

The Sorcerer's House

The Urth list — 10 messages, 8 voices, 15 Mar 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5559>

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Russell Wodell — 15 Mar 2010, 21:59

In F.W. Murnau's silent classic film **Nosferatu**, there is a famous sequence in which the vampire loads a coach with coffins; this is under-cranked (i.e., filmed in fast motion), to suggest supernatural strength and agility, but to modern viewers (or this one, at least) speeded-up motion seems inevitably comic.

I mention this to convey the difficulty I find with Wolfe's latest novel. As in **Castleview** and parts of **Free Live Free**, there is such a plethora of weird incidents, conveyed at really breakneck speed by a typically laconic and unemotional Wolfe narrator, that I find the necessary suspension of disbelief very difficult. Not to spoil anything for those who haven't got their hands on this yet, I'll give only one minor example: in the middle of one tense encounter, the narrator receives an emergency telephone call from his butler's little dog.

Wolfe is very much smarter than I am, so he must anticipate something of this reaction. The story seems to demand being read straight; yet there are, for another example, no less than three sets of identical twins at large, plus an evil dwarf bent on rape (who is explicitly identified with a Dickens character I will not name here).

Does he want us to laugh? I add that Wolfe's few explicit attempts at humour, such as his Sherlock Holmes and Nero Wolfe parodies, have always struck me as leaden failures.

The jacket copy instructs readers who finish the novel to immediately read it again. I'll try, but right now I'm off to Tim Burton's **Alice in Wonderland**.

Russell Wodell

John Watkins — 16 Mar 2010, 02:05 · in reply to James Crossley

Evil Guest, yes. I liked the pulpy feel and the Cthulhu stuff, and I actually liked Cassie (which I think is a minority opinion.)

Pirate Freedom, no. Just a puzzlebox.

On Mon, Mar 15, 2010 at 11:01 PM, James Crossley <ishmael at drizzle.com> wrote:
On 3/15/10 1:59 PM, "Russell Wodell" <wrustle at gmail.com> wrote:

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Russell Wodell

I'm about two-thirds of the way through *Sorcerer's House* and find myself in agreement with much of what you've said. I can't really imagine how this stuff reads to anyone not very familiar with Wolfe's work. The characters seem inconsistently buffoonish and brilliant, and major events are glossed while inconsequential conversations take up paragraphs to all appearances.

As with other late-period Wolfe, the surface reading is off-putting not because of baroque vocabulary or complexity, but for opposite reasons. Everything is played so straight and so (apparently) simplistically that there's next to no pleasure to be had for anyone not racking his brains to keep up with the subtext. Now, I love the puzzling subtext and think the book is worth reading just for that, but what I always really enjoyed about the greatest Wolfean works was the richness available on all levels.

Does anyone on the list really find these late volumes? I'm thinking of *Evil Guest* and *Pirate Freedom*, and even *Memorare*? enjoyable as anything other than puzzleboxes?

James

Fernando Gouvea — 16 Mar 2010, 02:36 · in reply to James Crossley

On 3/15/2010 11:01 PM, James Crossley wrote:

Does anyone on the list really find these late volumes---I'm thinking of *Evil Guest* and *Pirate Freedom*, and even *Memorare*---enjoyable as anything other than puzzleboxes?

Oh, yes! I loved *Memorare* (and didn't find much to puzzle about in it) and also *Pirate Freedom*, which seems to me a fascinating meditation on what freedom is and what morality is all about. *Evil Guest* is sans doute harder, but I don't enjoy the puzzle box version of it nearly as much as I just enjoy it as a story, a romp, a mash-up of ideas and themes from pulp novels. Who cares whether it makes sense?

Fernando

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Fernando Q. Gouvea

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<http://www.colby.edu/~fqgouvea>

Try not to have a good time ... This is supposed to be educational.

-- Charles Schulz

Son of Witz — 16 Mar 2010, 02:51 · in reply to Fernando Gouvea

What I want to know, as always, is why does Wolfe get the crappiest covers? The Sorcerer's House cover is one of the worst yet.

James Crossley — 16 Mar 2010, 03:01 · in reply to Russell Wodell

On 3/15/10 1:59 PM, "Russell Wodell" <wrustle at gmail.com> wrote:
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James

Gwern Branwen — 19 Mar 2010, 21:27 · in reply to James Crossley

On Mon, Mar 15, 2010 at 11:01 PM, James Crossley <ishmael at drizzle.com> wrote:
On 3/15/10 1:59 PM, "Russell Wodell" <wrustle at gmail.com> wrote:

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Russell Wodell

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James

I'm not sure. I just set it down, and while it's more readable than *_Fifth Head of Cerberus_* or *_Peace_* or *_An Evil Guest_*, I don't know whether I enjoyed it or not. I kept waiting for some sort of payoff or complicated plot denouement, and all I got was Lupine fighting Bax by the river and losing.

The esoteric story goes quite by me. I mean, obviously Baxter & George dueled at the end and George died - the last letter is extremely transparent in that respect, especially compared to how subtle the murder & replacement was in *_Fifth Head of Cerberus_*. But that doesn't seem like enough. Wolfe's little endnote all but tells you that some of the letters are out of order and unreliable, yet I don't see any interesting possibilities arising from it.

