

Wolfe: Misogynist? and accessibility

The Urth list — 14 messages, 8 voices, 18 Oct 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4735>

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Jack Redelfs — 18 Oct 2006, 23:20

b sharp said:

On one end there are men who fear and/or
loathe women, on the other end are men who feel
women deserve a higher degree of respect,
protection and caring than men

Wolfe is a misanthrope. "All men are wolves," says Latro, and I don't think that it's far off from what Wolfe believes. He is NOT a humanist. He has no faith in human rationality, science, law, philosophy, or even priests. I think he believes that all of the institutions of man, no matter how positively spun, are twisted into tools or weapons by carnal men (and women). Wolfe puts his faith in higher things, and he believes that people of goodwill are rare pearls, gemstones to be treasured.

In that light, how can Wolfe fill his pages with honorable female characters? Or male?

I just don't see how we can neatly say that a chivalrous author will refuse to put his female characters in harms way. That's like saying only an anti-semite would write novels about Auschwitz, isn't it?

In order for there to be a true appreciation for chivalry, perhaps you should make it clear that women are in great danger? Perhaps if, as an author, you shepherd your female characters from indignities, you paint a rose-colored picture of the world. And if your readers believe in that picture, they will feel no urgency to be chivalrous in their own conduct. They will feel that it is a nicety, not a necessity.

Mo's observation that few women seem to become Wolfe fanatics is germane.

Perhaps it is. I don't know. Tolkien is incredibly masculine, perhaps more insulting to women by reason of simply ignoring them, treating them as nonentities, bit players. Yes, Eowyn, Arwen and Galadriel notwithstanding (and the latter two are mythical creatures, not ordinary human women). And yet vast throngs of women are in love with his writings.

How do we explain Mo's observation, if it is correct?

1. despite the fact that his writings are kind of beyond genre, he is pigeonholed into SF, a male-dominated genre, and 2. even in the genre, his profile is rather low. Sure, he may be a highly influential author, and a critical darling, but in flat numbers, his readership is quite small.

b sharp also said:

I think we can all agree Wolfe is
writing from his heart and his deeper feelings

about women are expressed.

Perhaps. Wolfe's writing is so oblique, I am hard pressed to identify what his feelings are on ANYTHING. Even what I said earlier in this post is based mostly on his interviews. His political leanings are also inscrutable in his fiction, beyond generalities like an abhorrence of despotism. The fact is, Wolfe has a gift for presenting contradictory arguments (through the dialogue) that are very intelligent.

Wolfe's writing is so unusual, and so varied, that I have a very hard time identifying a consistent Narrative Voice. Every Wolfe novel seems to come from a different world. Maybe he does really find them in ancient urns, or floating in space?

On a related note, vis-a-vis Wolfe's small profile, I think a lot of the blame lies with *The Book Of The New Sun*. It's a great achievement and an anchor holding him down. It's widely seen as his best series, and not unreasonably so, and so I'll bet that many curious readers pick "Shadow Of The Torturer" as their first foray into Wolfe. I know did. And I was delighted by the bizarre vocabulary, philosophical discursions, and the baroque feel of the writing. But in my experience, most people find it to be a very inaccessible book. I wonder how many people tried to read it and gave up early on because it was too "hard."

I really hope we'll start inviting curious people to start with *Nightside The Long Sun*, *Devil In The Forest*, *The Knight*, even *Soldier Of The Mist*. Anything, really. No matter how delightful we may find it, *Shadow Of The Torturer* is Wolfe's least accessible novel.

One more thing: this may be a strawman, but perhaps it has been said by someone, somewhere that Wolfe is incapable of writing a sympathetic female character. How about Io? She seems to be totally respectable and good. She's honest, wise, loyal, kind and brave. She does unsuccessfully try to seduce Latro, at one point, but only after travelling with him for the better part of a year and falling in love with him. One does not get the impression that she is unreasonable or wanton.

Jeff Wilson — 19 Oct 2006, 05:02 · in reply to Jack Redelfs

Jack Redelfs wrote:

I just don't see how we can neatly say that a chivalrous author will refuse to put his female characters in harms way. That's like saying only an anti-semite would write novels about Auschwitz, isn't it?

If an author complusively wrote novels about Jews being tortured and killed, I'd at least suspect him of anti-semitism.

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The Latro books are great counterexamples for the suggestion that Wolfe is a misogynist himself and can't write women otherwise; Latro is physically very capable, but is socially vulnerable and depends on the kindness and guidance of friends, many of whom are strong, sympathetic women. There are no unqualified female villains; those who participate in vice are at least partners in their exploitation rather than pawns kept by a male pimp.

