

SRD on obscurity

The Urth list — 35 messages, 13 voices, 09 Jun 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4647>

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 09 Jun 2006, 21:36

No ... I don't mean Samuel R. Delany, but a writer many on this list probably disdain, Stephen R. Donaldson. He said, about a year ago, something that resonates for me with some things Wolfe has said about some of the "puzzles" in his work -- specifically, his attitude that the "answers" should be obvious:

"As a narrative artist, I face an incessant dilemma which (I believe) plagues all artists in one form or another: I suffer from a natural and understandable (and perhaps inevitable) impulse to *leave out* anything that seems perfectly obvious to me. At the same time, I expound endlessly on anything that I find obscure or difficult. But guess what? The things that are obvious to me are seldom obvious to the reader. At the same time, readers are quicker on the up-take than I am (because they read so much more quickly than I write)."

For what that's worth.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

Daniel D Jones — 09 Jun 2006, 22:43 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Friday 09 June 2006 17:36, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
No ... I don't mean Samuel R. Delany, but a writer many on
this list probably disdain, Stephen R. Donaldson.

Why would you assume that many here disdain him?

pthwndxrcalz — 09 Jun 2006, 22:50 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

Probably because he's the most egregiously untalented fantasy hack ever to (unaccountably) get published?

(Sales figures are irrelevant; fer gosh sakes, Howard Stern's books sell multiple millions of copies....).

On 6/9/06, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:

On Friday 09 June 2006 17:36, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

No ... I don't mean Samuel R. Delany, but a writer many on
this list probably disdain, Stephen R. Donaldson.

Why would you assume that many here disdain him?

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 09 Jun 2006, 22:52 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On 6/9/06, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:

No ... I don't mean Samuel R. Delany, but a writer many on this list probably disdain, Stephen R. Donaldson.

Why would you assume that many here disdain him?

Experience.

I'd better explain that. I don't mean that this is a particularly disdainful group of readers/fans. But Donaldson has come in for a great deal of disdain over the years, partially of the "Covenant is a horrible character" variety -- which I don't suppose would particularly faze Wolfe's readers! -- but also of Donaldson's prose, which is a lot harder to defend.

Donaldson is a very conscious stylist, who deliberately chose a very unpleasant and (frankly) offputting style for the Covenant books. I don't mean his use of "big woids," which, again, ought not to bother Lupines, but the thudding rhythms, especially of the first trilogy. Until I read some non-Covenant work of his, I thought of him as "a conscioius, and conscientious, stylist with a tin ear." (In fact, even the new Covenant book is much better-written than the old books: it's the same basic style, but handled much more deftly. Donaldson has become a much better writer.)

At any rate, you have but to mention his name in most fannish contexts to get people urgghing, which I think a pity: he brought something desparately needed to the fantasy market.

--Dan'I

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 09 Jun 2006, 22:53 · in reply to pthwndxrc1zp

Case in point...

On 6/9/06, pthwndxrc1zp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:

Probably because he's the most egregiously untalented fantasy hack ever to (unaccountably) get published?

If you really think that, then you should go enjoy some nice Terry Brooks and Dennis McKiernan books, and leave the adults alone.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

pthwndxrc1zp — 09 Jun 2006, 23:04 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Ah, so let me get this straight. Anyone who disagrees with your opinions on literary quality is a child? Fascinatingly mature viewpoint ya got there.

Donaldson's early prose is mind-numbingly unreadable. Your mileage may well vary, Grandpa.

As for able fantasy stylists, I prefer the work of folks like Gene Wolfe, C.S. Friedman, Mervyn Peake, John Myers Myers, Jennifer Stevenson, John C. Wright, Lois McMaster Bujold, even

George R.R. Martin. But Donaldson? Pfah. Life's far too short.

But then, you probably like *Tolkien*.... <shudder>

On 6/9/06, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Case in point...

On 6/9/06, pthwndxrclzp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:

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"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

Robert Davies — 09 Jun 2006, 23:10 · follows pthwndxrclzp

I haven't read them in years, but I've always liked the Covenant books. There are plenty of other fantasy author to slag if you must.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jun 2006, 01:02 · in reply to pthwndxrclzp

On 6/9/06, pthwndxrclzp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:

Ah, so let me get this straight. Anyone who disagrees with your opinions on literary quality is a child?

No; but I do think that anyone who confuses "writer I don't like" with "egregiously untalented," or confuses their personal opinions with facts ("Donaldson's early prose is mind-numbingly unreadable" as opposed to "I find Donaldson's early prose mind-numbingly unreadable") has a bit of semantic maturing to do.

Nonetheless, I should not have written my previous comment in such a blatantly insulting manner, and I apologize for that.

Your mileage may well vary, Grandpa.

My mileage usually varies; I drive many different roads. And, while I could in theory be a grandfather (my elder child will be 24 this year), I'm not.

As for able fantasy stylists, I prefer the work of folks like Gene Wolfe, C.S. Friedman, Mervyn Peake, John Myers Myers, Jennifer Stevenson, John C. Wright, Lois McMaster Bujold, even George R.R. Martin.

I was with you part of the way -- of those in this list I've read, I find them better stylists than the early Donaldson (though even there, if you check out his non-Covenant short stories, collected in *Daughter of Regals*, you may be in for a bit of a shock). But when you get to Lois McMaster Bujold ... I have never successfully read a single book of hers, and I've tried several. This is my problem; I know she's a well-respected writer, and I know better than to confuse "bad writer"

with "writer I don't like."

But then, so is Donaldson a well-respected writer, except among people who apparently can't make that not-terribly-complex distinction.

But then, you probably like *Tolkien*.... <shudder>

Indeed I do; and Lewis and Williams -- but for very different reasons (and only one of them as a stylist).

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

pthwndxrclzp — 10 Jun 2006, 01:35 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

My assessment had very little to do with my liking or disliking the material. Whether you agree or not, I find his prose puerile, sloppy, and overwritten. You needn't agree, but getting so bent over the absence of an "I think" statement (which is actually implicit in almost anything anyone writes, neurolinguistically speaking) seems equally childish to me.

As for the measure of Donaldson's respect as a writer, we'll just have to agree to disagree. I'm sure you know lots of folks who think he's terrific, just as all the readers I know find him an embarrassment to the genre.

And while I couldn't disagree more with your lack of appreciation for Bujold, I certainly respect your right to the opinion.

I am curious about something. Is it your opinion that there exist no "bad writers," only writers about whose work opinions vary? Or just that yes, there are indeed bad writers, Donaldson (in your opinion) just not being one of them? 'Cause it is starting to seem like you are holding the view that there *are* no bad writers, just readers with insufficient appreciation, or something of that ilk....

