet? I think I might buy it for myself for Christmas.

Dei, sive natura, give you good rest.

eric

A heretic is a man who sees with his own eyes.

-- Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

James Wynn — 01 Dec 2004, 21:15 · in reply to Eric Mattingly

"Out of the Silent Planet" (not a fan of the other two space novels at all)

I gotta disagree about "That Hideous Strength". I found it to be an untamed genre busting imagination-orgy of the sort that Wolfe has made his stock and trade.

The head of a murderer set up by demon possessed scientists as their god, who dig up Merlin in a war with Lords of the five planets (who are just like their Greco-Roman counterparts and have their actual elemental counterparts on Earth). One of the scientists wants to mow down all the trees and cover the Earth in stainless steel. The opposite side of the Moon (which when this novel was written was still unseen and uncharted) is a paradise outside the realm of the revolutionary lord of Earth; the Earth-side was blasted during the war with that same revolutionary. The textual parallels to the King Arthur legends *and* the book of Revelation.....hot-diggedy! This one is a killer.

~ Crush

Lisa Schaffer-Doggett — 01 Dec 2004, 21:58 · in reply to turin

On Tuesday, November 30, 2004, at 11:15 PM, turin wrote:

Forgot to mention Dan'I, I was completely hundred percent thinking of Starship Troopers when you said military science fiction. How many times have we seen space marines since Heinlein? The film could have been a harsher juvenelian satire of Nazi germany than what it was, but it did an okay job I guess. Verhoeven drops the ball on it I think.

Verhoeven's not satirizing Nazis. He's satirizing the Bush One (and scarily enough, Bush 2) administration and mocking the filmgoer at the same time. I've said it to many people, we're living that film. Sorry for heading further ot.

Don

Chris — 02 Dec 2004, 00:15 · in reply to Eric Mattingly

I've read Borski's book. He did some very good work with it, but it's hard not to be frustrated with it - especially if you don't agree with his interpretations. And a good portion of the time, I didn't. That said, he brings up all sorts of references in the books that often you won't even remember... and he cites them, which provides a great prod for the reader to go back and re-read that section of BotNS, which is always worthwhile.

So I'm somewhat torn: I think Borski's work should be supported, and I respect the work he's done, but on the other hand I have a hard time recommending it to read for its own sake. I guess what I'd suggest is that you should buy it if you are planning on re-reading BotNS, and you can use Borski's book as you go.

But first, Dan'l. I think you are right and if I was (and I was) obtuse, it was my fault and was a result of the orgiastic rush to present the ideas I had been sitting on for about two years. Maybe I can clarify my point better if I say that I believe Christianity to be a phenomenon that does not escape the bounds of history. So many things in human culture (like, for instance, "humanism") cannot be explained outside of the actual processes they exhibit. This, of course, is part of my general critique of the idea of transcendence. To put it simply: if a thing is transcendent we cannot know it. If we know it has become immanent and thus has become part of the "world" which implies partiality, prejudice (in Gadamer's sense), limitation, and, finally, definition in terms of the world. Even if there is a God that at one time existed outside of the cosmos, the fact that we can even speculate on it means that he must have joined the cosmos. Anyway, to stay on point, Wolfe may accept the idea of transcendence but that doesn't mean that it is justified. No one can truly be "christian" in the sense that "Christianity" implies unworldliness-- which cannot be expressed (or known, I would argue). I appreciate your comments, especially since they helped me to clarify myself.

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