

New Wolfe Stories

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 27 May 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4832>

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Matthew Keeley — 27 May 2007, 20:04

I was in the bookstore today browsing the fantasy section when I found a new fantasy anthology called Wizards. Wolfe has a story called "The Magic Animal." I didn't take a very long look at the book, but I noticed that Neil Gaiman, Jane Yolen, Peter S. Beagle, and Tad Williams all have stories in the collection. I looked up the book on Amazon, and the reviews seemed to be fairly positive, though they noted that a large number of the stories have to do with coming-of-age (Is this supposed to be YA?). Not sure how good the Wolfe story is, as I really don't have the money to buy a hardcover at the moment, but I thought the list might be interested.

Also, Subterranean Press now publishes an online magazine; apparently they're going to be putting up a Wolfe story at some point in the future. I wonder if this means Wolfe is publishing something through Subterranean? Hopefully they'll put the story up soon.

-Matt

Batrinque at aol.com — 27 May 2007, 20:34 · follows Matthew Keeley

Recently while browsing through a few boxes of old books in the garage (and putting off doing repairs on the tractor-mower) I came across a book I had forgotten I owned: a copy of the limited first edition (#217 of 750) of Gene Wolfe's "Free Live Free", published in 1984 by Mark Ziesing of Willimantic, CT (back in those days I frequented the Ziesing Brothers bookstore in Willimantic); it was signed by Wolfe and the three artists who contributed illustrations to the book. I shall have to read the book again because I cannot remember a thing about it.

Bruce Trinkle
Amston, CT

Craig Brewer — 28 May 2007, 17:59 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

I just finished TWK for the second time, and, after rereading the archives, I thought I'd throw something out there:

I'm not entirely convinced that we're supposed to idealize Able as much as all the other characters do. What I mean is that I don't think Wolfe actually sees Able as (at least currently) an example of ideal knighthood. Or, if he is an ideal knight, I'm not entirely sure that we're supposed to think of knighthood itself as some kind of ideal itself. I say this because in the archives, so many people seemed upset with Able's often brutal choices. I think that

reaction is right, but I don't think it means that Wolfe is either idealizing some kind of brutal knighthood or that Able's necessarily supposed to be some sort of "everyman." (He's even less of a christological figure than Severian, imo.) Instead, I think he's a kind of speculative projection, as in "if a world such as this had knights, this is how they would act, etc."

There are a number of reasons for this.

The first is that, in an interview with Fast Forward (<http://fast-forward.tv/blog/?p=4>), Wolfe says that he wanted to imagine a world with knights and chivalry but without Christianity. I take this idea literally, and, consequently, I think it best at first to resist the urge to find Wolfe's Catholicism somehow necessarily "embedded" in this cosmos. The story of the creation here seems decidedly unchristian since, according to Able, it was just so that the Most High God could have someone "to talk to." This also gives very little Christian framework for morality since there's no Adam and no test. Humans are part of a larger pattern of less perfect things looking higher and setting examples for lower beings. There's no "original sin," etc., and while it's certainly possible to work out a Christian analogy to some of it, there's never any real sense of being judged by the Most High God. He seems entirely absent (and even the immediate gods of each realm are themselves particularly "absent," as Able's message makes clear).

Second, Able becomes a knight not out of sincere respect for knights but because it was necessary for him to bring the message to Arnthor (he had to be the kind of person Arnthor would find respectable). (I also have a feeling that his early awe at Ravd was something he was made to feel by the Aelf, not necessarily out of some mystic moral respect — his description of a kind of instant awe seems a touch "magical" in retrospect.) His only seemingly sincere desire was to return to Disiri, and all of his other knightly qualities were results of knowing that he needed to be successful in that quest before he could return to her. I know that's a big claim, but it seems to stand up.

Third, isn't refusing to follow the Valfather at the end a kind of confirmation of this? He actually goes lower, to Aelfrice, rather than ascending closer to the Most High God. I don't think this is necessarily a failing, but even Able knows that his "true" love is

for a creature of leaves and mud (as he sees Disiri in the helm) rather than for the Valfather's glory. Even after letting Disiri drink his blood and become human, they remain in Aelfrice and Able speaks of giving up knighthood and return to a life as a boy. The rest of the knights want to die as knights, but, for Able, it was a temporary occupation.

Fourth, he knows how to be brave and strong, etc., but his ideal heroic status (and the feats he can accomplish) are often the result of his "wizard" nature: having magical friends or magical weapons or a magical bow (recall how he loses the bow contest because he no longer has his magical string). Certainly, he can do wonderful things on his own, but they seem ordinarily wonderful, if that makes sense not exactly idealized heroically.

