

The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe

The Urth list — 72 messages, 25 voices, 28 May 2007

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4833>

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Matthew King — 28 May 2007, 18:28

"The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe", by John Farrell, is finally available in the online archives of First Things magazine.

Farrell makes the common mistake of identifying Jesus with the Conciliator, and he smears Gaiman and Stephenson by mentioning them in the same clause as Robert Jordan, but this is an otherwise worthy article.

http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=5466

Lots of novel readers from the highest brow to the lowest nod politely when the science-fiction writer Gene Wolfe is mentioned. But even among science-fiction fans, one gets the sense that they're saying, "Yes, yes, we know how good he is, but we'd rather talk about such bestselling authors as Neil Gaiman or Robert Jordan, Laurel Hamilton or Neal Stephenson." As Glenn Reynolds, the inveterate science-fiction enthusiast and popular blogger of Instapundit.com, recently wrote, "Gene Wolfe is a superb writer, but I'm not crazy about his storytelling." I recently asked a veteran New York editor whether Wolfe could find a publisher today if he were just coming along as a young writer. "Probably not," she admitted. His writing is too religious, too difficult, and too strange.

Both the Soldier cycle and the Book of the New Sun series reveal the problem and the promise of Gene Wolfe. The New Sun series, for instance, takes place in a world more than a million years in the future, where artifacts of Christ still have healing power, while the Soldier novels chronicle the life of a mercenary bedeviled by gods and goddesses in the Mediterranean world a few centuries before the birth of Jesus.

Daniel D Jones — 29 May 2007, 11:26 · in reply to Matthew King

On Monday 28 May 2007 14:28, Matthew King wrote:
"The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe", by John Farrell, is finally available in the online archives of First Things magazine.

Farrell makes the common mistake of identifying Jesus with the Conciliator, and he smears Gaiman and Stephenson by mentioning them in the same clause as Robert Jordan, but this is an otherwise worthy article.

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Worthy? Really? While the only factual error I can point to is the one you pointed out - the conflation of the Conciliator with Christ - I can't imagine a much more misleading summary of TBOTNS. His descriptions of other works seem to completely miss the mark as well. For a quick example, he says "Peace" is "...[Wolfe's] only mainstream novel (also one of his personal favorites), about a wealthy old man who builds museum-style rooms in his mansion to match the rooms from houses of his past life." Again, factually accurate but that hardly describes the

novel I read. YMMV, of course.

Michael Straight — 29 May 2007, 15:26 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

Over and over I read articles like this and I feel like the reviewers aren't reading the same books I'm reading.

It almost makes me doubt my ability to read. I'm I deluded? Or is this guy pretty much completely missing--I won't say "the point" because I don't think there's a single point to any of Wolfe's books--missing what's valuable and worthwhile about the books he mentions?

I wonder how Wolfe feels.

Matthew King — 29 May 2007, 16:00 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On May 29, 2007, at 6:26 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:
Worthy? Really? While the only factual error I can point to is the one you pointed out - the conflation of the Conciliator with Christ - I can't imagine a much more misleading summary of TBOTNS. His descriptions of other works seem to completely miss the mark as well. For a quick example, he says "Peace" is "...[Wolfe's] only mainstream novel (also one of his personal favorites), about a wealthy old man who builds museum-style rooms in his mansion to match the rooms from houses of his past life." Again, factually accurate but that hardly describes the novel I read. YMMV, of course.

Is the article illuminating for long-time readers of Wolfe?

Decidedly not. I do think it has worth, merit, or value, and is useful. At a minimum, the article introduces Wolfe to an audience that I think would not normally stumble across his work. Shall we brace ourselves for an onslaught of High Church conservatives? (First Things has always tried to be more ecumenical, and mostly succeeded, until the original editor stepped down last year. The Wolfe article was published just after I let my subscription lapse. I try not to take this as a reprimand)

Some of my perception of the article may come from lowered expectations. Outside of this list, I rarely come across any insightful discussions of Wolfe, as Michael Straight just wrote.

I do like the article's emphasis on the Soldier books. Mist is the book that hooked me for Wolfe, after New Sun nearly chased me away.

Matthew King — 29 May 2007, 16:08 · in reply to Michael Straight

On May 29, 2007, at 10:26 AM, Michael Straight wrote:
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These reviewers aren't equipped to read fiction in the way that we read Wolfe. I wasn't so equipped when I began, and I'm still far too impatient to be much good at it.

Why do such readers enjoy paddling about with Wolfe, only vaguely aware, if at all, of the vasty deep below?

Craig Brewer — 29 May 2007, 19:44 · in reply to Michael Straight

--- Michael Straight <mfstraight at gmail.com> wrote:
books--missing what's valuable and worthwhile about
the books he
mentions?

I'm curious what you might mention as valuable and worthwhile when trying to convince people to read Wolfe. I say this only partly to ask what you feel this reviewer omits. But it's also because I've had trouble myself summarizing all that I find compelling about him when suggesting that others read him.

-Craig

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I wonder how Wolfe feels.

aaron — 29 May 2007, 20:57 · in reply to Craig Brewer

This is my first post here, although I have read the list for a couple of years now. Anyway, I came across a website devoted to a podcast called "Starship Sofa". I saw that one of their shows was about Gene Wolfe, so naturally, I was interested. I clicked the link to listen and was amazed by their sheer ignorance of anything pertaining to Wolfe. One of the guys says he's read Fifth Head and the other says nothing. All of the info they had was reproduced from the same old articles and interviews found on the web. They had absolutely nothing new to add, and actually gave some negative reviews of some of his work, which would be okay if they'd actually read these works (which is doubtful) They should really try to do a better job, IMO. If you are interested in hearing this, just google the words "starship sofa" and click the links as I can't remember the exact URL. Just horrible stuff, and yes, I want to share it all with you guys. Sorry if there are fans of the podcast here whom I have offended. I meant no harm. On 5/29/07,

Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:
--- Michael Straight <mfstraight at gmail.com> wrote:

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I wonder how Wolfe feels.

Daniel D Jones — 29 May 2007, 22:16 · in reply to Matthew King

On Tuesday 29 May 2007 12:00, Matthew King wrote:

On May 29, 2007, at 6:26 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:

Worthy? Really? While the only factual error I can point to is the one you pointed out - the conflation of the Conciliator with Christ - I can't imagine a much more misleading summary of TBOTNS. His descriptions of other works seem to completely miss the mark as well. For a quick example, he says "Peace" is "...[Wolfe's] only mainstream novel (also one of his personal favorites), about a wealthy old man who builds museum-style rooms in his mansion to match the rooms from houses of his past life." Again, factually accurate but that hardly describes the novel I read. YMMV, of course.

Is the article illuminating for long-time readers of Wolfe? Decidedly not. I do think it has worth, merit, or value, and is useful. At a minimum, the article introduces Wolfe to an audience that I think would not normally stumble across his work. Shall we brace ourselves for an onslaught of High Church conservatives? (First Things has always tried to be more ecumenical, and mostly succeeded,

until the original editor stepped down last year. The Wolfe article was published just after I let my subscription lapse. I try not to take this as a reprimand)

I didn't expect any sort of illumination. However, if I read that article and picked up the BOTNS expecting to read an uplifting story of redemption about a man who was raised as a torturer, found artifacts of Jesus Christ and worked miracles with them, and became king and abolished the evil torturers guild which spawned him, I'd be thoroughly confused and wondering if I'd picked up the wrong book. Yes, all of these things happen (other than the JC/Conciliator confusion) but that doesn't change the fact that the summary is wildly misleading. Assuming that the goal is to enlarge Wolfe's readership and appreciation, is it really helpful to spread such inaccuracies and set up expectations that will almost certainly be disappointed?

Some of my perception of the article may come from lowered expectations. Outside of this list, I rarely come across any insightful discussions of Wolfe, as Michael Straight just wrote.

Other than remote corners of cyberspace such as this one, I rarely come across any insightful discussion of any authors other than a handful of mainstream names. There are authors who receive a great deal more press than Wolfe, but rarely is it insightful or illuminating.

I do like the article's emphasis on the Soldier books. *_Mist_* is the book that hooked me for Wolfe, after *_New Sun_* nearly chased me away.

BOTNS was the first Wolfe series I read. (It was almost the first Wolfe period. I'd actually read "The Death of Doctor Island" in an anthology long before, but didn't recall the name of the author.) That series led me to read everything by him I could get my hands on. The Soldier series are good, but they wouldn't have inspired me to stock my bookshelves with his stuff. The Long and Short Sun series are also good, but I don't find the story near as compelling as the New Sun stuff.

