

The puzzles

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 18 May 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4829>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Roy C. Lackey — 18 May 2007, 04:26

Craig Brewer wrote:

So

no mysteries solved but more questions raised. If we come to think that this book is essentially knotted, that at least does give a very interesting counter-example to the common notion that all of Wolfe's "puzzles" can be solved by discerning readers. It also makes me question whether some of the puzzles in the other works are supposed to remain so. That said, it raises some other interesting questions about the literary merit of "puzzles" like this: what purpose(s) do they serve when they are solvable and when they are opaque. After all, puzzles and ambiguity have very different interpretive consequences.<<

Those are some nasty, nasty questions. <g> Any response I make is likely to elicit yowls from one or another section of the Preacher's choir, but it can't be helped.

There are puzzles and then there are puzzles. Do we really need to know that Dorcas is Severian's grandmother in order to understand the surface story or appreciate the author's thematic designs? No. But a certain satisfaction is derived from figuring it out.

Likewise, do we need to know that Weer is dead? I think, yes. The difference is that knowing Weer is dead, as opposed to, say, the disjointed ramblings of a demented old man, changes our perception of the nature of his ruminations. Who is he trying to fool in the frame tale, himself or God? Apparently Wolfe thought it important for the reader to know that Weer was dead, so he planted the clue in the first sentence of the novel. When critics failed to pick up on the fact of it he pointed it out, proclaiming that he had provided the information fair and square to the attentive reader. Well, yes, he did. <g>

I have little doubt that some of the minor puzzles in Wolfe's work are, in effect, 'insider' references that few people could or would be expected to understand. But I think the vast majority of his puzzles are meant to be solved, that the pieces (scattered though they may be in unlikely places) are there, or at least enough of them that the picture they form can be seen clearly enough.

Wolfe *demands* more from his readers than many readers can -- or are willing -- to supply, which is part of the reason he is not a best-selling author. It is why the Urth list exists. Over the years I have engaged people, on list and off, some of whom have published books and articles about Wolfe's work, in discussions of his major and minor works. I *know* from those discussions that *no one* has all the answers, and few even pretend to. I have expended more words in exchanges about some short stories than the stories contained -- and when all was

said the questions still outnumbered the answers.

The puzzles are meant to be solved, I think, but the problem is to distinguish the puzzles from the deliberate ambiguities. Parts of 5HC, say, are, I believe, meant to remain ambiguous. The puzzle surrounding that damn trunk in Marble/Rose's attic was, I believe, meant to be solved, even if I haven't done it to my satisfaction.

No one can accuse Wolfe of padding his works with a lot of window dressing. Almost everything is in there for a reason, even if for no better reason than the fact that Wolfe *wanted* it there (e.g., talus factory tour). To supply a very minor example from CASTLEVIEW: When little Judy fetched Excalibur from Morgan's cabinet, the tip of the sword was resting on "a shabby little leather book that fell to the floor as she took the sword out. Mercedes picked up the book, but had eyes only for the sword." (265) That is the only mention of that book in the text. I can't name that book, but I bet Wolfe could.

As for the "literary merit" of the puzzles, I don't know. But I do know that FINNEGAN'S WAKE makes an excellent doorstop. <g>

-Roy

Roy C. Lackey — 19 May 2007, 15:48 · follows Roy C. Lackey

I wrote:

Wolfe *demands* more from his readers than many readers can -- or are willing -- to supply, which is part of the reason he is not a best-selling author. It is why the Urth list exists.<<

Looking back at the above, I hope that my meaning was not construed as somehow insulting to the members of this list; far from it, as I am obviously in the same boat. What I meant to convey was that many readers, even among the sub-set who enjoy Wolfe, have little more than a passing interest in solving the puzzles. They either lack the time needed to pursue solutions or feel that the rewards are not worth the effort.

-Roy

Steve Taylor — 20 May 2007, 04:09 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

Roy C. Lackey wrote:

Looking back at the above, I hope that my meaning was not construed as somehow insulting to the members of this list; far from it, as I am obviously in the same boat. What I meant to convey was that many readers, even among the sub-set who enjoy Wolfe, have little more than a passing interest in solving the puzzles. They either lack the time needed to pursue solutions or feel that the rewards are not worth the effort.

Certainly for my part, I'm more than glad to have the list here as a magic decoder ring. I love Wolfe's writing, but the fact that it's full of arcane puzzles is not the reason I love it.

-Roy

Steve