I stand by what I originally wrote, or certainly intended to write: *I* THINK that Donaldson's "Lord Foul's Bane" is a literary embarrassment. While he may well have improved his skills thereafter, IN MY OPINION his offenses were sufficient to guarantee that I would never waste my time with his work. Might well be my loss. And I'll add that I've never gotten to that point with any other writer in over 40 years of reading. I mean, I loathed LOTR, but I did make my way through the whole thing. (I like the Hobbit, though; go figure). FWIW.

On 6/9/06, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

On 6/9/06, pthwndxrclzp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:

Ah, so let me get this straight. Anyone who disagrees with your opinions on literary quality is a child?

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I was with you part of the way -- of those in this list I've read, I find them better stylists than the early Donaldson (though even there, if you check out his non-Covenant short stories, collected in *Daughter of Regals*, you may be in for a bit of a shock). But when you get to Lois McMaster Bujold ... I have never successfully read a single book of hers, and I've tried several. This is my problem; I know she's a well-respected writer, and I know better than to confuse "bad writer" with "writer I don't like."

But then, so is Donaldson a well-respected writer, except among people who apparently can't make that not-terribly-complex distinction.

But then, you probably like **Tolkien**.... <shudder>

Indeed I do; and Lewis and Williams -- but for very different reasons (and only one of them as a stylist).

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

pthwndxrc1zp — 10 Jun 2006, 01:48 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Sorry, I left off what is probably the most important part of what I wanted to say.

Thanks, Dan'l, for your words of apology, which were greatly appreciated. For my part, I certainly didn't need to nastily hurl out my opinions like buckshot for what was I'm sure at least in part my own gratification as much as for any group edification. My apologies right back at you.

On 6/9/06, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

On 6/9/06, pthwndxrc1zp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:

Ah, so let me get this straight. Anyone who disagrees with your opinions on literary quality is a child?

No; but I do think that anyone who confuses "writer I don't like" with "egregiously untalented," or confuses their personal opinions with facts ("Donaldson's early

prose is mind-numbingly unreadable" as opposed to
"I find Donaldson's early prose mind-numbingly unreadable")
has a bit of semantic maturing to do.

Nonetheless, I should not have written my previous
comment in such a blatantly insulting manner, and I
apologize for that.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jun 2006, 06:57 · in reply to pthwndxrcclzp

On 6/9/06, pthwndxrcclzp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:
My assessment had very little to do with my liking or disliking the
material. Whether you agree or not, I find his prose puerile, sloppy, and
overwritten. You needn't agree, but getting so bent over the absence of an
"I think" statement (which is actually implicit in almost anything anyone
writes, neurolinguistically speaking) seems equally childish to me.

It seems to me (which I like to use instead of "I think" or "in my opinion") that, while the "I think"
statement is factually implicit in any utterance, failure to explicitly mark opinions as over
against facts frequently denotes an inability to distinguish the two; the real test, of course, is
how "emotionally" people defend their opinions against perceived attacks.

As for the measure of Donaldson's respect as a writer, we'll just have to
agree to disagree. I'm sure you know lots of folks who think he's terrific,
just as all the readers I know find him an embarrassment to the genre.

"All?" Mighty big statement.

And while I couldn't disagree more with your lack of appreciation for
Bujold, I certainly respect your right to the opinion.

I didn't state an opinion on Bujold. I don't have one; I have not
got the qualifications for one, which would involve finishing at least one book. I stated the mere
fact that I can't read her, carefully making clear that I don't necessarily think the fault lies with
her.

I am curious about something. Is it your opinion that there exist no "bad
writers," only writers about whose work opinions vary? Or just that yes,
there are indeed bad writers, Donaldson (in your opinion) just not being one
of them?

Oh, no. There are very definitely bad writers. Piers Anthony, post
1976. Anne McCaffrey, post-about-1970. Ed Earl Repp, ever.
John Saul. But if enough people I respect respect a writer that I see no value in, I make the leap
of faith that there's something in that writer's work that I'm simply not equipped to see.

'Cause it is starting to seem like you are holding the view that
there *are* no bad writers, just readers with insufficient appreciation, or
something of that ilk....

Rather, we all have blind spots.

I stand by what I originally wrote, or certainly intended to write: **I**
THINK that Donaldson's "Lord Foul's Bane" is a literary embarrassment.

I think you're missing some valuable material, even in LFB. His style there is decidedly not up to
snuff, but he was doing something, and something valuable, that nobody had ever done in
fantasy before.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
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Andy Robertson — 10 Jun 2006, 07:05 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes writes:

At any rate, you have but to mention his name in most fannish contexts to get people urgghing, which I think a pity:

Google "clench racing Donaldson" for an (unfair) titter at his expence

stilskin — 10 Jun 2006, 11:13 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

--- On 6/9/06 Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:
I think you're missing some valuable material, even in LFB. His style there is decidedly not up to snuff, but he was doing something, and something valuable, that nobody had ever done in fantasy before.

Could you elaborate on what you believe he was doing, that nobody had done in fantasy before?

Paul

<http://www.sff.net/people/stilskin>

David Duffy — 10 Jun 2006, 11:36 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On Fri, 9 Jun 2006, Daniel D Jones wrote:
On Friday 09 June 2006 17:36, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
No ... I don't mean Samuel R. Delany, but a writer many on this list probably disdain, Stephen R. Donaldson.

Why would you assume that many here disdain him?

FWIW, does anyone else remember the back-to-back review of Donaldson and Wolfe by either Clute or Watson or Greenland in Foundation around 1983: it quite favourably compared *The One Tree* to *The Sword of the Lictor*, (both midway through the series at that time). Donaldson's style was becoming less grating to the reviewer. Unfortunately I didn't subscribe at that time, and can find no on-line contents list going back that far.

The review actually led me to bother reading the second Donaldson series, not being greatly impressed by the first. Anyway, I don't *have* to reread Donaldson, but I do have to read each Wolfe through a few times (much better value for money;)).

Other quotable Wolfe:

"But I wanted to be a particular person again, and so I sought the mirror of other persons, which would show me that I was not as they were."

"Thus by the paradoxical nature of knowledge, it is seen that though the existence of the Ylem, the primridal source of all things, may be doubted, yet the existence of his servants may not be doubted."

"...it represents for me all that monomaniacal fabric of argument, so tightly woven that not even the tiniest objection or spark of light can escape its net, in which human minds become enmeshed whenever the subject is one in which no appeal to fact is possible."

David Duffy.

Daniel D Jones — 10 Jun 2006, 12:36 · in reply to Robert Davies

On Friday 09 June 2006 19:10, Robert Davies wrote:
I haven't read them in years, but I've always liked the Covenant books.
There are plenty of other fantasy author to slag if you must.

I enjoyed the first series, but wasn't nearly as fond of the second. I don't think Covenant is nearly as good as the Gap series, however. I find it rather humorous that Donaldson is being slammed as "unreadable" by Wolfe fans.