Recursive Loop — 01 Jun 2007, 12:33 · in reply to Matthew King

Now, **this** is funny:

"I recently asked a veteran New York editor whether Wolfe could find a publisher today if he were just coming along as a young writer. ?Probably not, she admitted. His writing is too religious, too difficult, and too strange."

Heaven forbid that we request readers to actually **think**, now!

Why didn't she just say "He's conservative, I'm a hip left-leaning NY publisher and I can't see past the end of my viewpoint!"

aaron — 01 Jun 2007, 13:37 · in reply to Recursive Loop

I also thought this was ridiculous. One editor's opinion does little to convince me. I think Wolfe would be published no matter when he began submitting. The comment about his writing being too strange also kills me. What about the guy who wrote *Fight Club* and *Guts*? (Can't remember his name at the moment) I suppose this editor thinks that his stuff is normal. And as far as Wolfe's writing being too religious, I disagree. I think for most people, the religion in his work is there, but it is subtle and never dominates. If you go into Wolfe's work looking for examples of his beliefs, then you will find them, IMO. Then again, you could go into Wolfe's work looking for examples of just about anything and most likely find it. Just my \$0.02

On 6/1/07, Recursive Loop <recursive_loop at yahoo.com> wrote:
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Got a little couch potato?
Check out fun summer activities for kids.

http://search.yahoo.com/search?fr=oni_on_mail&p=summer+activities+for+kids&cs=bz

JWillard — 01 Jun 2007, 16:25 · in reply to Recursive Loop

Recursive Loop wrote:
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David DiGiacomo — 01 Jun 2007, 16:55 · follows JWillard

I think the veteran New York editor is mistaken. Maybe she would not be able to sell her publisher on a young Gene Wolfe, but David Hartwell would have no problem with it.

Hmm, it would be a good story... young Gene Wolfe travels in time from the Korean War to 2007, and looks for a publisher. There would be a scene where he beats old Gene Wolfe with a

stick, and learns a lesson.

JBarach at aol.com — 01 Jun 2007, 17:00 · follows David DiGiacomo

In a message dated 6/1/2007 9:56:19 AM Pacific Daylight Time, david at slack.com writes:

I think the veteran New York editor is mistaken. Maybe she would not be able to sell her publisher on a young Gene Wolfe, but David Hartwell would have no problem with it.

But it's arguable that it's precisely the influence of writers like Wolfe that would prompt Hartwell to pick up "Wolfe" if he was writing today. No past-Wolfe, no present market for Wolfe perhaps?

John

Recursive Loop — 01 Jun 2007, 17:01 · in reply to David DiGiacomo

If Gene Wolfe is too difficult for readers, I hate to hear the reception that Young Herman Melville or Young John Dos Passos or Young Philip K. Dick or Young Samuel R. Delany, etc., etc., etc. would meet in today's market.

Must every book today be of the weight of a Grisham or a Star Trek/Star Wars media tie-in or a Harry Potter clone?

Heck, I like easy books. But not all the time. I like challenging books. But not all the time. I won't exclude either category entirely!

Matthew King — 01 Jun 2007, 17:01 · in reply to David DiGiacomo

On Jun 1, 2007, at 11:55 AM, David DiGiacomo wrote:

Hmm, it would be a good story... young Gene Wolfe travels in time from the

Korean War to 2007, and looks for a publisher. There would be a scene where he beats old Gene Wolfe with a stick, and learns a lesson.

Then he would clone a series of David Hartwells, and send them off on slowships to found colonies where SF could thrive.

JBarach at aol.com — 01 Jun 2007, 17:07 · follows Matthew King

In a message dated 6/1/2007 10:02:20 AM Pacific Daylight Time, automatthew at gmail.com writes:

Then he would clone a series of David Hartwells, and send them off on slowships to found colonies where SF could thrive.

Nah. He'd clone himself. And that son would clone HIMself. And so on ... until one of those, living with his sister on a French-speaking planet, has a son he calls "Number 5."

John

don doggett — 01 Jun 2007, 17:14 · in reply to JBarach at aol.com

I like to remain optimistic and think that a great writer can find a market in any period. Were Wolfe writing right (oh yeah) now as a young man he would produce something entirely different than the pulp informed, Tolkien and Graves influenced works we appreciate. It's faulty logic to try to imagine his past works as new releases in our present.

Don

p.s. Cry, Theanthropos, cry.

--- JBarach at aol.com wrote:

No

past-Wolfe, no present market for Wolfe perhaps?

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Jun 2007, 19:52 · in reply to aaron

On 6/1/07, aaron <aaronsingleton at gmail.com> wrote:

I also thought this was ridiculous. One editor's opinion does little to convince me.

Though it is one editor's opinion, I think it is the opinion of an editor who is clearly cognizant of the realities of the industry. Things have changed significantly with the conglomeratization of publishing; risky books don't get published as much.

What about the guy who wrote Fight Club and Guts? (Can't remember his name at the moment)

Chuck Pahlaniuk (sp?)

And

as far as Wolfe's writing being too religious, I disagree. I think for most people, the religion in his work is there, but it is subtle and never dominates. If you go into Wolfe's work looking for examples of his beliefs, then you will find them, IMO.

Well, the first Wolfe I ever read was tBotNS, as it came out, and I knew nothing about at the time. Halfway through the third volume (specifically, at the "Temptation in the Wilderness" scene) I said, "This guy is a Christian."

I think that one misses a lot of what Wolfe is doing if one doesn't know that he's a Catholic, with a strongly "incarnationalist" perspective.

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

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

<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

Joel Sieh — 01 Jun 2007, 20:08 · in reply to don doggett

I'm glad I came back to read this thread after checking out that article. It left me cold, and I was hoping I wasn't the only one.

New Sun is what got me into GW, and I discovered so much more when I started reading this list years ago (just resubscribed and started reading it again). The Soldier books didn't hold me quite as well as all the Sun books, but I really enjoyed Soldier of Sidon.

I've talked up Wolfe to a number of people, and I've come across some people who just didn't get tBotNS.... I was originally confused by them, but I guess it just comes down to how hard you want to think about what you're reading. For a while I thought that Gene Wolfe was a writer for writers. I'm an aspiring sci-fi author, so this fit nicely with my world view. However, when I tried to write like Wolfe in my creative writing classes in college, I found that my fellow classmates and teachers missed all of the clues in my stories that might imply an underlying idea or theme. I determined that I was being too subtle, or just writing poorly in general. However, it's also possible that I was wrong about Gene Wolfe being a writer for writers. He's more than that. He's a writer for puzzle solvers. :)

--Joel

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 01 Jun 2007, 22:49 · in reply to Joel Sieh

Joel,

As another "aspiring writer" (a few short story sales to my name, some years ago), I have also found Wolfe a problematic model. He's easy to parody but hard to pastiche, if you see what I mean.

I'm not sure about him being a "writer for puzzle solvers" -- though I do enjoy crosswords, anacrostics, sudoku, etc. I think he's a writer for people who want their fiction to resemble the "real" world in its being both overdetermined and underdetermined.

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

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

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Soon, where Toon Town once stood will be a string of gas stations, inexpensive motels, restaurants that serve rapidly prepared food. Tire salons, automobile dealerships and wonderful, wonderful billboards reaching as far as the eye can see. My God, it'll be beautiful.

Daniel D Jones — 02 Jun 2007, 01:11 · in reply to Recursive Loop

On Friday 01 June 2007 08:33, Recursive Loop wrote:

Now, **this** is funny:

"I recently asked a veteran New York editor whether Wolfe could find a publisher today if he were just coming along as a young writer. ?Probably not, she admitted. His writing is too religious, too difficult, and too strange."

Heaven forbid that we request readers to actually **think**, now!

Why didn't she just say "He's conservative, I'm a hip left-leaning NY publisher and I can't see past the end of my viewpoint!"

Because that has nothing to do with it.

The world today is very different from what it used to be. Publishing today is a business, and

solely a business. Publishers publish books because they think they can sell enough of them to turn a profit. Artistic considerations play little or no role in the decision of whom to publish. There may be a few small exceptions out there, but they aren't significant in the publishing world.

It's not an insult to Wolfe to say that Wolfe does not have mainstream appeal. Even with the fact that he's been publishing for years and has a loyal, devoted and vocal fan club, his books don't do particularly well from the perspective of a publisher's bottom line. Without the reputation he's built over the years, his books would sell even fewer copies. How many people here can honestly say they'd have bought a copy of *The Wizard* and *The Knight* if they'd never heard of Wolfe and stumbled upon a blurb on Amazon or seen the book sitting in a bookstore? I think it's doubtful that I would have.

