

The Devil in a Forest

The Urth list — 18 messages, 10 voices, 13 May 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5431>

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James Wynn — 13 May 2009, 19:54

Who shot Gloin?

J.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 13 May 2009, 19:56 · in reply to James Wynn

Legolas, in the library, with the revolver.

On Wed, May 13, 2009 at 12:54 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
Who shot Gloin?

J. _____
Urth Mailing List
To post, write urth at urth.net

James Wynn — 13 May 2009, 19:59 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Who shot Gloin?

Legolas, in the library, with the revolver.

Actually, it was a hunting bow. Your out of the game.
:-)

J.

Adam Thornton — 13 May 2009, 20:23 · in reply to James Wynn

On May 13, 2009, at 2:54 PM, James Wynn wrote:
Who shot Gloin?

Grimli.

Oh, no, that's *how* shot Gloin.

Adam

James Wynn — 14 May 2009, 15:36 · in reply to Adam Thornton

Am I really the only person on this list who's read this book? Really?

Okay. Here's what it is (not obvious from the summary on the back of the book). It's a re-telling Robin Hood. It's not clear where it is supposed to occur. The names are English (or Scandinavian in the case of Gloin), so combined with the Robin Hood connection it's a slam dunk. But the references to King Wenceslas in the summary (not the book) suggests it might have been intended to take place in the Czech Republic of the 11th century. The enormous mountain that

plays such a dominant role in the story (requiring more than a day's march to reach the summit) tends to bring to mind the Pyrenees or the Alps.

This is not a sci-fi story or a fantasy story. The "magic" that takes place is of the "real", naturalistic sort. Miracles are not ruled out, however. There is a Father Brown-style detective priest.

****SPOILERS TO FOLLOW****

I think all the loose ends are wrapped up at the end (but with Wolfe, can one be sure?) EXCEPT for one of the characters (Gloin) being shot by an arrow. He was fleeing an attack by soldiers in the woods. The soldier's deny having shot him (no reason they would lie about it). The arrow was not from a military cross-bow. So that suggests to me that the arrow was fired from Wat's bow. But Wat had left his bow at the Inn, and by the end of the story it is made clear that Wat could not have reclaimed it until after Gloin was shot.

So who shot him? Joselynn's father? Could he have left his duties at the Inn to go with the soldier's to hunt for the refugees? Maybe --if all the soldiers were involved in the search. He might have left with the bow and shot Gloin so the soldiers would catch him and let Joselynn escape. Or he might have done it so Joselynn would not be alone with him in the woods. But there's no reference in the book that suggests her father knew how to use a bow, and it was a risky shot considering how close Gloin and Joselynn probably were to each other. Anyway, he seems like the ONLY viable choice, but he's still an unacceptable one in my mind (something that happens a lot when I read Wolfe).

J.

Mo Holkar / UKG — 14 May 2009, 16:57 · in reply to James Wynn

At 16:36 14/05/2009, J. wrote:

Am I really the only person on this list who's read this book? Really?

I have read it -- but a long time ago (like 20 years or more), so I don't remember the details of plot. I am hoping that someone else will pick this up with you though!

best wishes,

Mo

~ # ~

WolfeWiki -- a wiki about Gene Wolfe

<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/>

John Smith — 14 May 2009, 20:10 · in reply to James Wynn

I've read *The Devil in the Forest* and I liked it. It is good fantasy. It's been many years since I read it, but some images stick with me. For instance, the witch who tells fortunes by throwing "the thigh bones of men."

Best wishes,

Jack

--- On Thu, 5/14/09, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
From: James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) The Devil in a Forest
To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Thursday, May 14, 2009, 11:36 AM
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J.

James Wynn — 14 May 2009, 20:25 · in reply to John Smith

I've read *The Devil in the Forest* and I liked it.
It is good fantasy. It's been many years since I read it,
but some images stick with me.
For instance, the witch who tells fortunes by throwing
"the thigh bones of men."

It might have got by you at the time but Mother Clot actually says:
"Thigh bones of men. [...] Tell a lie and be a lawyer--tell the truth and be a trull. Murdered by me
and their mothers, Mark; and every one is a left thigh bone."