Daniel D Jones — 10 Jun 2006, 13:14 · in reply to pthwndxrcclzp

On Friday 09 June 2006 18:50, pthwndxrcclzp wrote:
Probably because he's the most egregiously untalented fantasy hack ever to
(unaccountably) get published?

I fail to understand this.

Certainly, I have no problem with you not liking Donaldson. The world would be a boring place indeed if we all had the same tastes and opinions. But this isn't a statement that his works don't appeal to you. It's an ad hominem attack that is clearly not factually true. (That is, however much you dislike Donaldson, I find it extremely hard to believe that you think he has less talent than, say, Gary Gygax.)

There are lots of writers I don't care for. I read all but the last two chapters of the first book of Brooks _Shanara_ series, laid it down and haven't read a single word by him since. I can't stand reading Weis and Hickman. Alan Dean Foster leaves me cold. I never cared for Philip Jose Farmer, although I know others who swear he's a god in human form. But I don't find it necessary to despise any of these people or their writings. I express my opinion by not devoting my money and time to their efforts. I don't understand why that isn't sufficient.

pthwndxrcclzp — 10 Jun 2006, 16:44 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

I gather that what is giving you the most trouble with my statement is the word "most," and I concede that I have not read every extant work of fantasy; thus, such that a categorical statement is inappropriate.

It's probably time to drop it, but I really am surprised at the intersection of Wolfe and Donaldson fandom. To my mind, it's like someone championing, I dunno, Cezanne and Jeff Koons in the same breath. Not that it's unacceptable, just seemingly unaccountable.

I tried to say this earlier and may not have managed to convey what I feel.

I had an extreme reaction to Donaldson's early work. I'm not even sure why I found it so offensive, but I did, and the opinion, admittedly founded upon a minimum of his work, really

stuck with me. And yes, the way I presented my opinion in here was definitely over the top, and in retrospect served no purpose but to let me grind away on a very old axe and to annoy most of the audience in here to no useful end. So I apologize to the group for letting my passions get ahead of my good-citizenship. I will certainly aim at greater circumspection in future when rendering off-charter literary evaluations.

All *that* said, I do think there's a utility in conveying extreme literary opinions, if only to present a more complete range of evaluation so that people who haven't yet read a given author might make the best-informed decision as to whether they should. Or should ahead of alternate, perhaps more rewarding, writers.

Nevertheless, vitriol aside, there is a natural tendency to shoot for breezy readability rather than exhaustive, if more precise, prose. So I'm definitely guilty of writing "the guy's work sucks" instead of something like, "relative to the excellent examples of fantasy at what most readers would consider the top of the genre, there are writers like, say, Stephen R. Donaldson, certainly not the worst of the bunch, but whose work just leaves me cold in such an extreme fashion that it's hard for me to refrain from unfairly bashing it, though of course your exegetical mileage may well vary."

Again, I'm still a bit stunned at the intersection of Wolfe/Donaldson fans. For my money, Wolfe's stuff is erudite, layered, compelling, subtle, clever, rich, masterful. Whereas I find what little I've read of Donaldson to be nothing of the kind. But hey, I'm also sure I love some writers who'd provoke nothing short of giggles from lots of people (and not in a good way).

S'probably not a great place to stick a plug, but if you haven't read Sean McMullen's Moonworlds stuff you are missing out on some superbly entertaining fantasy. And ironically, I suspect it will appeal to readers at both the Donaldson and Wolfe ends of the spectrum. The Voyage of the Shadowmoon is the single most enjoyable book I've read in the last 10 years, hands-down.

Though your mileage may vary <grin>.

-John

P.S. Why isn't just avoiding a writer's books "sufficient"? Well, I think 'cause sometimes you gotta let your passions fly. Makes for a more lively discussion...at least some of the time. And we are a literary discussion forum, after all. Or so it seems to me.

On 6/10/06, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:

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Chris — 10 Jun 2006, 19:55 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

It is not so much Covenant's horribleness that bothers me about that series, it's Donaldson's tendency to *wallow* in that horribleness for extended periods of time.

I enjoyed some things about that series. Afterward I felt pretty dirty about it, though. Something akin to your feelings about a bottle of cheap port wine the day after you've imbibed it.

Experience.

I'd better explain that. I don't mean that this is a particularly disdainful group of readers/fans. But Donaldson has come in for a great deal of disdain over the years, partially of the "Covenant is a horrible character" variety -- which I don't suppose would particularly faze Wolfe's readers! -- but also of Donaldson's _prose_, which is a lot harder to defend.

Donaldson is a very conscious stylist, who deliberately chose a very unpleasant and (frankly) offputting style for the Covenant books. I don't mean his use of "big woids," which, again, ought not to bother Lupines, but the thudding rhythms, especially of the first trilogy. Until I read some non-Covenant work of his, I thought of him as "a conscioius, and conscientious, stylist with a tin ear." (In fact, even the new Covenant book is much better-written than the old books: it's the same basic style, but handled much more deftly. Donaldson has become a much better writer.)

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jun 2006, 21:05 · in reply to Chris

On 6/10/06, Chris <rasputin_ at hotmail.com> wrote:

It is not so much Covenant's horribleness that bothers me about that series, it's Donaldson's tendency to *wallow* in that horribleness for extended periods of time.

This provides a good jumping-off place to answer Stilskin's question, "What was Donaldson doing that nobody had done before in fantasy?"

1. Disclaimer: since I haven't read every pre-Donaldson work of fantasy out there, I could obviously be missing something important.

2. The short answer: taking a character from realistic fiction (I mean in the sense of Zola) and plopping him down into a fantasy world.

3. The long answer is, naturally, more complex. The rest of this post is a quick sketch:

It isn't that Covenant is horrible; it is that horrible things have happened to Covenant, making him a particular kind of person; and then, in a particular situation, he does a particular and particularly horrible thing, which colors his reaction to the Land and to himself for the rest of the book.

The Covenant books are (at one level) about the interplay of passion and control. What is shown in Covenant's crime is that passion without control is, well, horrible. What the rest of the series dramatizes in a dozen ways, including Covenant's own protests against the Land, is that control without passion is impotent. This is the "paradox" at the heart of white gold: it is necessary to make a decision in an utterly controlled way, and carry out the decision with utter passion.

This paradox can only be embodied in a character who is, no, not horrible, but capable of horribleness: capable of making the choice to "damn" rather than "save."

Put another way: Covenant is a character who has been taught, by the horrible things that happen to him, that only by complete and utter control can he survive. He finds himself in a situation he believes to be impossible, and -- in a moment of lost control -- acts on pure passion, and commits a crime he finds unbearable. His response is twofold: first, to reject the reality of the Land (because by doing so he makes his crime not real) and second, to impose upon himself in the Land control even beyond what his condition required in his "real" world.

One result is that, in the real world, his control begins to slip, and he nearly dies. Another is that, in the Land, where he is overcontrolled, he is impotent, incapable of wielding the power that he is repeatedly demonstrated to carry.