I suspect that, even among Wolfe's fans, very few would describe one of his books as a fun read. It's an intense, rewarding and often illuminating experience, but it's seldom enjoyable in the same sense as reading, say, George R R Martin or even fluff like David Eddings. And reading today competes with video games and reality television and Ultimate Fighting matches for attention.

If you wish to lament what the editor's comments say about the world we live in, I'll add my voice to the chorus. But if you want to pretend it isn't accurate because you dislike those implications, I'll have to disagree.

Roy C. Lackey — 02 Jun 2007, 15:56 · follows Daniel D Jones

Daniel D Jones quoted Matthew King and wrote:

I do like the article's emphasis on the Soldier books. *_Mist_* is the book that hooked me for Wolfe, after *_New Sun_* nearly chased me away.

BOTNS was the first Wolfe series I read. (It was almost the first Wolfe period. I'd actually read "The Death of Doctor Island" in an anthology long before, but didn't recall the name of the author.) That series led me to read everything by him I could get my hands on. The Soldier series are good, but they wouldn't have inspired me to stock my bookshelves with his stuff. The Long and Short Sun series are also good, but I don't find the story near as compelling as the New Sun stuff.

(Daniel D. Jones, in a subsequent post, has anticipated some of my points or at least implied them, but I'll say this anyway.)

It's funny how tastes differ even among those who read Wolfe. As I've probably said before, *PEACE* was my first read, twenty-five years ago. I loved it. *SHADOW* was my second. It so thoroughly disgusted me all the way around that I actually got rid of the book. When *CLAW* came out, I had to buy *SHADOW* and read it again. My reaction mellowed, but if not for the 'redeeming' qualities of the other "mid-Western" novels (and some of the short stories), I might not have bothered to finish the series. I've lost track now of how many times I've read the series, but I still look down my nose at Severian the World Savior.

I never liked the SOLDIER books (Wolfe's plots are hard enough to follow without having the protagonist wake up in a new world every morning), and I've stubbornly refused to read *SIDON* even though I've had it since it came out, partly because I don't look forward to reading the first two books again, and I would have to. I really wish that Wolfe, given his age, had not taken up the series again, though I believe I am probably in the minority.

From time to time people here have lamented their lack of success in getting friends and relatives to read Wolfe. My experience is the same. My wife has read the majority of his work, but I wouldn't call her a fan. She read NEW SUN and LONG SUN, but found the latter so boring she wouldn't even start SHORT SUN. My older son finally read NEW SUN a few years ago but couldn't finish URTH. My younger son read some of the mid-Western novels and some of the short stories when he was in college, but wasn't impressed. And so it goes.

Our sons grew up with reading parents in a house full of books, and my wife and I have for many years had a practice of reading favorite books/authors aloud. Both sons have fond memories of those readings. Wolfe's work does not, generally speaking, lend itself well to being read out loud, particularly the serial novels. I doubt that statement requires explication in this forum. This want of fluid readability, coupled with the narrative lacunae (such as the one between SHADOW and CLAW, or the twenty years that lapsed for Able between KNIGHT and WIZARD), makes his work difficult to follow without a lot of back tracking. Most people who read fiction read for pleasure, and most people, I think, do not find reading Wolfe pleasurable. That, in a nut shell, is why Wolfe fans have so much trouble turning other people on to him. It is why his books do not sell particularly well even within the genre.

-Roy

don doggett — 02 Jun 2007, 16:50 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

--- "Roy C. Lackey" <rlackey at stic.net> wrote:

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This is the second time this has come up, and it just hasn't felt quite right. I couldn't figure out why, so I've been thinking about it and I believe I've at least pinched it between two fingers if I haven't quite grasped the answer. I read fiction solely for pleasure as well. If a novel doesn't grab my interest, it doesn't even get 50 pages of my attention anymore. I enjoy Wolfe; he draws me into his world and it's pleasurable to go there. The work comes when I'm finished and have to figure out what's "really" going on. Now, of course I'm not an expert, but I have worked on and off in bookstores for about 19 years, and from what I've seen, people read for comfort, not pleasure. They like consistency and repetition, and they like the illusion of feeling like they know what's going on even before the author does. Maybe that's pleasurable. It's certainly safe, and it accounts for 90% of SF, Mystery, and Lit, and all of Romance. There's very little comfort in Wolfe, and what there is is fairly cold, whether it's in the

plot itself, or in his narrative style. That's at least part of the problem I think, if you want to call it a problem. My 2 cents.

Don

Don't cry, Theanthropos. I'm back to bottom posting now.

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

Megan Bugge — 02 Jun 2007, 18:26 · follows don doggett

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URL:

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/attachments/20070602/357eb0e2/attachment.htm>

Joel Sieh — 02 Jun 2007, 18:34 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On 6/1/07, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:

The world today is very different from what it used to be. Publishing today is a business, and solely a business. Publishers publish books because they think they can sell enough of them to turn a profit. Artistic considerations play little or no role in the decision of whom to publish. There may be a few small exceptions out there, but they aren't significant in the publishing world.

So it goes with all forms of media nowadays, even video games. Some video game gems are relegated to cult status, either because they are developed by a small company without the marketing clout of larger companies, or they are too "different" to attract enough mainstream gamers. Even so, some of these manage to make money.

It's a good thing the internet exists, so we have a convenient way to access alternate media. The only problem is finding the good amongst all the junk. :) That said, I can't say I've found too much literature online that has caught my interest, save for old stuff on project gutenber, and that doesn't really count since it all was traditionally published in the first place.

I suspect that, even among Wolfe's fans, very few would describe one of his books as a fun read. It's an intense, rewarding and often illuminating experience, but it's seldom enjoyable in the same sense as reading, say, George R R Martin or even fluff like David Eddings. And reading today competes with video games and reality television and Ultimate Fighting matches for attention.

I guess I must be one of those few. Fun for me: epiphanies, engaging style and description, some drama, and when characters do "cool" things. Some examples:

Style: tBotNS hooked me in the first chapter at the bookstore, because of the style. The way Gene Wolfe uses words, and the old language he includes, captures my attention.

Description: The strange world Wolfe built kept me along through Shadow and Claw, when some others I know got sick of the series. It's also part of what kept me going through Nightside the Long Sun, which was an otherwise slow read.

Drama: This is what made Sidon better for me than the first two Soldier books, even though it was still sparse. His interactions with Myt'Ser'eu and his foster daughter engaged me. The drama, pain, tragedy, and love expressed in the Long and Short Sun books is what made them entertaining for me.

"Cool" moments: The fight scenes in tBotNS, Soldier books, and Wizard/Knight. They tend to be brief, but brutal and/or flashy, and have the tendency to make the main character look like a bad-ass. I know this counts as "fluff", but I like it like I like a good action movie. These scenes, along with scenes such as Severian's various resurrections, Able purposefully missing the target in the archery contest only to cause an avalanche, Gylf's transformations, etc.

Epiphanies: These are probably the best parts for me. Dorcas vomiting up the lead balls, Severian realizing Dorcas was his grandmother, Severian realizing that the claw saved him in his fight with Agilus, and then later Severian realizing that the claw was really nothing special at all, everything Apu-Punchau, etc. These really entertained me.

I guess it's different for everyone.

Joel Sieh — 02 Jun 2007, 18:47 · in reply to Joel Sieh

On the subject of Wolfe essays, a friend sent me a link to Neil Gaiman's blog, where he linked to an essay he wrote about how to read Gene Wolfe. He also links to some other short essays by people that I felt "got it." One of the essays made me go find and read A Solar Labyrinth. My apologies if this has already been posted!

The link: <http://www.neilgaiman.com/journal/2007/03/gene-wolves.html>

--Joel

Joel Sieh — 02 Jun 2007, 19:03 · in reply to Joel Sieh

Yeah, it's been posted. Sorry about that. And it makes sense that they "get it," being that the essays were featured in the F&SF Wolfe appreciation issue.

--Joel

Daniel D Jones — 02 Jun 2007, 21:03 · in reply to Joel Sieh

On Saturday 02 June 2007 14:34, Joel Sieh wrote:

On 6/1/07, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:

The world today is very different from what it used to be. Publishing today is a business, and solely a business. Publishers publish books because they think they can sell enough of them to turn a profit. Artistic considerations play little or no role in the decision of whom to publish. There may be a few small exceptions out there, but they aren't significant in the publishing world.