So she claims she collected the left thigh bones of male fetuses she had aborted for
fortune-telling. Of course, every verifiable statement she says is a lie so, who knows?

J.

don doggett — 15 May 2009, 07:05 · follows James Wynn

Sorry James, I've read *The Devil in a Forest*, but I was pretty underwhelmed by it, so I never dug
very deep.

Don
Doggerel
www.don-doggett.blogspot.com

--- On Thu, 5/14/09, Mo Holkar / UKG <lists at ukg.co.uk> wrote:
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Transentient — 15 May 2009, 12:33 · in reply to James Wynn

On May 14, 2009, at 11:36 AM, James Wynn wrote:
Am I really the only person on this list who's read this book? Really?

I read it a couple years ago and really enjoyed it, but I don't recall what, if any, resolution I arrived at for who shot Gloin.

Is it completely impossible that Mark actually shot Gloin?

James Wynn — 15 May 2009, 13:31 · in reply to Transentient

Don Doggett:
Sorry James, I've read The Devil in a Forest,
but I was pretty underwhelmed by it, so I never dug very deep.

Look, this is no great work, but it is a very "well-constructed" work; to a degree that it's worth examining for that reason alone. Most people are unaware of the story of the evil abbess who poisons, blinds, and kills Robin Hood. Wolfe has combined the abbess, Baba Yaga, and Hansel & Gretel's witch into a single character.

The story has lots of interesting, filled-out characters. The abbe' is an early Silk as well as a kind of Friar Tuck.

Thematically Wat/Robin Hood is an interesting exemplar of the corrupting nature of socialism while the Ganelon/Sherriff of Nottingham is an exemplar of the ambiguous but cruel nature of big, bureaucratic government.

I've read much worse novels, even by Wolfe.

Transentient:

Is it completely impossible that Mark actually shot Gloin?

Yeah, I think it is. Mark came straight from the woods with Wat (after Wat stabbed him) to the hideout with the refugees. If we assume the deed was done with Wat's bow then there was no opportunity to retrieve it. The deed was not done with a military bow, anyway. Also tDiaF has a third person narrator that speaks from Mark's POV.

So I don't think he could do something without us knowing it, unless... ..unless Mother Cloot mixed up some of that special potion that she gave Wat to make him Ganelon (or the other way around). But , it's still unlikely that Mark shot Gloin I think. He was over-taken by the soldiers. Nor could he have killed the sexton, for that matter, despite what Mother Cloot said. It must have been the charcoal burner. But what was his motive? I bet there are some hints if I read some of the Robin Hood versions.

Hmmm...I suppose it's possible that Mother Cloot carried Wat's bow to him in the forest, but that would undermine Mark's reasoning for concluding that Wat was Ganelon. Still it's not unheard of in a Wolfe novel for people to come to the right conclusion for the wrong reason.

J.

David Stockhoff — 16 May 2009, 13:13 · follows James Wynn

I don't recall the novel well, but I'm skeptical that one can so confidently read direct criticism of socialism and bureaucratic government in it. They are modern ideas that may be roughly linked but can't actually be represented in this milieu. Naturally Wolfe doesn't like them, because they are inferior to the rule of a good king. So I'd like to see more citations specifically supporting that theory. Unless, of course, you meant it only in a general or indirect sense.

First of all, by the time you've equated socialism with "robbing from the rich and giving to the poor," you've already hanged socialism without a trial, because that means you don't know what it is. Though I will grant that it is commonly understood in that way in the US, and that the requirement of ignorance does not rule out Wolfe's understanding of it that way too.

Second, in what way does a feudal figure resemble modern big government? Again, punitive overtaxing---a practice that was perfected by the Medicis, not by the IRS, by any stretch---and being corrupt and evil bears no particular relation to big government as we know it. Rather, it's business as usual for imperial/authoritarian orders of the kind our big government replaced.