The solution to the paradox -- control guiding passion -- is the artist's solution; it is also the solution found at the same time by Lord Mhoram, which causes him to reject everything the New Lords have built.

4. Incidentally, one thing about Donaldson's style in these books: the constant reuse of certain words ("clench" being the famous example) is an attempt -- which fails, in the first trilogy, through overuse and clumsy use -- to create the literary equivalent of a Wagnerian leitmotif. This is one reason it would be wise to read at least one non-Covenant text before dismissing Donaldson as a terrible stylist; he doesn't do this everywhere, it's a specific trick used only in the TC books.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

Adam Thornton — 11 Jun 2006, 00:48 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On Jun 10, 2006, at 8:14 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:
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Ooooh, now THEM'S FIGHTIN' WORDS!

Did *Donaldson* ever write a Wandering Harlot Table?

I *thought* not.

Adam

Daniel D Jones — 11 Jun 2006, 02:32 · in reply to Adam Thornton

On Saturday 10 June 2006 20:48, Adam Thornton wrote:
On Jun 10, 2006, at 8:14 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:
Certainly, I have no problem with you not liking Donaldson. The world would be a boring place indeed if we all had the same tastes and opinions. But this isn't a statement that his works don't appeal to you. It's an ad hominem attack that is clearly not factually true. (That is, however much you dislike Donaldson, I find it extremely hard to believe that you think he has less talent than, say, Gary Gygax.)

Ooooh, now THEM'S FIGHTIN' WORDS!

Did *Donaldson* ever write a Wandering Harlot Table?

I *thought* not.

I whiled away a lot of hours thanks to Gary. (For those who may not be familiar with him, he's the author/inventor of the original Dungeons and Dragons game.) And his writing... hm, what would one call such writing? It's difficult to call it non-fiction when one is describing the fighting ability of a dragon, but it's not fiction in the normal sense of telling a story either. Technical fiction, perhaps? In any event, his writing skill in that area was fine. But if you've ever read (or tried to read) any of his fiction... Whew. Bad. Very bad.

Daniel D Jones — 11 Jun 2006, 02:52 · in reply to pthwndxrclzp

On Saturday 10 June 2006 12:44, pthwndxrc1zp wrote:

I gather that what is giving you the most trouble with my statement is the word "most," and I concede that I have not read every extant work of fantasy; thus, such that a categorical statement is inappropriate.

It's probably time to drop it, but I really am surprised at the intersection of Wolfe and Donaldson fandom. To my mind, it's like someone championing, I dunno, Cezanne and Jeff Koons in the same breath. Not that it's unacceptable, just seemingly unaccountable.

Interesting. I would expect a great deal of cross-over. While there are certainly some very pronounced differences between them, I see similarities as well. Both bring intelligence and depth that is all too often lacking in fantasy. Both explore the nature of good and evil, albeit in very different ways. Both have a penchant for protagonists who are, well, sometimes just not very nice people.

Again, I'm still a bit stunned at the intersection of Wolfe/Donaldson fans. For my money, Wolfe's stuff is erudite, layered, compelling, subtle, clever, rich, masterful. Whereas I find what little I've read of Donaldson to be nothing of the kind. But hey, I'm also sure I love some writers who'd provoke nothing short of giggles from lots of people (and not in a good way).

Well, I enjoy David Eddings. It's the literary equivalent of cotton candy, but one can't eat healthy all the time.

P.S. Why isn't just avoiding a writer's books "sufficient"? Well, I think 'cause sometimes you gotta let your passions fly. Makes for a more lively discussion...at least some of the time. And we are a literary discussion forum, after all. Or so it seems to me.

Just to be clear, I was addressing a larger question than solely your post. There are web sites (someone posted a link to one here not too long ago) that are devoted to denigrating Wolfe and his works. A great deal of time and effort has gone into telling people how horrible a writer he is and how overrated is his fiction.

Transient — 11 Jun 2006, 18:46 · in reply to Adam Thornton

I would like to interject into this thread the fact that I loathe the writing style of George R. R. Martin, and I find his "Game of Thrones" series to be nothing more than fanfic in search of a made-for-Sci-Fi movie to be a fan of.

Thanks for listening, now please carry on.

Adam Thornton — 12 Jun 2006, 00:34 · in reply to Transient

On Jun 11, 2006, at 1:46 PM, Transient wrote:

I would like to interject into this thread the fact that I loathe the writing style of George R. R. Martin, and I find his "Game of Thrones" series to be nothing more than fanfic in search of a made-for-Sci-Fi movie to be a fan of.

Thanks for listening, now please carry on.

Sometimes Stephen Baxter's prose style makes me want to stick hatpins through my eyes.

Adam

Stanislaus — 14 Jun 2006, 17:52 · in reply to Andy Robertson

Hello Andy,

Saturday, June 10, 2006, 9:05:54 AM, you wrote:

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes writes:

At any rate, you have but to mention his name in most fannish contexts to get people urgghing, which I think a pity:

Google "clench racing Donaldson" for an (unfair) titter at his expence

This is a brilliant essay by Langford:

"The well-tempered Plot Device"

<http://www.ansible.co.uk/Ansible/plotdev.html>

"Covenant saw. The Staff of Plot. Destroyed. For the Staff of Plot had been formed by Berek Halfhand as a tool to serve and uphold the Plot. He had fashioned the Staff from a limb of the One Tree as a way to wield Earthpower in defence of the health of the Land, in support of the natural order of life. And because Earthpower was the strength of mystery and spirit, the Staff became the thing it served. It was the Plot; the Plot was incarnate in the Staff. The tool and its purpose were one. And the Staff had been destroyed. That loss had weakened the very fibre of the Plot. A crucial support was withdrawn, and the Plot faltered."

By the way- he, after reading "Shadow" and "Claw", prematurely accuses Wolfe of the same - that is, that the Claw is merely a plot device. - Wolfe as usual made it appear that way at first, later to explain that the Claw was essentially worthless in itself.

Best regards,
Stanislaus <mailto:sbocian@poczta.fm>

Zobacz nowosci salonu moto w Madrycie >>> <http://link.interia.pl/f1961>

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 14 Jun 2006, 18:01 · in reply to Stanislaus

Now that we've all had the chance to play "bash the fantasy writer (and fellow list members)," does anybody have any thoughts on the original quote? To save y'all from having to dig through week-old emails, here it is again:

"As a narrative artist, I face an incessant dilemma which (I believe) plagues all artists in one form or another: I suffer from a natural and understandable (and perhaps inevitable) impulse to *leave out* anything that seems perfectly obvious to me. At the same time, I expound endlessly on anything that I find obscure or difficult. But guess what? The things that are obvious to me are seldom obvious to the reader. At the same time, readers are quicker on the up-take than I am (because they read so much more quickly than I write)."