So it goes with all forms of media nowadays, even video games. Some video game gems are relegated to cult status, either because they are developed by a small company without the marketing clout of larger companies, or they are too "different" to attract enough mainstream gamers. Even so, some of these manage to make money.

It's a good thing the internet exists, so we have a convenient way to

access alternate media. The only problem is finding the good amongst all the junk. :) That said, I can't say I've found too much literature online that has caught my interest, save for old stuff on project gutenber, and that doesn't really count since it all was traditionally published in the first place.

Like you, I haven't found much literature on line that is worth digging into. What I have found, however, are odd little back alleys and side streets off the information superhighway, like the one we're inhabiting here, where I can both increase my understanding of authors and works I'm already familiar with and glean recommendations and pointers to fantastic new stuff that I haven't yet discovered. My knowledge and understanding of Wolfe has been increased exponentially by this list.

I suspect that, even among Wolfe's fans, very few would describe one of his books as a fun read. It's an intense, rewarding and often illuminating experience, but it's seldom enjoyable in the same sense as reading, say, George R R Martin or even fluff like David Eddings. And reading today competes with video games and reality television and Ultimate Fighting matches for attention.

I guess I must be one of those few. Fun for me: epiphanies, engaging style and description, some drama, and when characters do "cool" things. Some examples:

Style: tBotNS hooked me in the first chapter at the bookstore, because of the style. The way Gene Wolfe uses words, and the old language he includes, captures my attention.

Description: The strange world Wolfe built kept me along through Shadow and Claw, when some others I know got sick of the series. It's also part of what kept me going through Nightside the Long Sun, which was an otherwise slow read.

Drama: This is what made Sidon better for me than the first two Soldier books, even though it was still sparse. His interactions with Myt'Ser'eu and his foster daughter engaged me. The drama, pain, tragedy, and love expressed in the Long and Short Sun books is what made them entertaining for me.

"Cool" moments: The fight scenes in tBotNS, Soldier books, and Wizard/Knight. They tend to be brief, but brutal and/or flashy, and have the tendency to make the main character look like a bad-ass. I know this counts as "fluff", but I like it like I like a good action movie. These scenes, along with scenes such as Severian's various resurrections, Able purposefully missing the target in the archery contest only to cause an avalanche, Gylf's transformations, etc.

Epiphanies: These are probably the best parts for me. Dorcas vomiting up the lead balls, Severian realizing Dorcas was his grandmother, Severian realizing that the claw saved him in his fight with Agilus, and then later Severian realizing that the claw was really nothing special at all, everything Apu-Punchau, etc. These really entertained me.

I guess it's different for everyone.

I'm sure that we all approach Wolfe a bit differently, but please don't misunderstand me to be saying that reading Wolfe isn't enjoyable. It certainly is. But I don't think that "enjoyable" and

"fun" are synonyms. I agree with pretty much everything you said above. I love Wolfe's vocabulary and, well, call it "alternate word usage" in BOTNS. I love his vision. I originally picked up BOTNS because it was compared to Vance's "Dying Earth" series. It turns out the comparison was quite weak - the only real similarity is that both take place in the far future when the sun is declining. The _feel_ of the world in BOTNS is completely and utterly unique. It captured me as very few works ever have and I immediately ordered everything by him I could locate. But reading Wolfe is _work_. It's a labor of love, but a labor none-the-less. It means tracking down obscure words and then digging into their etymology to figure out what he means. It requires noting minute details and figuring out how they tie together. He demands thought and effort and attention.

Readers are becoming a distinct minority. And for most of those who do cling to the habit, many or most of them use it as a means of escape and relaxation. They don't want a writer who demands so much of them. Those of us who enjoy literature which requires active participation are a minority within a minority.

David Duffy — 02 Jun 2007, 22:04 · in reply to Roy C. Lackey

On Sat, 2 Jun 2007, Roy C. Lackey wrote:
Daniel D Jones quoted Matthew King and wrote:

I do like the article's emphasis on the Soldier books. _Mist_ is the book that hooked me for Wolfe, after _New Sun_ nearly chased me away.

BOTNS was the first Wolfe series I read. (It was almost the first Wolfe period. I'd actually read "The Death of Doctor Island" in an anthology

It's funny how tastes differ even among those who read Wolfe. As I've probably said before, PEACE was my first read, twenty-five years ago. I

I first read _The Fifth Head_ back in high school, and was blown away by the complexity and density of ideas. I knew I didn't understand half of what was going on, but you can **taste** that there are layers. I think the mental comparison I made at the time was with Borges.

Much more recently, I recommended tFHoC as a good introduction to Wolfe to my wife (actually I think we might have started reading it aloud), but she found it too cruel, and didn't continue. He actually does write a lot of horror, mixed in with everything else.

I still think that if you are going to like Wolfe, you will like tFHoC, and it is short ;)

David Duffy.

Transient — 02 Jun 2007, 23:30 · in reply to Joel Sieh

On Jun 2, 2007, at 2:34 PM, Joel Sieh wrote:

I suspect that, even among Wolfe's fans, very few would describe one of his books as a fun read. It's an intense, rewarding and often illuminating experience, but it's seldom enjoyable in the same sense as reading, say, George R R Martin or even fluff like David Eddings. And reading today competes with video games and reality television and Ultimate Fighting matches for attention.

I guess I must be one of those few. Fun for me: epiphanies, engaging style and description, some drama, and when characters do "cool" things. Some examples:

Me too; I always find Wolfe's stories immensely satisfying and fun to read. I can't put them down.

GRRM bores me to tears and I haven't been able to finish a single novel of his.

Daniel D Jones — 03 Jun 2007, 20:20 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On Saturday 02 June 2007 17:03, Daniel D Jones wrote:
Readers are becoming a distinct minority. And for most of those who do cling to the habit, many or most of them use it as a means of escape and relaxation. They don't want a writer who demands so much of them. Those of us who enjoy literature which requires active participation are a minority within a minority.

Replying to my own post, but I recently ran across this blog which really brings home the point I was making. It's a blog, so take it with a grain of salt but there's a link to a Slate article which backs up the essence of what it says (although not the actual figures quoted.)

<http://newpairedimes.blogspot.com/2007/06/u.html>

don doggett — 03 Jun 2007, 20:57 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

Sorry, I don't buy it. The guy got his stats from google, and I can tell you that our store, which I won't name, made 4 million dollars last year, two thirds of which were from book sales. People read; we're probably more literate as humans than at any other point in our history, but literacy doesn't equal critical thinking. It may make people feel good to think we're part of a dying breed as readers, the same way that celebrating banned books month makes people feel like they're fighting oppression (even though every book on that list is readily available everywhere in the US every day) but I personally don't believe it's that simple. Or maybe it's simply that the written word is so prevalent that it's not precious anymore. Which is not necessarily a bad thing.

Don

Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote: On Saturday 02 June 2007 17:03, Daniel D Jones wrote:

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Replying to my own post, but I recently ran across this blog which really brings home the point I was making. It's a blog, so take it with a grain of salt but there's a link to a Slate article which backs up the essence of what it says (although not the actual figures quoted.)

<http://newpairedimes.blogspot.com/2007/06/u.html>

Daniel D Jones — 03 Jun 2007, 22:53 · in reply to don doggett

On Sunday 03 June 2007 16:57, don doggett wrote:
Sorry, I don't buy it. The guy got his stats from google, and I can tell you that our store, which I won't name, made 4 million dollars last year, two thirds of which were from book sales.

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According to the US Census Bureau, US book stores have about \$16.5 billion in sales annually. Not all of that is books, however. Barnes and Noble, for instance, reports their sales at about \$4.5 billion, about \$2 billion of which is DVDs, CDs, coffee shop sales, etc. Borders also has substantial non-book sales in their stores. College bookstores are included in those figures, and they frequently sell as much or more in apparel as they do in books. I'd say that estimating \$10 billion annual sales in books is a generous estimate. Books sales also include magazines, college textbooks, etc. The US population is around 250 million. That's, on average, \$40 per person. I spend that much or more per month on average. That's my share and 12 or 14 other people's share. I'd guess that most people here spend significantly over the average as well. (And for those that don't, it's likely more a matter of budget than desire.) There are around 16 million students enrolled in US colleges and universities. If they average \$100 a year on text books (which certainly seems like a low figure to me), that's over one and a half billion of the pie there. Take into account the sale of non-fiction book, including various manuals which are, like textbooks, substantially more expensive than novels. And, of course, figure in how much of the total a small group of books (Harry Potter, anyone?) account for and you're left with a small fraction of the population who spends money on fiction.