Fifth, although he seems himself "truly" as a man at the end through his helm, through the rest of it, he's always insisting that he's still a boy, even after spending 20 years in Skai. Part of this could be the humility and the acknowledgement of fear and finitude that everyone responds to him with. But it could also be simply true: Able recognizes that he's really being used and manipulated by things much greater than him, and that his "heroism" is a result of all kinds of forces other than him.

Finally, and this is pure speculation, is his name. Able. Ability. Capability. Capacity. Almost like Power. So if a knight is a kind of power, it's a Can, not a May. Knights need something more than power to know that how they're acting is right. By itself, it's not enough. In the end, this world seems somewhat neutral on the question of whether or not it's good in itself to be a knight. It's certainly good given the kind of world they live in. But they're also brutal warriors. That returns me to the world without Christianity. I feel it most strongly in its absence, and, if Wolfe is giving any kind of moral to Able as an idealized knight, it's almost that, without some kind of moral guidance, even honor will always remain a bit questionable. Perhaps Able realizes that, and what I feel is his ambivalence towards his own actions is a kind of recognition that he really needs more. His love for Disiri, a real love that is based on nothing "martial" at all, transcends everything of his knightly nature, it would seem, and could potentially nullify all that he's done, if she would ask. That kind of love and devotion is very different from

anything he's been asked to do in his "honorable" roles, and perhaps that's the point at which, in the end, the figure closest to a Christian image in the books, Michael, can finally come to him with a different quest. It's only, maybe, when Able is least a knight that he can work for this "great lord" who has sent a messenger who also is capable of seeing into the world of "America" that is somehow outside this brutal, Norse-ish world.

Anyway, my thoughts.

And a couple of unrelated questions: Is Michael's quest for Able going to be for another message like the Aelf wanted to send? If so, for and to whom?

Is Garsecg our Merlin figure? After all, he's the one who teaches Able about the "sea" and its power early in his life, as well as showing him the consequences of bad rule.

How are we to understand cross-level breeding (Arnthor, Morcaine, Garsecg) if the Aelf can't go two levels above them? How do the dragons go up?

And what did Kulili show Able when, he says, he fought her but yielded?

What is a "soul" here? Or rather, are there such things? Aelf don't have them because they were created by a creature? Further, aren't all lower beings in some form the result of cast-off imperfections? Even men, even the Overcyns. Certainly Garvaon's "ascension" seems like it could be his "soul" ascending, but Able says specifically that only a few people actually ascend like that. What happens to the rest of the souls? Do they, like the giant whose body is Mythgarthr, actually just return to "nature?" The animist world of elementals associated with Aelfrice seems to suggest something like that. It's only heroes who get to rise to Skai. So this is a world in which "salvation," if there is such a thing, is neither Christian nor Gnostic. Only heroes, or maybe Heroes, endure.

I have many more. But this is long enough. Hopefully people will be willing to start some chat about it again.

Craig

Bob Miller — 12 Jun 2007, 12:23 · in reply to Craig Brewer

There is and has been a lot of legitimate, quite justified, criticism of Able and thus, to a lesser degree, of TWK. Up front, I think it is the best book published so far in this new century, one of the best coming oif age books since Rudyard Kipling blessed the world with Kim.

To me, Able was telling the tale ex post facto and not hiding any of his errors or sins. To me, the ascension to Skai was a reward for one area of growth/progress. To me, the return was for completion (or as my wife tells me, closure). To me, the justification, beyond the take away the breath scenes, beyond the personal growth he led or inspired or acted as a catalyst for Puck and Uns and Svon was the scene where in Disiri came for him before the final dustup. Herself begged Able to come back with her to Aelfrice and he said no. And in this one moment in the dark and wind and the dirt Able was justified. He returned to the people to whom he had assumed, even if it were for Disiri's sake, duty and obligation. And he met those obligations. And in denying/turning down the ascent, for a second time, to Skai Able became more. To a collector of trophies or a scorekeeper, Able became less because he "descended". Because he accepted his cup, "do what you can or else do what you must", Michael from beyond Skai has come for him and his lover that his love has made able to ascend. So, to me this book was about growth and the greater rewards gained than would have been from the "simple" completion of the task.

As an aside, or because I couldn't figure out where to put it in my meanderings above, throughout TWK I was reminded again and again of the scene in Zelazny's Lord of Light where Sam told Taraka that he fought him because he was a man, and being a man sometimes did aspire to more than the belly and the phallus.

Cliff Judge — 12 Jun 2007, 14:24 · in reply to Bob Miller

On 6/12/07, Bob Miller <bob_bageera at hotmail.com> wrote:

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belly and the phallus.

I just really liked how the Odin type was just suddenly THERE with a single sentence at the end, and he was like, "You have done." That was some high-quality stuff right there.