I found Stanislaus's comment strangely apropos, by the

way:

On 6/14/06, Stanislaus <sbocian at poczta.fm> wrote:
By the way- he, after reading "Shadow" and "Claw", prematurely accuses Wolfe of the same - that is, that the Claw is merely a plot device. - Wolfe as usual made it appear that way at first, later to explain that the Claw was essentially worthless in itself.

-- though I'd argue that in fact something that seems tremendously important but is "essentially worthless in itself" is almost a working definition of a plot device (especially the variety of plot device known as a Maguffin).

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

Stanislaus — 14 Jun 2006, 18:54 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Hello Dan'l,

Saturday, June 10, 2006, 8:57:16 AM, you wrote:
On 6/9/06, pthwndxrczlp <aquastor at gmail.com> wrote:

My assessment had very little to do with my liking or disliking the material. Whether you agree or not, I find his prose puerile, sloppy, and overwritten. You needn't agree, but getting so bent over the absence of an "I think" statement (which is actually implicit in almost anything anyone writes, neurolinguistically speaking) seems equally childish to me.

It seems to me (which I like to use instead of "I think" or "in my opinion") that, while the "I think" statement is factually implicit in any utterance, failure to explicitly mark opinions as over against facts frequently denotes an inability to distinguish the two; the real test, of course, is how "emotionally" people defend their opinions against perceived attacks.

The real difference between facts and opinion is that opinions can be neither attacked nor defended. The opinion is the fact that I like or dislike something. They are. I like something, or not, and similarly you like it, or not. There is nothing more to it. I cannot, and I need not, persuade you that I like something.

Unfortunately, the obvious fact that one can have an opinion about a value of a book is taken to mean that one cannot make a judgement about it.

You can certainly say that there are no objective values of books, only personal likes or dislikes. That position is wrong, but it is tenable. It can be proven that books have an intrinsic value, but it would require many presuppositions. Many of them could be regarded as not obvious, or even false. (Eg, I think it is necessary to suppose that the God exists. This is a controversial supposition.)

Calling any judgement about value of a book an opinion, however, only confuses matter.

The proof that there opinions and judgements about books are different things is easy - I can like a book, and judge it bad (eg some romance) or I can dislike a book and judge it good (eg Cortazar, or Joyce's Ulysses).

In other words there are two separate things:

an objective value of a given book,
your liking or disliking of it.

You can like a bad book, and dislike a good one - most people do so. But whether a book is bad or good is not an opinion, but a fact - although it can be difficult to ascertain. (It does not follow that one of the widely different books must be better; good and bad is not a one-dimensional category, books can be good in different ways).

I am curious about something. Is it your opinion that there exist no "bad writers," only writers about whose work opinions vary? Or just that yes, there are indeed bad writers, Donaldson (in your opinion) just not being one of them?

Oh, no. There are very definitely bad writers. Piers Anthony, post 1976. Anne McCaffrey, post-about-1970. Ed Earl Repp, ever. John Saul. But if enough people I respect respect a writer that I see no value in, I make the leap of faith that there's something in that writer's work that I'm simply not equipped to see.

So it seems you think that there are bad writers, but not good ones. There is a certain objective minimal threshold. Those who are below, are bad. Those that are above, are not-bad.

Writers who pass this minimum can be liked or disliked, but cannot be judged.

Unfortunately, this theory is contradictory. Great works can deliberately breach the rules which are the minimal limits of good writing. So you will have to say that there are bad and not-bad books. And some of the best books are bad.

Or perhaps you are simply saying that many people like Donaldson, and they may very well be right.

I stand by what I originally wrote, or certainly intended to write: *I*
THINK that Donaldson's "Lord Foul's Bane" is a literary embarrassment.

I think you're missing some valuable material, even in LFB. His style there is decidedly not up to snuff, but he was doing something, and something valuable, that nobody had ever done in fantasy before.

Donaldson, and Bujold also, are neither very good, nor very bad. Both are rather enjoyable.

Donaldson's innovation in fantasy is the world as inner landscape - the land as the heart of the hero. It is taking the so-called "pathetic fallacy" and making it the main constructing material of a novel. Covenant is corrupted, and the Land is corrupted in its turn - in other words, Lord Foul is a facet of Covenants character.

Best regards,
Stanislaus <mailto:sbocian@poczta.fm>

INTERIA.PL dla kobiet... >>> <http://link.interia.pl/f193b>

Andy Robertson — 14 Jun 2006, 19:10 · in reply to Stanislaus

Stanislaus writes:

This is a brilliant essay by Langford:

"The well-tempered Plot Device"

<http://www.ansible.co.uk/Ansible/plotdev.html>

Indeed, but it's actually by the well-known UK fan Nick Lowe.

I was in the audience at Fencon (Cambridge 1982) when it was first given - time flies.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 14 Jun 2006, 19:57 · in reply to Stanislaus

Stanislaus,

The real difference between facts and opinion is that opinions can be neither attacked nor defended. The opinion is the fact that I like or dislike something.

Ummm ... no, I don't think so. That's a very narrow definition of opinion. I can have the opinion that Gene Wolfe is a good writer; or that the Earth is flat; or that there is life on Mars, or that a Being much like the Judaeo-Christian God made the world.

The first is debateable. The second is provably false, but I could still hold it as an opinion. The third is in principle provably false or true, but not with available knowledge. The last is unprovable by any technology I can imagine.

If I hold to an opinion which is provably false ("The Earth is flat"), I am in-sane. If I hold to an opinion in spite of massive evidence, but not proof, well, I'm stubborn.

"I like Gene Wolfe's books" represents a fact.

"Gene Wolfe is a good writer" represents an opinion; and, unless you have objective, empirical means of determining whether writer X is good (which of course means, to begin with, an objective, extensional, etc. definition of "good" as it pertains to "writer") , it will always be an opinion.

You can certainly say that there are no objective values of books, only personal likes or dislikes. That position is wrong, but it is tenable. It can be proven that books have an intrinsic value, but it would require many presuppositions.

Ummm, that's the basic problem: all those "presuppositions."

I like to operate in a world where all the cards are on the table, and only the empirically demonstrable is regarded as a "fact."

Calling any judgement about value of a book an opinion, however, only confuses matter.

Then there's this word "value." What is the "value" of a book? \$5.95 in paperback? Fodder for a whole bunch of research papers? Priceless, because it gave me an emotional experience that changed my life? Or... What does this word "value" mean as you use it here? I do not like this word; we don't have agreement on what it means, so its use does not aid clarity.

I can like a book, and judge it bad (eg some romance) or I can dislike a book and judge it good (eg Cortazar, or Joyce's Uliesses).

I agree with this statement, though I would perhaps have chosen other examples. (I like Joyce.)

In other words there are two separate things:
an objective value of a given book,
your liking or disliking of it.