Sure, \$4 million is a lot of money if it's sitting in your bank account. It's not, however, necessarily indicative of a widespread and thriving book market.

Bob Miller — 04 Jun 2007, 10:56 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

The gentlemen seem to have hit a "nerve" with the responses to the below:

"Readers are becoming a distinct minority. And for most of those who do cling to the habit, many or most of them use it as a means of escape and relaxation. They don't want a writer who demands so much of them. Those of us who enjoy literature which requires active participation are a minority within a minority."

It has always been difficult to publish "thoughtful" books. The best example (most popular?) was exemplified by an interview I saw with the original publisher of Lord of the Rings. At the time he had taken over operations of the publisher from his father. His estimate was that publishing the books would bring them a net loss of 10,000 lb (sorry my keyboard doesn't have the pound symbol). His father wired him back that if he truly thought it was a work of genius he had permission to lose 10,000 lb.

At age 60 I have now been reading this same plaint/observation for more than 45 years.

Thank you aghain for agitating the unused depths of my mind.

Michael Straight — 04 Jun 2007, 18:03 · in reply to Megan Bugge

Sheesh. Do we really have to pretend that liking Wolfe proves that we're super-smart and that people who don't are just lazy, not willing to do the "hard work" that we're willing to do?

Reading Wolfe requires a different kind of attention than reading some other books, but I wouldn't call it work. I enjoy that kind of reading. If I didn't, I wouldn't do it. It doesn't make me morally superior to someone who doesn't enjoy that kind of reading.

I don't enjoy skateboarding or skeet shooting, but it's not because I'm too lazy to do the "work" (practice) it would take for me to do those things well. I'm just not interested

Rostrum

don doggett — 04 Jun 2007, 18:21 · in reply to Michael Straight

--- Michael Straight <mfstraight at gmail.com> wrote:
Sheesh. Do we really have to pretend that liking
Wolfe proves that
we're super-smart and that people who don't are just
lazy, not willing
to do the "hard work" that we're willing to do?

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reading.

I don't enjoy skateboarding or skeet shooting, but
it's not because
I'm too lazy to do the "work" (practice) it would
take for me to do
those things well. I'm just not interested

I agree. It's more that we're suffering from an
embarrassment of riches. Increasing literacy is
probably the one thing our public schools have done
right. And even if the only books a person has read
are from primary school up through college, that's
still a third of a person's life spent reading. Not to
mention email, web pages, comics (many of which are
highly sophisticated- GW's a comics fan I believe.)
and the crap ton of magazines that come out every year
that ought to be online instead of in the landfill.
The sky hasn't fallen yet, I think.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha
<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

Michael Straight — 04 Jun 2007, 19:01 · in reply to Craig Brewer

On 5/29/07, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:
I'm curious what you might mention as valuable and worthwhile when trying to convince people to read Wolfe. I say this only partly to ask what you feel this reviewer omits. But it's also because I've had trouble myself summarizing all that I find compelling about him when suggesting that others read him.

That's why this kind of review kinda bothers me, because I feel somewhat at a loss myself to put my finger on why Wolfe is my favorite writer. I'll give it a try. I'd welcome anyone else trying to articulate "Why is Wolfe great?" or even just "Why I love Wolfe," especially geared toward people who haven't read him before.

Beauty to start with. Wolfe is like one of those actors who could read aloud from the phone book and have you on the edge of your seat. Remember the scene where Auk explains to Silk how his needler works? You've seen technology info-dumps a million times, and there's certainly nothing new about an electromagnetic railgun, but passage is a marvel of simplicity - it uses no scientific jargon but explains the scientific principles involved in a way a child could understand, and at the same time is very convincingly Auk's voice and perspective.

The last chapter of *Soldier of Arete* is like a jewel: in the sheer beauty of Pindar's prose; in density so much is said with so few words; and in flashes of light every other sentence illuminating whole chapters of what has come before (or will come after).

And it's not just beautiful language, but beautiful events - the Sidhe's dwindling flock of birds, Severian's matter-of-fact charity to the Green Man, Marble's sacrifice for her adopted grand-daughter. Wolfe's writing is full of these wonderful moments.

One aspect of that beauty is Wolfe's ability to suggest rather than tell. His ability to plant these subtle bombs in the text that will later explode into something weird or wonderful or both. I'll never forget the moment I noticed the significance of the elm tree falling at the beginning of *Peace*.

Or the way he can so casually pull the rug out from under you. As when Nadan mentions that he's gone back and changed stuff in the diary you've been reading.

Wolfe's ability to make convincing a certain kind of miraculous wonder is right up there with Tolkein. He does this wonderful thing in the *New Sun* books where you start out thinking you're reading a fantasy novel. But then he subtly convinces you that all these marvels you're seeing have a scientific explanation. And then once you've realized that this is the sort of story where miracles don't happen, he shows you one. And so it seems like a genuine miracle, not just another bit of fantasy magic.

I think that the games Wolfe plays with narrative voice offer a lot of insight into the way we really know things, particularly for people like me interested in issues of faith. You're never going to have a third-person omniscient account of what happened to Silk or Severian or Latro. No one ever knows things like that, even though we tell ourselves those sorts of stories all the time. I think the *Outsider* is real, not because Wolfe told me so, but because I believe Horn and Nettle and their children.

I've also mentioned before that I think reading Wolfe's books is a good school in the virtue that C.S. Lewis called "Preferring the Given." Wolfe is constantly setting you up to expect a certain kind of story, making think you're going to see, and want to see, certain events. Then he turns the corner and shows you something completely different, gives you a very different story. If you cling to your expectations, you'll be frustrated and miss the good thing that's in front of you

because it's not the imagined good you were expecting. Real life is like that a lot.

I also think Wolfe has a lot of interesting exploration of the meaning and responsibilities of power. His protagonists are, in general, mightier than their foes, and their conflicts are often more about struggling with the responsibility of strength than struggling against the limitations of weakness.

Wolfe is able to depict Goodness, Kindness, Strangeness, Evil in ways that seem very genuine and insightful to me. I'd try to elaborate, but then I'd never finish this.

And of course Wolfe is very intellectually stimulating. For those that enjoy that kind of reading, Wolfe is enormously fun and satisfying. (But, as I said in another post, let's not kid ourselves and think that our taste for that kind of thing makes us somehow better than people who don't care for it.)

Rostrum

Batrinque at aol.com — 04 Jun 2007, 22:58 · follows Michael Straight

In a message dated 6/4/2007 6:56:42 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time, ddjones at riddlemaster.org writes:

Interesting take on what's been said. I'm not sure why you interpret it that way, as I don't recall anyone saying that those who don't find Wolfe appealing were lazy or unwilling to work. Perhaps it was hidden in the text, a careful blend of hints and clues that requires multiple readings to ferret out the hidden slur. I would have thought that reading Wolfe might have sensitized me to such subtleties, but apparently I wasn't sufficiently perceptive to notice this subtext.

Yes, we must be sensitive to the "unreliable narrator" technique ...

Bruce Trinque
Amston, CT

Daniel D Jones — 04 Jun 2007, 23:00 · in reply to Michael Straight

On Monday 04 June 2007 14:03, Michael Straight wrote:
Sheesh. Do we really have to pretend that liking Wolfe proves that we're super-smart and that people who don't are just lazy, not willing to do the "hard work" that we're willing to do?

Interesting take on what's been said. I'm not sure why you interpret it that way, as I don't recall anyone saying that those who don't find Wolfe appealing were lazy or unwilling to work. Perhaps it was hidden in the text, a careful blend of hints and clues that requires multiple readings to ferret out the hidden slur. I would have thought that reading Wolfe might have sensitized me to such subtleties, but apparently I wasn't sufficiently perceptive to notice this subtext.

Reading Wolfe requires a different kind of attention than reading some other books, but I wouldn't call it work. I enjoy that kind of reading. If I didn't, I wouldn't do it. It doesn't make me morally superior to someone who doesn't enjoy that kind of reading.

Of course it's work. Thinking requires effort and expends energy. That's the very definition of work.

Despite our society's Puritanical heritage that might argue otherwise, work and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive. Far from it. A significant part of what I enjoy is work of some kind or another. Whether it's crafting wood projects in my workshop or writing extensions for Firefox or rebuilding my '78 shovelhead or creating a new recipe, most of the activities which engage my time are work. I find them quite enjoyable.