Daniel D Jones — 19 Oct 2006, 11:13 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On Thursday 19 October 2006 01:02, Jeff Wilson wrote:

Jack Redelfs wrote:

I just don't see how we can neatly say that a chivalrous author will refuse to put his female characters in harms way. That's like saying only an anti-semite would write novels about Auschwitz, isn't it?

If an author compulsively wrote novels about Jews being tortured and killed, I'd at least suspect him of anti-semitism.

So you suspect Agatha Christie of harboring a secret desire to murder? I'd shudder to hear what you must suspect of Stephen King and Clive Barker. :-)

Bob Miller — 19 Oct 2006, 12:19 · in reply to Jack Redelfs

Perhaps it is. I don't know. Tolkien is incredibly masculine, perhaps more insulting to women by reason of simply ignoring them, treating them as nonentities, bit players. Yes, Eowyn, Arwen and Galadriel notwithstanding (and the latter two are mythical creatures, not ordinary human women). And yet vast throngs of women are in love with his writings.

How do we explain Mo's observation, if it is correct?

Tolkien's writings are permeated? with two things that lend them an attractiveness that is immeasurable. The first is the identification the reader gets with wonderful, in all senses of the word, characters. The second is the love of his universe, with all its difficulties, that is obvious to any reader.

Many of Wolfe's leads are ambiguous and he deals with a great deal of horrid situations. I would submit this tends to reduce his readership in some quarters. And even his "best" chars show a great deal of self change in those books that allow development.

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Perhaps. Wolfe's writing is so oblique, I am hard pressed to identify what his feelings are on ANYTHING. Even what I said earlier in this post is based mostly on his interviews. His political leanings are also inscrutable in his fiction, beyond generalities like an abhorrence of despotism. The fact is, Wolfe has a gift for presenting contradictory arguments (through the dialogue) that are very intelligent.

I really hope we'll start inviting curious people to start with _Nightside The Long Sun_, _Devil In The Forest_, _The Knight_, even _Soldier Of The Mist_. Anything, really. No matter how delightful we may find it, _Shadow Of The Torturer_ is Wolfe's least accessible novel.

I think the Wizard Knight is one of the very best novels ever written. When I read it to my wife, there were multiple occasions where I would stop and we would just stare at each other going "wow". And it's fun, the chars, except Bold Berthold, are not far above us; they are, compared to me, better focused.

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I think Wolfe, like many of us, while being driven by youth and hormones at one time, has long been coming to a more complete and cooperative orientation in his female characters for all the 35 years I've been reading him. Perhaps the queen in the Wizard/Knight is a nod toward that elder orientation (a particular funhouse mirror of reality) as Zelazny once characterized his own work? Thank you all again for stimulating my mind

Hmpf MacSlow — 19 Oct 2006, 13:34 · in reply to Bob Miller

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To weigh in as a female Wolfe fan for a moment, I seem to remember rather liking the female soldier in, is it the third or the fourth part of TBotNS? I forgot her name and don't have time to look it up now. Also, wasn't there a sympathetic female sailor in TUotNS?

Clearly, I have to read the books again...

Hmpf

"You broke metaphysics. Fix it."

- Triangle & Robert

Jeff Wilson — 19 Oct 2006, 15:00 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

Daniel D Jones wrote:

On Thursday 19 October 2006 01:02, Jeff Wilson wrote:

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If an author compulsively wrote novels about Jews being tortured and killed, I'd at least suspect him of anti-semitism.

So you suspect Agatha Christie of harboring a secret desire to murder?

No more so than most people. Murder mysteries were already established as a category of polite literature before she chose to write them; misogyny isn't.

I'd

shudder to hear what you must suspect of Stephen King and Clive Barker. :-)

With Stephen King, I don't suspect, I know he's personally tickled by, for example, seeing authority figured being eaten by vicious animals, because he cops to it. King is a subscriber to the theory that a writer's hangups emerge in his work, to the extent that they can identify the author of a story in which they appear. It's part of his musing in *DANSE MACABRE* and appears as a plot device in "The Ballad Of The Flexible Bullet", and particular hangups are discussed in the commentary sections of some of his story collections.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Stanislaus — 19 Oct 2006, 17:35 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Hello Jeff,

Thursday, October 19, 2006, 7:02:46 AM, you wrote:

Jack Redelfs wrote:

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There is a technical term for this kind of criticism = "the poetic of a police informer."

I don't think the aim of reading books is to find some crime to accuse author of.

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

PS. >>> <http://link.interia.pl/f19a6>

Nathan Spears — 19 Oct 2006, 18:23 · follows Stanislaus

If an author compulsively wrote novels about Jews being tortured and killed, I'd at least suspect him of anti-semitism.

You have good reason to suspect Elie Wiesel of anti-Semitism, I suppose.