Again: you assert the existence of this "objective value," without giving me any hint what it is or how I can determine it. I question this; if you can't discuss it clearly, it's a ghost. And then when you say:

But whether a book is bad or good is not an opinion, but a fact - although it can be difficult to ascertain.

this sounds like you're already backing away from "objective."

(It does not follow that one of the widely different books must be better; good and bad is not a one-dimensional category, books can be good in different ways).

True: any kind of "value" is a flattening measurement, i.e., a single, one-dimensional measurement that combines in some (usually quite complex) way a large number of measurements, some of which are themselves multidimensional. This is why I included the ludicrous "\$5.95 in paperback" above: price is the ultimate flattening value-measurement.

I am curious about something. Is it your opinion that there exist no "bad writers," only writers about whose work opinions vary? Or just that yes, there are indeed bad writers, Donaldson (in your opinion) just not being one of them?

Oh, no. There are very definitely bad writers. Piers Anthony, post 1976. Anne McCaffrey, post-about-1970. Ed Earl Repp, ever. John Saul. But if enough people I respect respect a writer that I see no value in, I make the leap of faith that there's something in that writer's work that I'm simply not equipped to see.

So it seems you think that there are bad writers, but not good ones.

Where did you get that idea? You asked specifically about "bad" writers, and I answered the question you asked; I said nothing about there being no "good" writers.

In fact, I think that Wolfe, Donaldson, Delany, Ellison, Le Guin, Tiptree, Butler, Shakespeare, Milton, Joyce, Mann, Faulkner, Dostoevski, Woolf, Wolfe, and Twain are all "good" writers -- though I admit that there is at least one name in that list whose work I don't personally care for.

Unfortunately, this theory is contradictory. Great works can deliberately breach the rules which are the minimal limits of good writing. So you will have to say that there are bad and not-bad books. And some of the best books are bad.

You've gone waaaaay off on a tangent here that I don't follow at all.

Or perhaps you are simply saying that many people like Donaldson, and they may very well be right.

I'm saying that (a) many people like Donaldson, (b) I like Donaldson and (c) in my opinion, Donaldson is both a skilled and a talented writer.

Donaldson's innovation in fantasy is the world as inner landscape - the land as the heart of the hero.

That would be one. Another is a little more complex ...

One of the clearest distinctions between "swords'n'sorcery" and "high fantasy" is that the former tends to concentrate attention on The Hero and the latter on ... well, something larger. This becomes clear when you realize that S'n'S series are generally referred to by the hero's name (the "Conan" series, the "Fahrd and the Grey Mouser" series, the "Alyx" series, etc.) while high fantasy series are generally referred to by the name of the world or concept ("The

Lord of the Rings," "The Earthsea Series," etc.), and frequently don't have a Hero figure as such.

What Donaldson did in the original "Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever" was to place a (psychologically realistic and complex) character at the focus of what would otherwise seem to be a high fantasy series; thus the series title contains both his name and the larger central issue of the series (Unbelief and its consequences).

Covenant is different from every prior high-fantasy hero of whom I am aware, because he is capable -- I mean emotionally capable -- of making a moral decision that will result in the destruction of The Land. That's the whole point of the series: he was selected by the Despiser precisely
for that quality.

Lord Foul is "a facet of Covenant's character" only if the Land's Creator is also: yet we see the Creator in Covenant's "real" world (as the man in ochre robes), objectively separate from Covenant. It might perhaps be -- and I suspect that this is what is going to play out in the final chronicles -- that Creator, Despiser, and Unbeliever are three facets of a single larger personality; but Foul and Covenant are decidedly separate, as much so (at least) as the Christian Father and Son and Holy Spirit.

But this is a Wolfe list, not a Donaldson list, and I only quoted Donaldson in the first place because I thought his remarks had some relevancy to some Lupine issues...

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

Chris — 14 Jun 2006, 22:40 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Dan'l said:

"Gene Wolfe is a good writer" represents an opinion; and, unless you have objective, empirical means of determining whether writer X is good (which of course means, to begin with, an objective, extensional, etc. definition of "good" as it pertains to "writer") , it will _always_ be an opinion.

Not to say that I don't agree with a lot of what you've said, but a qualification can be made here. You can believe in objective aspects of the world that aren't codifiable in language (and perhaps not even in principle). You can further believe (or not believe) that there are still empirical means of determining whether writer X is good - the idea that some things you know simply by *seeing* them (and of course people can see clearly, or not so clearly, on occasion).

SOCRATES: The disgrace begins when a man writes not well, but badly. PHAEDRUS: Clearly. SOCRATES: And what is well and what is badly -- need we ask Lysias, or any other poet or orator, who ever wrote or will write either a political or any other work, in metre or out of metre, poet or prose writer, to teach us this?

Stanislaus said:

You can certainly say that there are no objective values of books, only personal likes or dislikes. That position is wrong, but it is tenable. It can be proven that books have an intrinsic value, but it would require many presuppositions.

I get lost somewhere in this one. One could also hold that there *are* objective values when it comes to books, but that the overall "goodness" of particular books is a matter of opinion. Or as above one could hold that there are objective values, and the assessment of the goodness of books is not a matter of mere opinion, and yet still hold that no flat "criteria" can be given that codifies the goodness and badness.

Dan'l:

Ummm, that's the basic problem: all those "presuppositions."

I like to operate in a world where all the cards are on the table,
and only the empirically demonstrable is regarded as a "fact."

I am afraid that your expectations are unrealistic, even with what we consider to be empirically demonstrable facts. I am sympathetic to the urge behind that particular Grail-quest, but ultimately we still have to come to terms with all these presuppositions which are not to be evaded or left behind.

Calling any judgement about value of a book an opinion, however,
only confuses matter.

Then there's this word "value." What is the "value" of a book?
\$5.95 in paperback? Fodder for a whole bunch of research
papers? Priceless, because it gave me an emotional
experience that changed my life? Or... What does this word
"value" mean _as you use it here_? I do not like this word;
we don't have agreement on what it means, so its use does
not aid clarity.

That is perhaps the essence of what's at issue. We can't come to agreement until we agree on the nature of values. And this question cannot be avoided by simply ignoring the word, or pretending that "values" are not involved.

But whether a book is bad or good is not an opinion, but a fact -
although it can be difficult to ascertain.

this sounds like you're already backing away from "objective."

I think in a way he may be leaning toward the position I described above.

(It does not follow that one of the widely different books must be
better; good and bad is not a one-dimensional category, books
can be good in different ways).

True: any kind of "value" is a _flattening_ measurement, i.e., a
single, one-dimensional measurement that combines in some
(usually quite complex) way a large number of measurements,
some of which are themselves multidimensional. This is why I
included the ludicrous "\$5.95 in paperback" above: price is the
ultimate flattening value-measurement.