Essentially everyone here could make the same claim. The particular types of work they might mention as examples would undoubtedly be quite different from my list. That doesn't at all make me superior to them, nor them to me. It simply makes us different. Wonderful world, isn't it, that can encompass so much variety with scarcely any effort at all?

I don't enjoy skateboarding or skeet shooting, but it's not because I'm too lazy to do the "work" (practice) it would take for me to do those things well. I'm just not interested

Fortunately, I'm not aware of any attempt to enforce either practice upon you. Absent such concerns as paying bills and putting food on the table and whatever other personal concerns drive your behavior, you're free to engage in whatever pursuits you find enjoyable. One of them appears to be reading Wolfe. That doesn't make you special in any significant sense, but it does put you in a rather small minority. Book sales provide conclusive proof of that.

aaron — 05 Jun 2007, 00:34 · in reply to Batrinque at aol.com

My definition of work: weight X distance X duration X temperature

My definition of pleasure: reading Wolfe or Vance on a long rainy day.

Any other Vance fans subscribe to the list? It seems that many people who read Wolfe also read Vance. A generalization, I know, but true in my experience. Any comments?

Batrinque at aol.com — 05 Jun 2007, 00:52 · follows aaron

In a message dated 6/4/2007 8:34:41 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time, aaronsingleton at gmail.com writes:

Any other Vance fans subscribe to the list?

Yes, although it has been several years since I last read anything of his, except for an occasional re-read of his "The Last Castle" novella. Hmm, I must dig out the Dying Earth and Demon Princes books for another read one of these days.

Bruce Trinkle
Amston, CT

Recursive Loop — 05 Jun 2007, 00:59 · in reply to aaron

"Any other Vance fans subscribe to the list?"

You tell me...

<<http://texasbestgrok.mu.nu/archives/224757.php>>

<<http://texasbestgrok.mu.nu/archives/225838.php>>

;)

"The Dying Earth" was, as Baen, Drake and Flint put it in a recent anthology, one of those things that Turned the World Upside Down in terms of literary perspective. Great author! Wish I could have afforded that Vance Integral Edition!

FPK3

aaron — 05 Jun 2007, 01:34 · in reply to Recursive Loop

I am glad to see some Vance readers around here. I, too, wish I could have purchased the VIE, and I still sometimes fantasize about having those lovely volumes here on my bookshelf. I have heard some negative comments regarding these books, however (excepting the price). The man who designed the font used in the books was no pro at typefaces, but only an interested amateur and Vance fan. I have seen the font and I do not particularly like it myself. It doesn't lend itself to long reading sessions and is somewhat archaic in appearance. Why they didn't go with an established and easy-to-read font is anybody's guess. Alas... But seriously, I read The Dying Earth first, as many others did, then moved on to his other work. The man is just an amazing writer, but something of an acquired taste, it seems. I am a member of the Jack Vance MB, a really great place to meet other Vance fans. The folks there are so darn nice; two members mailed me Vance novels that I hadn't read yet just so I could discuss them on the board. Free of charge and for keeps. Anyway, I discovered Wolfe through Vance I guess you could say. I think a google search of The Dying Earth produced a link to a review of TBotNS, and from there I was hooked. I also discovered that Wolfe is a big Vance fan himself. Anyway, I went about a year or so reading nothing but Vance, then another year reading Wolfe almost exclusively. Now it seems like every other author I attempt to read are mere beginners compared to these two greats. Now I wish I would have waited to read these two, and 'worked my way up', so to speak.

Also, the other day, I read about the author Michael Shea and how he wrote a sequel to The Eyes of the Overworld. He then went on to write a few books about a character named Nifft the Lean who is said to be Cugel-esque. I am intrigued and will probably try to locate a copy of this Nifft the Lean. Hopefully it will be worthwhile. Any of you guys read Michael Shea? Any good? Sorry for the long post guys.

Tim Walters — 05 Jun 2007, 02:06 · in reply to aaron

aaron wrote:

I am glad to see some Vance readers around here. I, too, wish I could have purchased the VIE, and I still sometimes fantasize about having those lovely volumes here on my bookshelf. I have heard some negative comments regarding these books, however (excepting the price).

I ordered a copy of the sample volume as a gift for a friend, and it was so ugly I almost didn't give it to him. Eventually I came to my senses and realized that, like most people, he's not as much of a book design snob as I am and probably would like it fine. But I lost all interest in buying it for myself--I'd rather stick with my paperbacks.

Coincidentally, I re-read the Lyonesse trilogy last week, and enjoyed it quite a bit, with a couple of caveats:

--the last book is badly paced--it moves along languorously for the first three-quarters or so, then rushes to fit all the plot points in before the end, going so far as to dispose of a major character off-stage.

--Vance's highly artificial style, especially his dialog consisting largely of exquisitely euphemistic negotiations, gets a little tiresome over the course of a long trilogy. One begins to wish for characters capable of ordinary conversation.

Also, the other day, I read about the author Michael Shea and how he wrote a sequel to *The Eyes of the Overworld*. He then went on to write a few books about a character named Niff the Lean who is said to be Cugel-esque.

The Niff books are highly entertaining--not as well-crafted as Vance's, I would say, but even more bizarrely imaginative.

Tim Walters | The Doubtful Palace | <http://doubtfulpalace.com>

aaron — 05 Jun 2007, 02:11 · in reply to Tim Walters

--Vance's highly artificial style, especially his dialog consisting largely of exquisitely euphemistic negotiations, gets a little tiresome over the course of a long trilogy. One begins to wish for characters capable of ordinary conversation.

Who was it that said, "I like Vance except for his wooden dialogue." To which the other man responded: "Not wooden. Carved." But I can understand how it could wear thin on some readers after a long trilogy. Wolfe seems to be much more flexible with his writing than Vance ever was. That is another reason the two writers complement one another so well.

Tim Walters — 05 Jun 2007, 02:23 · in reply to aaron

aaron wrote:
Wolfe seems to be much more flexible with his writing than Vance ever was.

Lyonese highlighted this as well, as there are several child characters... all of whom converse in Vance-speak just like the adults.

Not that I don't love it! But like P.G. Wodehouse or single-malt scotch, it's best in small doses.

Tim Walters | The Doubtful Palace | <http://doubtfulpalace.com>

Andy Robertson — 05 Jun 2007, 07:12 · in reply to aaron

aaron writes:

Any other Vance fans subscribe to the list?

Vance can be very very good, when he takes himself seriously. I first read him as a kid: my only access to SF books was my local library and the only Vance book in it was *THE DYING EARTH*. For years I thought he was an unknown writer who had produced only one exquisite work.

- hartshorn

<http://www.thenightland.co.uk>

01273-488272 / 0777-214-9545

Joel Sieh — 05 Jun 2007, 14:34 · in reply to aaron

On 6/4/07, aaron <aaronsingleton at gmail.com> wrote:
Any other Vance fans subscribe to the list?

Learned about Vance a few years ago from this list, but just started Tales of the Dying Earth. It's fun so far. It doesn't have the complexity of Wolfe's writing, but the language and descriptions are just as rich and flavorful, if not more so. When I envision the world Vance describes, it is super-saturated with color and ornamented with strange debris. I like it.

One observation.... I've heard that Tolkien's work was a large inspiration for the Dungeon and Dragons tabletop games. Just after reading about 100 pages of Tales of the Dying Earth, I'd say that it looks like the D&D creators took a LOT of inspiration for their magic systems from it, much more than anything they would have gotten from Tolkien. Gandalf's magic was much more organic, subtle, and undefined than the mechanisms and descriptions (including spell names) I've seen in the book I'm currently reading.

--Joel

Recursive Loop — 05 Jun 2007, 14:46 · in reply to Joel Sieh

Greetings:

"One observation.... I've heard that Tolkien's work was a large inspiration for the Dungeon and Dragons tabletop games."

There were a lot of things that inspired D&D. Vance is one, Tolkien is another. So is Leiber, (Lin) Carter, (Edgar Rice) Burroughs and more. Even H.P. Lovecraft. His creations such as Cthulhu and others showed up at one point, until TSR got a "cease and desist" order. Either Tolkien or his estate did the same thing, so "hobbits" in early editions became "halflings" in later editions, even though we all knew what they were...

FPK3

Rob Thornton — 05 Jun 2007, 15:42 · follows Recursive Loop

Funny that Vance and D&D are mentioned in the same post. I have heard that Vance is one of the influences on the wizard spells from the original AD&D and I believe them.

The Prismatic Sphere and the Prismatic Spray are good examples, and I think another 9th level spell is actually taken from him -- can't remember the AD&D name but Vance called it the spell of Forlorn Encystment or something like that.

rob t.

