

Hanging Out with the Dream King

The Urth list — 5 messages, 2 voices, 11 Feb 2005

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Adam Stephanides — 11 Feb 2005, 17:10

A book that just came out, Hanging Out with the Dream King: Conversations with Neil Gaiman and His Collaborators by Joseph McCabe (pub. by Fantagraphics Books) has a six-page interview with Gene Wolfe (and a photo!). The interview doesn't confine itself to Gaiman or his collaboration with Wolfe (A Walking Tour of the Shambles, iirc), but discusses Wolfe's own writing. The most interesting thing Wolfe said, to me, was "It seems to me that it is wrong to write propaganda that is not clearly propaganda." This in response to a question on Wolfe's use of religious themes, iirc.

--Adam

maru — 11 Feb 2005, 17:27 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Could you give some context there Adam?

I'm not quite sure how to take that comment: does it mean he regrets even a little not making it glaringly obvious the religious content, and his fringe religious beliefs in particular (I think I'm justified in saying fringe; I've heard time and again that his Catholic viewpoints are practically pre-Vatican II. But I haven't gleaned enough on my own to appraise this view, so if someone wants to correct me, go ahead.) Or should I take it as a barb against the C.S. Lewis type writers?

~Maru

Adam Stephanides wrote:

A book that just came out, Hanging Out with the Dream King: Conversations with Neil Gaiman and His Collaborators by Joseph McCabe (pub. by Fantagraphics Books) has a six-page interview with Gene Wolfe (and a photo!). The interview doesn't confine itself to Gaiman or his collaboration with Wolfe (A Walking Tour of the Shambles, iirc), but discusses Wolfe's own writing. The most interesting thing Wolfe said, to me, was "It seems to me that it is wrong to write propaganda that is not clearly propaganda." This in response to a question on Wolfe's use of religious themes, iirc.

--Adam

Adam Stephanides — 13 Feb 2005, 08:01 · in reply to maru

on 2/11/05 7:27 PM, maru at marudubshinki at gmail.com wrote:
Could you give some context there Adam?

The interviewer mentions Wolfe's use of the "concept of the messiah" as a theme, and asks him how he has been able to keep his "emotions ... [from] block[ing] the intellectual examination [of the concept] ... where so many other writers failed to do so."

Wolfe answers in part: "I'm not sure that it's anything that I have done; I think it's part of my character. It's innate. It seems to me that it is wrong to write propaganda that is not clearly

propaganda. I teach writing from time to time, and you get a certain number of people who basically want to write what's basically propaganda for some cause or other. Or some church or other -- I have a Mormon friend, and when he tries to write fiction, his characters lecture on Mormonism when the lectures on Mormonism have nothing to do with the story, frankly. Someone asked Avram Davidson, 'Why aren't any of your characters Jewish?' ... He said, 'They all are.' He wasn't pushing Judaism, but he was writing with what he was, which was a Jew. And I think I write as what I am."

While his meaning isn't totally evident, he's drawing a distinction between writing as a Catholic (for example), which is desirable if you're a Catholic, and writing Catholic propaganda in the guise of fiction. I'd say his practice as a writer bears this out as far as religion is concerned, except for a couple of short stories where the devotional aspect is pretty obvious: I've never been convinced by claims that his novels are intended to illustrate or proselytize for Catholic doctrine. On the other hand, when it comes to politics it's a lot harder to reconcile his practice with what he's saying here.

I'm not quite sure how to take that comment: does it mean he regrets even a little not making it glaringly obvious the religious content, and his fringe religious beliefs in particular (I think I'm justified in saying fringe; I've heard time and again that his Catholic viewpoints are practically pre-Vatican II. But I haven't gleaned enough on my own to appraise this view, so if someone wants to correct me, go ahead.)

He has said that his Catholicism is pre-Vatican II, iirc, but I wouldn't say that makes him fringe. That's the Catholicism he was raised in, after all, and I would imagine that even today there are a substantial number of Catholics who by and large prefer the pre-Vatican practices. (There's a book called *The Smoke of Satan*, iirc, which is an entertaining look at some genuinely fringe Catholics: people who believe that the popes from John XXIII on have been illegitimate, for example.)

Or should I take it as a barb against the C.S. Lewis type writers?

You could certainly convict Lewis of "writ[ing] what's basically propaganda," at least in some of his novels. But it's not clear to me that this is any less true of Chesterton, whom Wolfe admires.

--Adam

Maru Dubshinki — 13 Feb 2005, 08:57 · in reply to Adam Stephanides

Sounds like he's thinking of Orson Scott Card there. Or at least, that's the only prominent Mormon writer who brings his religion into discussion that I can think of, anyway. But when I said 'fringe-y' I was thinking Mel Gibson & pater type. Incidentally, what do you mean by:

On the other hand, when it comes to politics it's a lot harder to reconcile his practice with what he's saying here.

~Maru

On Sun, 13 Feb 2005 10:05:40 -0600, Adam Stephanides

<adamsteph at earthlink.net> wrote:

.... snippity....

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Adam Stephanides — 16 Feb 2005, 20:22 · in reply to Maru Dubshinki

on 2/13/05 10:57 AM, Maru Dubshinki at marudubshinki at gmail.com wrote:
Incidentally, what do you mean by:

On the other hand, when it comes to politics it's a lot harder to reconcile his practice with what he's saying here.

I was thinking of stories like "The Blue Mouse," "Bluesberry Jam," and the fairly recent one, whose title I forget, where the protagonist is on the run from a female IRS agent.

--Adam