Yet all of the different kind of "goods" seem to have something in common that make them goods in the first place - a family resemblance. But what makes a good soccer player may have nothing codifiably in common with what makes a good novel (in any particular sense). Does this mean there's no such thing, objectively, as a good soccer player or a good book?

Unfortunately, this theory is contradictory. Great works can
deliberately breach the rules which are the minimal limits of good
writing. So you will have to say that there are bad and not-bad
books. And some of the best books are bad.

You've gone waaaaay off on a tangent here that I don't follow
at all.

I don't know for sure what he was talking about. I am vaguely reminded of Proust's meditation on originality. He said that basically what is **really** original in art is inherently something that you don't at first know what to make of, or are even a little disappointed with, because it does not fit into the conventions of what you expected a "good" performance or painting to be like. One asks oneself, "Is this beautiful?"

Perhaps it can tie in to what was said above. One comes up with hypotheses about what makes a book good, but these hypotheses are only approximations of something that apparently escapes codification. Nonetheless one looks, and one recognizes the beauty. Only afterward are our hypotheses about the nature of beauty revised.

What Donaldson did in the original "Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever" was to place a (psychologically realistic and complex) character at the focus of what would otherwise seem to be a high fantasy series; thus the series title contains both his name and the larger central issue of the series (Unbelief and its consequences).

I think a lot of other people have had psychologically realistic and complex characters, though I can't cite examples at the moment. What struck me about Covenant as an anti-hero was that the writer does not spare a lot of love for his creation - or for that matter any of his characters. By this I don't mean anything syrupy. There is simply a certain amount of **care** with which one renders a character - even a repulsive one - in a good work.

I felt, throughout all of those books, that the author in some way loathed his creation, and it was more than just Covenant, it bled over into the world in general and even the characters presented as innocent. Perhaps this was original on his part, but in this case the actual feeling that it created was that of an ill-made creation by a self-loathing author, and by attempting to identify or engage in some way with his characters the reader ends up disliking themselves just that tiny bit more as well.

All this doesn't mean he's a bad writer, just that I did not like those books and did not see them as original in any positive sense.

But this is a Wolfe list, not a Donaldson list, and I only quoted Donaldson in the first place because I thought his remarks had some relevancy to some Lupine issues...

Nonetheless most of what's been talked about isn't even about Donaldson, particularly, so I think the digression can be forgiven.

Alan Lewis — 16 Jun 2006, 00:14 · in reply to Chris

Dan'l:

True: any kind of "value" is a flattening measurement, i.e., a single, one-dimensional measurement that combines in some (usually quite complex) way a large number of measurements, some of which are themselves multidimensional. This is why I included the ludicrous "\$5.95 in paperback" above: price is the ultimate flattening value-measurement.

Chris:

Yet all of the different kind of "goods" seem to have something in common that make them goods in the first place - a family resemblance. But what makes a good soccer player may have nothing codifiably in common with what makes a good novel (in any particular sense). Does this mean there's no such

thing, objectively, as a good soccer player or a good book?

This kind of discussion is very interesting, and certainly relevant for our list. Though there seems agreement that there is such a thing as good writing and bad writing, there remains the problem of the objective reality of these qualities when we disagree about which a particular work is. A good (ahem) writer named Tom Stoppard said this in his play *The Real Thing*:

ANNIE: It just needs a bit of work.

HENRY: You're all bent.

ANNIE: You're jealous.

HENRY: Of Brodie?

ANNIE: You're jealous of the idea of the writer. You want to keep it sacred, special, not something anybody can do. Some of us have it, some of us don't. We write, you get written about. What gets you about Brodie is he doesn't know his place. You say he can't write like a head waiter saying you can't come in here without a tie. Because he can't put words together. What's so good about putting words together?

HENRY: It's traditionally considered advantageous for a writer.

ANNIE: He's not a writer. He's a convict. You're a writer. You write because you're a writer. Even you write about something, you have to think up something to write about just so you can keep writing. More well chosen words nicely put together. So what? Why should that be it? Who says?

HENRY: Nobody says. It just works best.

ANNIE: Of course it works. You teach a lot of people what to expect from good writing, and you end up with a lot of people saying you write well. Then somebody who isn't in on the game comes along, like Brodie, who really has something to write about, something real, and you can't get through it. Well, he couldn't get through yours, so where are you? To you, he can't write. To him, write is all you can do.

HENRY: Jesus, Annie, you're beginning to appall me. There's something scary about stupidity made coherent. I can deal with idiots, and I can deal with sensible argument, but I don't know how to deal with you. Where's my cricket bat?

ANNIE: Your cricket bat?

HENRY: Yes. It's a new approach. [He heads out into the hall.]

ANNIE: Are you trying to be funny?

HENRY: No, I'm serious. [He goes out while she watches in wary disbelief. He returns with an old cricket bat.]

ANNIE: You better not be.

HENRY: Right, you silly cow -

ANNIE: Don't you bloody dare -

HENRY: Shut up and listen. This thing here, which looks like a wooden club, is actually several pieces of particular wood cunningly put together in a certain way so that the whole thing is sprung, like a dance floor. It's for hitting cricket balls with. If you get it right, the cricket ball will travel two hundred yards in four seconds, and all you've done is give it a knock like knocking the top off a bottle of stout, and it makes a noise like a trout taking a fly. [He clucks his tongue to make the noise.] What we're trying to do is to write cricket bats, so that when we throw up an idea and give it a little knock, it might . travel . [He clucks his tongue again and picks up the script.] Now, what we've got here is a lump of wood of roughly the same shape trying to be a cricket bat, and if you hit a ball with it, the ball will travel about ten feet and you will drop the bat and dance about shouting Ouch! with your hands stuck into your armpits. This isn't better because someone says it's better, or because there's a conspiracy by the MCC to keep cudgels out of Lords. It's better because it's better. You don't believe me, so I suggest you go out to bat with this and see how you get on. [quoting from the play] You're a strange boy, Billy, how old are you? Twenty, but I've lived more than you'll ever live. Ooh, ouch! [He drops the script and hops about with his hands in his armpits, going Ouch! ANNIE watches him expressionlessly until he desists.]

ANNIE: I hate you.

HENRY: I love you. I'm your pal. I'm your best mate. I look after you. You're the only chap.

ANNIE: Oh, Hen. Can't you help?

HENRY: What did you expect me to do?

ANNIE: Well, cut it and shape it.

HENRY: Cut it and shape it. Henry of Mayfair. Look - he can't write. I would have to write it for him.

ANNIE: Well, write it for him.

HENRY: I can't.

ANNIE: Why?

HENRY: Because it's balls. Mary's part is the least of it - it's merely ham-fisted. But when he gets into his stride, or rather his lurch, announcing every stale revelation of the newly enlightened, like stout Cortez coming upon the Pacific - war is profits, politicians are puppets, Parliament is a farce, justice is a fraud, property is theft. It's all here: the Stock Exchange, the arms dealers, the press barons. You can't fool Brodie - patriotism is propaganda, religion is a con trick, royalty is an anachronism. Pages and pages of it. It's like being run over very slowly by a travelling freak show of favourite simpletons, the India rubber pedagogue, the midget intellectual, the human panacea.