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

From: Recursive Loop [mailto:recursive_loop at yahoo.com]

Sent: Tuesday, June 5, 2007 02:46 PM

To: 'The Urth Mailing List'

Subject: Re: (urth) The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe

Greetings:

"One observation.... I've heard that Tolkien's work was a large inspiration for the Dungeon and Dragons tabletop games."

There were a lot of things that inspired D&D. Vance is one, Tolkien is another. So is Leiber,

(Lin) Carter, (Edgar Rice) Burroughs and more. Even H.P. Lovecraft. His creations such as Cthulhu and others showed up at one point, until TSR got a "cease and desist" order. Either Tolkien or his estate did the same thing, so "hobbits" in early editions became "halflings" in later editions, even though we all knew what they were...

FPK3

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<http://tv.yahoo.com/collections/222>

Recursive Loop — 05 Jun 2007, 15:48 · in reply to Rob Thornton

This part of the Wikipedia entry on D&D matches my recollections from the mid-70's when I was involved in gaming!

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dungeons_and_dragons#Sources_and_Influences_on_the_Development_of_D.26D>

don doggett — 05 Jun 2007, 16:40 · in reply to Andy Robertson

--- Andy Robertson <andywrobertson@clara.co.uk> wrote:

I first read

him as a kid: my only access to SF books was my
local library and the only
Vance book in it was THE DYING EARTH. For years I
thought he was an
unknown writer who had produced only one exquisite
work.

That's a wonderful and beautiful illusion. I felt that
way when I stumbled upon The Circus of Dr. Lao. After
reading it I realized it was entirely appropriate that
it should just drift into my possession.

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

Adam Thornton — 05 Jun 2007, 16:42 · in reply to Joel Sieh

On Jun 5, 2007, at 9:34 AM, Joel Sieh wrote:
One observation.... I've heard that Tolkien's work was a large
inspiration for the Dungeon and Dragons tabletop games. Just after
reading about 100 pages of Tales of the Dying Earth, I'd say that
it looks like the D&D creators took a LOT of inspiration for their

magic systems from it, much more than anything they would have gotten from Tolkien. Gandalf's magic was much more organic, subtle, and undefined than the mechanisms and descriptions (including spell names) I've seen in the book I'm currently reading.

Gary Gygax says in the appendices to the AD&D v1 DMG (IIRC) that Dying Earth Magic was the immediate inspiration for the D&D magic system. I think it's there that he says that DE and Lieber's Nehwon stories are the biggest influences.

There's also an article by Gygax talking about Vance's influence on D&D in The Excellent Prismatic Spray issue II. [http:// www.dyingearth.com/mag.htm](http://www.dyingearth.com/mag.htm)

I have not read it.

Adam

don doggett — 05 Jun 2007, 16:47 · in reply to Recursive Loop

--- Recursive Loop <recursive_loop at yahoo.com> wrote:

until TSR got a

"cease and desist" order. Either Tolkien or his estate did the same thing, so "hobbits" in early editions became "halflings" in later editions, even though we all knew what they were...

Well, at the risk of being labelled a nitpick, they are called halflings by the Gondorians. But it appears that it's a "real" word that can't be copyrighted.

nerdily yours

Don

The Evangelists: a Lesser Apocrypha

<http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=178109961>

Recursive Loop — 05 Jun 2007, 16:53 · in reply to don doggett

Greetings:

"Well, at the risk of being labelled a nitpick, they are called halflings by the Gondorians. But it appears that it's a "real" word that can't be copyrighted."

Nitpick away! You are exactly right. One word is the invention of the Professor. The other is a "real world word".

Hence the deletion of "Cthulhu" and other words from the Monster Manual.

TSR had a good business relationship with Leiber and published supplements based on his works. I don't know if they ever had a deal with Vance. Arkham House eventually sold the rights for gaming in Lovecraft's worlds to Chaosium, who did a bang up job with their "Call of Cthulhu".

LotR has gone through multiple incarnations as a licensed property, under various helms.

(Nerdily? Here I am scouring eBay for copies of "En Garde!" to incorporate its quasi-roleplaying aspects into a naval miniatures game called "Fire As She Bears". You can't get much nerdier!)

Andy Robertson — 05 Jun 2007, 17:27 · in reply to don doggett

--- Andy Robertson <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk> wrote:
For years I thought he was an
unknown writer who had produced only one exquisite
work.

That's a wonderful and beautiful illusion.

Indeed.

I also came across E C Tubb's THE WINDS OF GATH and believed the same thing about **that** book. It's a fine work if you don't know about the 30-odd near-identical sequels

But we drift off tropic.

- hartshorn

Daniel D Jones — 05 Jun 2007, 21:58 · in reply to Recursive Loop

On Tuesday 05 June 2007 12:53, Recursive Loop wrote:
Greetings:

"Well, at the risk of being labelled a nitpick, they
are called halflings by the Gondorians. But it appears
that it's a "real" word that can't be copyrighted."

Nitpick away! You are exactly right. One word is the invention of the
Professor. The other is a "real world word".

Hence the deletion of "Cthulhu" and other words from the Monster Manual.

Although I haven't played in years, I still have the Monster Manual which includes creatures from Michael Moorcock's Elric/Immortal Champion series. I don't recall which edition it is - I'm reasonably certain that it isn't the first - and I'd have to dig through a lot of boxes to find it. But it's there.

TSR had a good business relationship with Leiber and published supplements based on his works.

I believe I also have a Lankhmar based campaign.

Adam Thornton — 05 Jun 2007, 22:03 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On Jun 5, 2007, at 4:58 PM, Daniel D Jones wrote:
On Tuesday 05 June 2007 12:53, Recursive Loop wrote:

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Although I haven't played in _years_, I still have the Monster Manual which includes creatures from Michael Moorcock's Elric/Immortal Champion series. I don't recall which edition it is - I'm reasonably certain that it isn't the first - and I'd have to dig through a lot of boxes to find it. But it's there.

I suspect you're thinking of the first printing of Deities and Demigods, which contained both Melibone and Cthulhu Mythoi. Since TSR never actually licensed the rights from Chaosium to do this, those two mythoi were removed from the second printing.

Adam

Daniel D Jones — 05 Jun 2007, 22:32 · in reply to Adam Thornton

On Tuesday 05 June 2007 18:03, Adam Thornton wrote:

On Jun 5, 2007, at 4:58 PM, Daniel D Jones wrote:

On Tuesday 05 June 2007 12:53, Recursive Loop wrote:

Hence the deletion of "Cthulhu" and other words from the Monster Manual.

Although I haven't played in _years_, I still have the Monster Manual which includes creatures from Michael Moorcock's Elric/Immortal Champion series. I don't recall which edition it is - I'm reasonably certain that it isn't the first - and I'd have to dig through a lot of boxes to find it. But it's there.

I suspect you're thinking of the first printing of Deities and Demigods, which contained both Melibone and Cthulhu Mythoi. Since TSR never actually licensed the rights from Chaosium to do this, those two mythoi were removed from the second printing.

Ahh! You're right. It is Deities and Demigods, not the Monster Manual. I said that it had been years....

Thanks.

David Duffy — 07 Jun 2007, 04:14 · in reply to aaron

On Mon, 4 Jun 2007, aaron wrote:

I am glad to see some Vance readers around here.

...

Also, the other day, I read about the author Michael Shea and how he wrote a sequel to The Eyes of the Overworld. He then went on to write a few books about a character named Nifft the Lean who is said to be Cugel-esque. I am intrigued and will probably try to locate a copy of this Nifft the Lean. Hopefully it will be worthwhile. Any of you guys read Michael Shea? Any good? Sorry for the long post guys.

Yes and yes. I posted a long time ago that Wolfe has a quote from Shea (actually from Nifft the Lean) in ?Short Sun.

David Duffy.

Bob Miller — 09 Jun 2007, 17:19 · in reply to Joel Sieh

On 6/4/07, aaron <aaronsingleton at gmail.com> wrote:

Any other Vance fans subscribe to the list?

One observation.... I've heard that Tolkien's work was a large inspiration for the Dungeon and Dragons tabletop games. Just after reading about 100 pages of Tales of the Dying Earth, I'd say that it looks like the D&D creators took a LOT of inspiration for their magic systems from it, much more than anything they would have gotten from Tolkien. Gandalf's magic was much more organic, subtle, and undefined than the mechanisms and descriptions (including spell names) I've seen in the book I'm currently

Good points and observations. I haven't seen an interview with Dave Arneson, but Gary Gygax who is the author of most of the first couple generations of D&D books will tell you that LoTR and Vance's work was, at least, on the back of his mind. Magic item Robe of Eyes in D&D directly related to one of the short stories. Halflings were originally called hobbits and the Tolkien Estate made TSR change the name.

