

Pirate Freedom

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Mar 2010

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James Wynn — 25 Mar 2010, 22:02

Finished Pirate Freedom. Now I can get on to The Sorcerer's House.

Going through the discussions from 18 months ago I only have this to add:

Discussions of the Catholic/Christian morality in Chris-as-pirate are quite beside the point. PF belongs on the shelf next to The Wizard Knight for more reasons than chronology. In TWK, Wolfe's primary impetus IMO was to take the case --as an attorney might--for the chivalric ethos. For example, "What's the deal with To-The-Death dueling over an insult to one's reputation? Isn't that a little extreme?" Able's argument in The Wizard was actually quite compelling.

Here Wolfe makes the case for 17th century pirates -- basing his defense on the New World politics at the time. If you blanched at Chris' justification for taking part in the slave trade, I recommend to you "Democracy in America" (1832) by Alexis de Toqueville where the Frenchman argues quite convincingly that the institution of slavery perniciously enslaves (and impoverishes) the culture that engages in it...making it all but impossible an individual citizen to act piously in that regard. By the same token, Wolfe argues that the entire economy of the New World at the time was based on rank piracy from the Spanish crown down to the Spanish farmers. In becoming a pirate, Chris essentially goes to war against the status quo...or at least the most significant status quo that he encounters: The Spanish.

Also, Wolfe very adroitly shows what other historians have noted: pirate ships were the only true democracies in the world at the time. This in itself is an assault against the politics of the time that I believe honestly inclined Wolfe to the pirates' case. I'm reminded what I heard Wolfe say last year:

"The form of government I favor is Democracy. America is not a democracy. It is a republic. That means that every so often we choose people to rule over us. And once we have, you can bet THEY KNOW IT."

At no time, does Wolfe let us forget the type of people who became pirates. He shows most of them as drunks and reprobates. Violent men who sold their lives cheaply and thought as little of the lives of others. Of course, he also shows that the system they parasitized --although filled with more respected "Christians"-- was every bit as cruel and callous. He also portrays the position of English privateers who saw themselves as patriots.

For half a chapter, there is some post-911 lecturing in Chris' reflections on the assault on Maracaibo and on harsh treatment/torture (here Chris' pirates alternately playing analogous Islamic terrorists and then the CIA). I can certainly understand it if anyone found the narrator's arguments unconvincing, but Wolfe's sympathies cannot be a surprise to anyone.

On the issue of time travel:

It is not likely that Wolfe intended to rationalize Chris' time-travel any more than Baum attempted to rationalize Dorothy's trips to Oz. I when I began reading the novel, I assumed the monastery was a ship that casually sailed through Time in the same way Chris's ships moved from port to port. The ending shows that is not so. The Time travel is something directly connected to Chris (to which his future self is able to hitch a ride). Maybe it is God, or maybe it was his Father, but primarily it is just a way to get a modern narrator into that world and to bring him back to report to us.

J.