ANNIE: It's his view of the world. Perhaps from where he's standing you'd see it the same way.

HENRY: Or perhaps I'd realize where I'm standing. Or at least that I'm standing somewhere. There is, I suppose, a world of objects which have a certain form, like this coffee mug. I turn it, and it has no handle. I tilt it, and it has no cavity. But there is something real here which is always a mug with a handle. But politics, justice, patriotism - they aren't like coffee mugs.

There's nothing real there separate from our perception of them. So if you try to change them as though there were something there to change, you'll get frustrated, and frustration will finally make you violent. If you know this and proceed with humility, you may perhaps alter people's perceptions so that they behave a little differently at that axis of behaviour where we locate politics or justice; but if you don't know this, then you're acting on a mistake. Prejudice is the expression of this mistake.

ANNIE: Or such is your perception.

HENRY: All right.

ANNIE: And who wrote it, why he wrote it, where he wrote it - none of these things count with you?

HENRY: Leave me out of it. They don't count. Maybe Brodie got a raw deal, maybe he didn't. I don't know. It doesn't count. He's a lout with language. I can't help somebody who thinks, or thinks he thinks, that editing a newspaper is censorship, or that throwing bricks is a demonstration while building tower blocks is social violence, or that unpalatable statement is provocation while disrupting the speaker is the exercise of free speech. Words don't deserve that kind of malarkey. They're innocent, neutral, precise, standing for this, describing that, meaning the other, so if you look after them you can build bridges across incomprehension and chaos. But when they get their corners knocked off, they're no good any more, and Brodie knocks corners off without knowing he's doing it. So everything he writes is jerry-built. It's rubbish. An intelligent child could push it over. I don't think writers are sacred, but words are. They deserve respect. If you get the right ones in the right order, you can nudge the world a little or make a poem which children will speak for you when you're dead.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 16 Jun 2006, 02:12 · in reply to Alan Lewis

Alan,

Thank you for posting that -- I do like Tom Stoppard a lot (especially _Travesties_ and _Dogg's Hamlet and Cahoot's Macbeth_ and ... Oh, heck: I like Tom Stoppard), and what he says here does seem relevant.

In fact, I do have some thoughts on how one can make a useful and empirical and all that stuff definition of "good"ness for a piece of fiction, but they are (for the moment) insufficiently choate for me to post anything about them, and anyway I want to see if anyone else comes up with a similar approach.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
"One o'th'flay-rods gone out o'skew on th'treadle."

David Duffy — 16 Jun 2006, 04:06 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Thu, 15 Jun 2006, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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I fear this will be worse than a discussion about the definition of science fiction. Maybe we should concentrate on objective measures of "bad". Just in the last month or so, I have read several newspaper and journal articles:

- 1) Allan Ginsberg is a bad poet and _Howl_ is undeservedly popular
- 2) JM Coetzee is a bad writer and undeservedly received the Nobel
- 3) Dan Brown is a bad writer and undeservedly made lots of money ;)

Each article provided quotes from the offending author -- "objective" evidence.

My favourite review of _Finnegan's Wake_ was by a psychiatrist, who said he frequently saw these types of word salads and neologisms in the writing of psychotics, and confidently made the same diagnosis for Joyce.

Or how about the frequent comment that HP Lovecraft is *much* better in French translation ;)

Which is to say, *I* *know* what "quality literature" is, and can spot a wooden sentence as well as Tom Stoppard's character, but _de gustibus_.

David Duffy.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 16 Jun 2006, 16:47 · in reply to David Duffy

On 6/15/06, David Duffy <David.Duffy at qimr.edu.au> wrote:
I fear this will be worse than a discussion about the definition of science fiction.

Probably not, but I believe the approach I'm mulling over -- basically, a weighted version of fuzzy definition -- would make defining SF a lot less controversial also. It's just that it makes defining "definition" a bit hairy.

Maybe we should concentrate on objective measures of "bad". Just in the last month or so, I have read several newspaper and journal articles:

- 1) Allan Ginsberg is a bad poet and _Howl_ is undeservedly popular

Certainly the title poem is the only thing in it I find readable -- but I'm not a real poetry-lover.

- 2) JM Coetzee is a bad writer and undeservedly received the Nobel

This critic should review the list of past Nobel winners. Chances are s/he has read less than half of those before, say, 1970. The Nobel committee turns out to be roughly as infallible as the Academy that presents the Oscars or the WSFS that presents the Hugoi.

- 3) Dan Brown is a bad writer and undeservedly made lots of money ;)

God knows, Dan Brown is no Gene Wolfe, or even Tom Clancy, but he delivers the product the audience pays for. I can't call that a "bad writer" in any meaningful way.

Each article provided quotes from the offending author --
"objective" evidence.

Yeah, and Tolkien is a bad writer because Legolas fell into his own tongue. "Even Homer nods." I can prove

any writer lousy if I'm allowed to quote out of context.

My favourite review of _Finnegan's Wake_ was by a psychiatrist, who said he frequently saw these types of word salads and neologisms in the writing of psychotics, and confidently made the same diagnosis for Joyce.

Cheez. That would be meaningful _if_ Joyce hadn't repeatedly proved (and was still proving in his massive correspondence) that he was, in fact, perfectly capable of writing good "standard" English. Actually, it _is_ meaningful, but what it means is about the shrink in question, not about Joyce.

Joyce's language in FW is clearly totally in control, having a definite structure and grammar which it is possible to imitate (my own recent attempt, a response to the Stephen James Joyce teatemptestpot, can be found on my blog at <http://sturgeonslawyer.livejournal.com/152542.html> if you care)

Or how about the frequent comment that HP Lovecraft is
much better in French translation ;)

I've mostly heard that about van Vogt. I've also heard that Thomas Mann -- or was it Franz Kafka -- was basically invented by his English translator, and his style in German was horrendous. I have no idea, since I can't read German...

Which is to say, *I* *know* what "quality literature" is, and can spot a wooden sentence as well as Tom Stoppard's character, but _de gustibus_.

Disgustibus non deputandem. ("You can't hire someone else to do your throwing-up for you.")

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

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Bob Miller — 17 Jun 2006, 02:54 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Thank you so much for responding to the post, Dan'I. I was wondering why that boring pretentiousness was put out there or why anyone would bother with it, and you showed me again that viewpoint and variety are the master limners of both profundity and accuracy. Very humbling---again.

From: "Dan'I Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com> Reply-To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net> To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net> Subject: Re: (urth) objective measure of "good" Date: Thu, 15 Jun 2006 19:12:19 -0700

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