If anything, the story sets---if I can again put it in the terms of past debates---'good' king vs 'bad' king. Bad kings tax and kill freely and destroy all that is not theirs; good kings try to improve things but also tax and kill with restraint. Nobility should behave in a certain way, according to a code, as a knight. Neither the sheriff nor Wat is a nobleman, and thus cannot be either. Clearly Wat is misguided, but it wouldn't be the first time a Wolfe protagonist is misguided.

Message: 4

Date: Fri, 15 May 2009 08:31:57 -0500

From: "James Wynn" <crushtv at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) The Devil in a Forest

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

Message-ID: <26082D4CA6CD4E83A88223747DCF7E57 at eMachinePC>

Content-Type: text/plain; format=flowed; charset="iso-8859-1";

reply-type=response

Don Doggett:

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James Wynn — 16 May 2009, 19:58 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff said: I don't recall the novel well, but I'm skeptical that one can so confidently read direct criticism of socialism and bureaucratic government in it. So I'd like to see more citations specifically supporting that theory. Unless, of course, you meant it only in a general or indirect sense.

I do think it's done in a more indirect sense. This novel is "about" many things, but the shadow of economic/social commentary lies long and dark over it. Wolfe starts with a hero of folklore known for "robbing the rich to give to the poor". But he starts the story from the perspective of "the rich". For starters, we get an old peddler, who is also a very clever salesman that manages to get housewives to spend more than they planned to. Wat shoots him dead with an arrow and robs him. Later he justifies it (he quite good a justifying everything he does) saying:

"I put my second-best shaft in his neck. I don't like the breed--nasty, whining creatures that cry and say you're taking their last farthing when they've half a dozen of gold in one shoe and a thousand more, like as not, in the mattress at home."

Then we meet the Villagers--the rest of "the rich"--all of whom are tradesmen. They start with a plan to form a private militia to root out Wat, but Wat is a clever corrupter. Before things get far along, he has convinced a sizable chunk of the tradesmen to join him in a plot to rob a nobleman (someone who is rich from the tradesmen's POV). But, actually, no nobleman will ever get skinned because Wat's real plan is to rob one of the tradesmen.

Only after we meet the rich, are we introduced to "the poor". The Poor are the charcoal burners in the forest. Wat's relationship with them is to buy them off. There is no time in the story when Wat's relationship with them is chummier than that. They can't go to the authorities even if they were inclined to because their own livelihood is technically illegal. But Wat knows that they might turn him in for a reward so he is never among them in trust.

There are no speeches about liberty or the rights of property, but Wolfe effectively demolishes the whole philosophical structure of forcibly taking from "the rich" for purposes of benevolence. It simply does not happen here.

...in what way does a feudal figure resemble modern big government?

If this isn't a fable about the foolishness of depending on the beneficence of the government, I can't imagine what would be. In order to protect themselves from thievery, members of the village seek the help of the government. But once they have let the camel's nose under the tent, they find that people actually performing those duties are not interested in "rescuing" them, but in following the letter of the law as it has been defined to them, and feathering their own well-being as much as they're permitted within the strict definition of their duties. In short, the Law (the government from the POV of the villagers), is a bigger marauder than Wat. They treat all the villagers as a potential law-breakers, and in deed Philip the Cobbler and Gloin the Weaver are defined technically as "Wat's men" even though they never robbed anyone, even though there was never anyone to rob.

If anything, the story sets---if I can again put it in the terms of past debates---'good' king vs 'bad' king. Bad kings tax and kill freely and destroy all that is not theirs; good kings try to improve things but also tax and kill with restraint. Nobility should behave in a certain way, according to a code, as a knight. Neither the sheriff nor Wat is a nobleman, and thus cannot be either. Clearly Wat is misguided, but it wouldn't be the first time a Wolfe protagonist is misguided.

Wat is not presented as "misguided". He's a ruthless murderer and thief, and as clever a corrupter of those around him as the Devil himself. He's also not in his right mind. He's totally controlled by Mother Clout.