I guess I'm a minority person on Vance. I always thought the Dying Earth stories relatively weak beside much, not all, of his other stuff. Of course, I never did read anything from Cugel's Saga inclusive on.

Dave Lebling — 09 Jun 2007, 18:09 · in reply to Bob Miller

Bob Miller wrote:

I guess I'm a minority person on Vance. I always thought the Dying Earth stories relatively weak beside much, not all, of his other stuff. Of course, I never did read anything from Cugel's Saga inclusive on.

Well, chacun a son gout, as the French folks say. I've always found Vance's fantasy stuff to be his best work (with the exception on the SF side of of the first couple of Demon Princes novels).

A couple of things to remember about the Dying Earth stories. First, they are just that; the "novel" is really just a story collection. The Cugel books are pretty episodic as well, and were broken up for publication; I don't know whether they started as a novel or as a bunch of stories. The later things (like "Fader's Waft") were also stories. As stories they stand pretty tall. Second, keep in mind when the original Dying Earth stories were published, and compare and contrast against what else was coming out in the fantasy genre: not much. It was post-Unknown, and F&SF was doing contemporary fantasy more than Cabell- or Lord Dunsany-influenced works. The only similar things that were happening were Leiber's Grey Mouser stories, also heavily influenced by Dunsany and Cabell. Howard was already in the past. Vance was a breath of fresh air. By today's standards he's a bit mannered, and if you read a huge chunk of his writing you see the same themes, even the same phrasings, pop up again and again.

In my opinion, D&D was influenced heavily by Vance, Leiber and Howard, and of course Tolkien. It goes without saying that contemporary fantasy computer games are utterly in their debt as well.

Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

Tim Walters — 09 Jun 2007, 18:22 · in reply to Dave Lebling

Dave Lebling wrote:

In my opinion, D&D was influenced heavily by Vance, Leiber and Howard, and of course Tolkien.

And Fletcher Pratt, who I think is less well known than he should be (G. G. Kay and G.R.R. Martin owe him plenty).

Tim Walters | The Doubtful Palace | <http://doubtfulpalace.com>

stilskin — 09 Jun 2007, 18:34 · in reply to Tim Walters

--- Tim Walters <walters@doubtfulpalace.com> wrote:

And Fletcher Pratt, who I think is less well known than he should be (G. G. Kay and G.R.R. Martin owe him plenty).

Let's not forget Michael Moorcock and Poul Anderson!

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

Adam Thornton — 09 Jun 2007, 19:38 · in reply to Dave Lebling

On Jun 9, 2007, at 1:09 PM, Dave Lebling wrote:

In my opinion, D&D was influenced heavily by Vance, Leiber and Howard, and of course Tolkien. It goes without saying that contemporary fantasy computer games are utterly in their debt as well.

Not that you're, uh, exactly blameless on that score, eh?

Adam

Dave Lebling — 09 Jun 2007, 20:07 · in reply to stilskin

stilskin wrote:

--- Tim Walters <walters@doubtfulpalace.com> wrote:

And Fletcher Pratt, who I think is less well known than he should be (G. G. Kay and G.R.R. Martin owe him plenty).

Let's not forget Michael Moorcock and Poul Anderson!

If we're going that far, we might as well include L. Sprague deCamp as well. The "Incomplete Enchanter" stories he wrote with Pratt were one of the highlights of the "Unknown" era. I for one always liked deCamp better than Pratt.

In any case, the magic system in D&D (and the one in the Zork computer games) was directly stolen from the Dying Earth stories, as was the grue. As the thief in the latter case, I can be sure of that.

Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

Adam Thornton — 10 Jun 2007, 00:05 · in reply to Dave Lebling

On Jun 9, 2007, at 3:07 PM, Dave Lebling wrote:

stilskin wrote:

--- Tim Walters <walters at doubtfulpalace.com> wrote:

And Fletcher Pratt, who I think is less well known than he should be (G. G. Kay and G.R.R. Martin owe him plenty). Let's not forget Michael Moorcock and Poul Anderson!

If we're going that far, we might as well include L. Sprague deCamp as well. The "Incomplete Enchanter" stories he wrote with Pratt were one of the highlights of the "Unknown" era. I for one always liked deCamp better than Pratt.

But once we go this far then we need to start considering second-and- third order effects. I mean, OK, so you have Moorcock. Looking back you've got Mervyn Peake, and forward you have M. John Harrison and the whole British crowd of Moorcock-inspired genre authors. Which would bring you to, say, China Mieville, on whom Vance is probably more of a second-order influence by way of Gygas. But of course, to bring this back to Wolfe, Mieville is extremely Borges-influenced as well. And also Lewis Carroll; I can't think offhand of anything specifically Carrollian in Wolfe, but I will be amazed if someone on this list can't immediately pipe up with something. (Of course, you could get there via Jasper Fforde, since the Unitary Authority of Warrington (formerly Cheshire) Cat is in charge of the Library of Babel--and therefore is, of course Master Ultan, and since Cyby is Wolfe's self-insertion, that might make Thursday Next Gene Wolfe, and now my head has exploded.

In any case, the magic system in D&D (and the one in the Zork computer games) was directly stolen from the Dying Earth stories, as was the grue. As the thief in the latter case, I can be sure of that.

Imagine my delight upon finding, early on in Lolita, that prostitutes were referred to as grues. The Great Underground Empire will, I fear, never look quite the same to me.

Adam

Dave Lebling — 10 Jun 2007, 01:14 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Adam Thornton wrote:

Imagine my delight upon finding, early on in Lolita, that prostitutes were referred to as grues. The Great Underground Empire will, I fear, never look quite the same to me.

Aha! The French "grue" is "crane" (both the bird and the lifting device). I suspect that's where Nabokov got it (the bird, I would suspect, though I suppose "lifting device" might apply as well).

Imagine my surprise when I first visited Montreal and found in the Yellow Pages "location des grues" ("crane rental"). One hopes they are rented only in daylight.

Dave Lebling, aka vizcacha

Joel Sieh — 10 Jun 2007, 02:04 · in reply to Dave Lebling

At first, I was somewhat embarrassed at bringing up D&D on this list, seeing how it was somewhat offtopic and derailed the conversation from matters of Wolfe. However, a lot of interesting posts have come out of it (especially Adam's above)! I have very little to add, considering many of these authors are on my to-read list, but alas have not yet been read.

Adam Thornton — 10 Jun 2007, 03:20 · in reply to Dave Lebling

On Jun 9, 2007, at 8:14 PM, Dave Lebling wrote:

Adam Thornton wrote:

Imagine my delight upon finding, early on in *_Lolita_*, that prostitutes were referred to as *_grues_*. The Great Underground Empire will, I fear, never look quite the same to me.

Aha! The French "grue" is "crane" (both the bird and the lifting device). I suspect that's where Nabokov got it (the bird, I would suspect, though I suppose "lifting device" might apply as well).

Imagine my surprise when I first visited Montreal and found in the Yellow Pages "location des grues" ("crane rental"). One hopes they are rented only in daylight.

I imagine there's not a lot of repeat business if they aren't.

Now I must write a short work of IF, "La Grenouille", in which you play the eponym, just so that I can say (shamelessly pasted from Google Translate):

Vous ?tes susceptibles d'?tre mang?s par une grue.

Which gets us back to Carroll. Found **what** advisable? I'm afraid I can't find the bridge back to Wolfe, though. What **did** the archbishop find?

Adam

Iorwerth Thomas — 11 Jun 2007, 21:07 · in reply to Joel Sieh

At first, I was somewhat embarrassed at bringing up D&D on this list, seeing how it was somewhat offtopic and derailed the conversation from matters of Wolfe. However, a lot of interesting posts have come out of it (especially Adam's above)! I have very little to add, considering many of these authors are on my to-read list, but alas have not yet been read.

I wouldn't feel overly bad about it; a while back on this list I referenced an *Ars Magica* supplement in a discussion on the Kabbalah and Severian...

lozz -- plush Cthulhu owner and appalling geek

Recursive Loop — 12 Jun 2007, 14:22 · in reply to Iorwerth Thomas

Greetings:

A humorous look at the Tolkien-D&D links...111 installments worth!!!

<<http://www.shamusyoung.com/twentsidedtale/?cat=14>>

FPK3