I agree with the poster who said that Wolfe is a misanthrope. Many of his characters suffer terribly. The abuse that men inflict upon other men takes different forms from the abuse that they inflict upon women, and Wolfe is aware of this fact. Perhaps your reaction to the former is less pronounced because you are yourself a man. Also, perhaps Wolfe finds himself writing more about the ways in which men abuse women than about strong, realistic female characters, because he is a man, not because he hates women. Any realistic man knows that he does not understand what it is like to be a woman - portraits he paints of her are from the outside looking in.

Anyway, most of this discussion has been centered around a kind of *cough*misogynist*cough* accusation rather than any sort of organized statement, and it's getting tiresome.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 19 Oct 2006, 18:58 · in reply to Stanislaus

On 10/19/06, Stanislaus quoted Jeff and wrote...

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There is a technical term for this kind of criticism = "the poetic of a police informer."

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Nor do I. I think Jeff's comment, tho apt, oversimplifies -- a persons who "compulsively" (which I take to mean that this is a theme that crops up in all her work, regardless of its ostensive plot, theme, etc.) writes about the torture and murder of Jews may be an anti-Semite, or may be an propagandist fighting anti-Semitism, or may just have a weird mental kink that she herself doesn't understand. A lot of how I would respond to such a writer would depend on the attitude with which she described the torture and murder: is it written as a sort of "torture porn," or is it written to horrify, or is it written clinically and coldly, or ...

Wolfe does not (in my opinion) step across the line into "torture porn." Though there is, in my opinion, an amount of "violence against women" in his work that must be considered, it's clear to me that at a minimum we can say that he is not consciously indulging a desire to actually rape, torture, and kill women, nor pandering to one, the way (say) "John Norman" does. Beyond that I am not prepared to go.

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die.

- Mel Brooks

Hmpf MacSlow — 19 Oct 2006, 19:42 · in reply to Nathan Spears

Any realistic man knows that he does not understand what it is like to be a woman - portraits he paints of her are from the outside looking in.

Actually, as a woman who has spent most of her life reading books written by men, from a male perspective, and hasn't found that perspective mind-bogglingly alien, I'd say the differences between men and women are somewhat (or, depending on which depiction we're actually talking about, often even *hugely*) exaggerated. Neither our emotions nor our thought processes seem greatly different to me. Of course, I can only go by what I know from literature, movies, conversations with members of the opposite sex... but I'd say that's quite a corpus of evidence.

Sorry, that was OT, I know. Just a personal pet peeve.

Hmpf

"I'm not sure that's ethical."

"It's not, it's vodka."

- Life On Mars

Daniel D Jones — 19 Oct 2006, 21:59 · in reply to Hmpf MacSlow

On Thursday 19 October 2006 15:42, Hmpf MacSlow wrote:

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It seems not all women agrees with you:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/core/Content/displayPrintable.jhtml?xml=/arts/2006/09/14/bamen14.xml&site=6&page=0>

As the above will almost certainly get mangled by email, this is the same page:

<http://tinyurl.com/mkela>

Nathan Spears — 20 Oct 2006, 03:48 · follows Daniel D Jones

I agree with you that our emotions and our thought-processes may not be as different as they have been portrayed. Our experiences, however, are far more divergent than the tools with which we process them. I also believe that the best women writers, generally being more empathetic and observant, can create better male characters than male writers create female characters.

So Wolfe could probably create more strong central female characters, but perhaps he feels that he would be writing a male character in a female body, not because he doesn't believe there are strong women, but because he doesn't know how to write them well, and would revert to the strengths he is familiar with.

I did think that many of the women in Castleview were convincingly spun.

----- Original Message -----

From: Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org>

To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>

Sent: Thursday, October 19, 2006 4:59:22 PM

Subject: Re: (urth) Wolfe: Misogynist? and accessibility

On Thursday 19 October 2006 15:42, Hmpf MacSlow wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 20 Oct 2006, 04:39 · in reply to Stanislaus

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There is a technical term for this kind of criticism = "the poetic of a police informer."

I don't think the aim of reading books is to find some crime to accuse author of.

No, it's not, but I'd be a pretty superficial reader if I never wondered why an author writes what he writes.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >

Jeff Wilson — 20 Oct 2006, 04:52 · in reply to Nathan Spears

Nathan Spears wrote:

If an author compulsively wrote novels about Jews being tortured and killed, I'd at least suspect him of anti-semitism.

You have good reason to suspect Elie Wiesel of anti-Semitism, I suppose.

Please, there is some considerable distance between suspect and convict. Rather than doing it compulsively, Wiesel was reluctant to do it at all without considerable outside encouragement.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
< <http://www.io.com/~jwilson> >