In that regard, I feel like after reading *_An Evil Guest_*: like I don't have even a clue what the subtext is about. Like in AEG which hinted at clones and time travel, TSH mentions various possibilities - the rival sorcerer Goldwurm off yonder, the far-reaching and paradoxical powers of the triannulus and longlight - but never seems to use them.

gwern

Matthew Keeley — 19 Mar 2010, 21:51 · in reply to Son of Witz

On Mon, Mar 15, 2010 at 10:51 PM, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:
What I want to know, as always, is why does Wolfe get the crappiest covers?
The *Sorcerer's House* cover is one of the worst yet.

I really like the look of the book's interior — ornate and mysterious. But yes, the front cover is a disappointment. His last few books have had pretty good covers, though I wish *Pirate Freedom*

didn't have the damn "Sci-Fi Essentials" marker on the spine.

As for the puzzleboxes versus novels debate, I liked The Sorcerer's House and Pirate Freedom, but don't especially care for An Evil Guest. Memorare was a lot of fun, but I haven't given it too much thought. I've yet to read Soldier of Sidon, but everyone seems to love it, right?

I don't think Pirate Freedom is one of Wolfe's best books, but it surprised me quite a bit — I didn't expect Chris to be anything like the character he ended up. (Being intentionally vague for those who haven't read it)

-Matt

James Wynn — 23 Mar 2010, 21:39 · in reply to Son of Witz

On Mon, Mar 15, 2010 at 9:51 PM, Son of Witz <sonofwitz at butcherbaker.org> wrote:
What I want to know, as always, is why does Wolfe get the crappiest covers?
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At a panel, Wolfe said that the covers on The Book of the New Sun got progressively worse with each cover as the expectations of the publisher increased. He said, no one expected much out of Shadow of the Torturer so they left them alone. But S0tT did well so the Art Director got more involved. As the prospects for each volume improved, the AD's involvement increased. And the quality of the covers decreased with each volume too.

I suspect the publisher had high hopes for the Long Sun/Short Sun series and it showed in the covers.

However, I thought the cover on AEG was fine. The covers on TWK and PF were stodgy & a little boring but the illustrations inside made up for that. The cover on Starwater Strains always attracts attention.

If I had my druthers, I'd like to see a collected works rack of volumes in 60s-style modernist covers. Here's an idea of what I'm talking about:
<http://www.mymodernmet.com/profiles/blogs/25-magnificent-modern-day>

James Wynn — 23 Mar 2010, 22:16 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Fernando said:
Does anyone on the list really find these late volumes?
I'm thinking of Evil Guest and Pirate Freedom, and even Memorare
?enjoyable as anything other than puzzleboxes?

Russell Wodell said:
As in Castlevew and parts of Free Live Free, there is such a plethora of weird incidents, conveyed at really breakneck speed by a typically laconic and unemotional Wolfe narrator, that I find the necessary suspension of disbelief very difficult.

Gwern said:
I'm not sure. I just set it down, and while it's more readable than
Fifth Head of Cerberus or _Peace_ or _An Evil Guest_, I don't know
whether I enjoyed it or not.

Amazon messed up my shipping. The Sorcerer's House is supposedly sitting at my door right now.

I'm almost done with Pirate Freedom. Haven't found a puzzle yet that isn't carefully explained.

Just an historical novel from the POV of a modern narrator. Same for Memorare.

When I first finished Peace, I was surprised with the questions left open. Then I thought about it for a couple days and realized the answers were sitting there in plain view. I have open questions in Fifth Head, but it was certainly readable. It was the novel that caused me to start telling people he was the greatest SF writer ever (after coming away with a positive but not overwhelming opinion after The New Sun).

AEG on the other hand was quite readable. It is only as a puzzle that it failed. If I just sit back and enjoy the world Wolfe created, it's great. If I try to figure stuff out...no so much.

Castleview, I think everyone agrees, is just a Fail. But there's a lesson in that, that I think touches on some of the complaints about Pirate Freedom and others. It is this:

No one asks to see Harry Seldon's math equations. They just accept it. No one asks how Galadriel's bowl works. No one frets over Helen's mother being seduced by a swan. No one asks why Iago hated Othello. The reason why Llwyd ap Cil Coed cursed Pwyll is pretty lame, but who cares?

But when it's Wolfe they've got to have an explanation for a Time Travelling monastery. And who are those bat people? And why did they abduct Able and how is it that there seems to be a twin in Mythgarthr and one on this side? And why did Vivianne want to kill Seth and what's with the talking cat? Meanwhile, Wolfe is saying "This is Faerie! You want explanations?"

In Castle of the Otter/Days Wolfe pointed out that people complained about the hard words. He said, people don't mind gibberish words in SF if they know it's gibberish. "But if you work hard to find just the right word...I should stop before my typewriter gets rusty."

A lot of the so-called puzzles are not puzzles at all. They are just the setting.

James Wynn — 24 Mar 2010, 00:10 · in reply to James Wynn

Fernando, adamantly denies he said this. It was someone else he was responding to. My mistake. Sorry.

Fernando said:

Does anyone on the list really find these late volumes?

I'm thinking of Evil Guest and Pirate Freedom, and even Memorare
"enjoyable as anything other than puzzleboxes"