There is no "good king" and no "bad king" in this story. Wat is both the highwayman AND the sheriff (there's a metaphor for you). There is a king at the end who provides information to tie up loose ends, but he doesn't punish the soldiers for what they did to Mark's village as a "good king" would. He doesn't attempt to arrive at a higher justice for Phillip and Gloin. Mark tells the king that the soldier's promised to release them if he led them to Wat, and the king just waved it away. The abbe' tells Mark they are sure to be hanged in a very short time. Nor is the king presented as a ravager. He's just an amiable old guy. It's not clear what he would have done if he'd known how often Mark went willingly through the forest with Wat.

First of all, by the time you've equated socialism with "robbing from the rich and giving to the poor," you've already hanged socialism without a trial, because that means you don't know what it is. Though I will grant that it is commonly understood in that way in the US, and that the requirement of ignorance does not rule out Wolfe's understanding it that way too.

I suspect Wolfe does not believe socialism deserves a trial. The reason socialism is understood "as robbing from the rich to give to the poor" in the US is because the country was founded on the ideals of private property. Excepting slavery and the treatment of the Indians, there was never a time of clearly defined "class" -- of a "place" in society that one is expected to know. Actually, "rob from the rich" is a nicer way to put it than Kipling did: "They promised abundance for all/By robbing proverbial Peter to pay proverbial Paul". In order to get from here to there (socialism/welfare state), the advocates of the shift have always framed it as taking from those who "don't need it" in order to fund "the community".

J.

Michael Straight — 23 Jun 2009, 05:25 · in reply to James Wynn

On Thu, May 14, 2009 at 9:36 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
Am I really the only person on this list who's read this book? Really?

Hey James! I like this book quite a lot.

As I said a while ago on this list, the thing that sticks with me most is the way Wat manipulates the villagers, dividing them into smaller and smaller factions, promising them less and less for deeds that are more and more evil. I think Wolfe is more interested in that sort of exploration of the nature of evil than he is in making some sort of political statement.

Like in the Soldier books, Wolfe has these little details that really make me feel like I'm getting a ground-view glimpse of medieval peasant life that I don't get from a lot of fantasy. Little things like Mark brushing his teeth with a twig.

Rostrum

brunians at brunians.org — 23 Jun 2009, 08:37 · in reply to Michael Straight

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As interested.

It's a floor wax AND a dessert topping.

I really like TDiaF also.

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James Wynn — 24 Jun 2009, 22:48 · in reply to brunians at brunians.org

Michael Straight:

I think Wolfe is more interested in that sort of exploration of the nature of evil than he is in making some sort of political statement.

Josh:

As interested. It's a floor wax AND a dessert topping. I really like TDiaF also.

That's pretty funny, Josh.

I didn't expect to like it as much as I did. I was expecting something along the level of "Pandora" quality. When I finished it, I considered it solid piece, but nothing of much depth. But as I discussed it, I began to appreciate it much more. The characters are iconic with each having his own "space". Very Dickensian. And as I said, it would be thick-headed to say the novel is "about" this or that. Part of my low(er) opinion of it was that I didn't think the political angle was very subtle at all. After talking to people about it, I came to the opposite conclusion. Yeah, it's about the corrupting power of greed and the human susceptibility to venality. But those evils are dressed in the idea of "robbing from the rich to give to the poor". And re-distribution of wealth is a major political issue. You can't really escape that theme in an homage to the Robin

Hood story (which this is, and a quite deft one). The sad thing is that I'm probably spoiling the novel for some people, at least, by pointing out that there **is** a political statement in there. Fortunately, there seems to be more than enough deniability in the work for readers to ignore me as a crank and enjoy the novel for all its other attributes.

J.

brunians at brunians.org — 24 Jun 2009, 23:10 · in reply to James Wynn

James Wynn:

The sad thing is that I'm probably spoiling the novel for some people, at least, by pointing out that there **is** a political statement in there. Fortunately, there seems to be more than enough deniability in the work for readers to ignore me as a crank and enjoy the novel for all its other attributes.

Gene Wolfe is not just a good propagandist, he is one of the best that I have ever seen. If you are likely to be hostile to his agenda, chances are you just won't get it, and will recommend the story to friends of yours, who might not be hostile to his agenda.

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