

# This week in Google Alerts: review of *The Knight*

The Urth list — 8 messages, 8 voices, 06 Dec 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5806>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

---

Gwern Branwen — 06 Dec 2010, 23:39

<http://weaponsgradeennui.wordpress.com/2010/12/06/the-knight/>

...

He later trades a baby for a dog, offers to kill a youth in order to get a moment alone with Disiri, and “raises a hand” when some woman tries to speak. It seems clear, then, that Able is a bastard. The reader receives no confirmation of this, as all the other characters treat Able as a hero. Women fall in love with him, and his social superiors find him a bold, forthright specimen of manhood. What you get is a heroic story that doesn’t recognize it has an anti-hero at its core.

At this point one begins to wonder if *The Knight* is a parody of the genre from one of its most gifted practitioners. Only if it’s irony, it’s so dry and deadpan it becomes impossible to detect. At which point, is it even funny? (Says the guy who doesn’t get it.) It may be necessary to give Wolfe the benefit of the doubt: *The Knight* fails as a straight-forward fantasy narrative. It’s tediously aimless, never addressing its most interesting elements while focusing on a dead theme, chivalry. But if it is ironic, it’s stealthily brilliant. But that suspense — does Wolfe recognize how big an asshole Able is? ? soon became the novel’s one draw.

...

But so much of these later jumps begin to feel just like gaps. Able is obsessed with Disiri the elf. His love for her motivates everything he does, so much so that motives and decisions do not even exist for him. There is only the action that will bring him closer to Disiri. We see the results of this obsession, but never its cause. Sure, Able tells you he loves Disiri above everything, but the reader never believes it because they never experience it. Again there is a disturbing disjunction between the reported Able and the actual Able, and the narrative never reconciles the two.

...

Inconsistencies like this — in plot scale, logic, and character — are what make *The Knight* so maddening. Even if these aren’t mistakes, they’re distracting enough to be counted as such. I do believe Gene Wolfe is a good writer. You’d just never know it from *The Knight*. Able is a teenage boy, and not a particularly bright one. Generally, Wolfe adheres to this non-literary voice. But sometimes it breaks. Leaving aside obviously incongruous word choices like “purling” to describe a stream, you can see flashes of a genuine lyricism which Able is completely incapable of. These aren’t questions of diction or sophistication, but an artfulness or eloquence of feeling which does not strike me as coming from Able.

...

What I’ve described is an ambivalence that’s pulling the book in two different directions. One thing turns out to be two things at once, which comes off as a headache-inducing double image rather than complexity. There’s Able and Gene Wolfe’s competing voices. There’s something troubling about the main character. The narrative wants to be epic myth and fish out of water story. Ambivalence is the symptom, but the root cause is ambiguity. Readers can handle cognitive dissonance only if the book trains them to. If not, there’s only indeterminacy.

gwern  
<http://www.gwern.net>

---

Gerry Quinn — 07 Dec 2010, 16:42 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: "Gwern Branwen" <gwern0 at gmail.com>  
<http://weaponsgradeennui.wordpress.com/2010/12/06/the-knight/>

Interesting review - not a favourable one, but well thought out. I think he does put a finger on a number of points that many will find problematic and which are certainly odd.

- Gerry Quinn

---

James Wynn — 08 Dec 2010, 03:07 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

<http://weaponsgradeennui.wordpress.com/2010/12/06/the-knight/>

It appears he hasn't read anything else by Wolfe. Granted, "The Wizard Knight" is probably not the novel anyone one would chose as the fulcrum of his body of work...but mostly because it is too stereotypically Wolfe rather than because it falls short of some baseline. But based on what the guy says about Wolfe's ambiguity, perhaps Wolfe is not his sort of author. On the other hand, maybe he should try some of his short stories.

---

Lane Haygood — 08 Dec 2010, 04:59 · in reply to James Wynn

The most annoying thing is how patronizing the guy is about sf literature. He doesn't examine why sf is not "respected" literary fiction, but rather assumes the imposed hierarchy is entirely natural, and lists the accolades given to literary writers, and thus asserts that no sf writer has received one because genre writing is necessarily inferior. Circular logic aside, he forgets that the awards of things like Nobel prizes are political, and with sf's place among the pop and outsider art traditions, it is little wonder it has received the oh-so-special treatment of literary fiction.

I wonder if he is aware that a few hundred years ago all prose was considered so inferior to poetry.

And to complete my rant, I didn't like Able as a narrator either, especially not compared to Severian, but I at least realize my dislike was not in how Able was written, but how Able writes. If the blogger cannot understand the artistry involved in such a flawed narrator, well, I wish him the best of his Cormac McCarthy.

Sent from my iPhone

On Dec 7, 2010, at 9:07 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

<http://weaponsgradeennui.wordpress.com/2010/12/06/the-knight/>

It appears he hasn't read anything else by Wolfe. Granted, "The Wizard Knight" is probably not the novel anyone one would chose as the fulcrum of his body of work...but mostly because it is too stereotypically Wolfe rather than because it falls short of some baseline. But based on what the guy says about Wolfe's ambiguity, perhaps Wolfe is not his sort of author. On the other hand, maybe he should try some of his short stories.

---

Daniel Petersen — 08 Dec 2010, 10:11 · in reply to Lane Haygood

Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:

'If the blogger cannot understand the artistry involved in such a flawed narrator, well, I wish him the best of his Cormac McCarthy.'

Totally agree with your point about his missing the artistry of writing through Able. But just want to say Cormac McCarthy and Gene Wolfe are not mutually exclusive alternatives! It's funny you should mention McCarthy because he's one of the only other authors I read that

stands up very well next to Wolfe for me. Two very challenging and satisfying authors with unbelievable virtuoso prose styles and depth.

-DOJP

---

Matthew Keeley — 09 Dec 2010, 03:44 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

In the comments, the blogger talks about the Tower of Glas being one of the more "videogamey" aspects of TWK. This rather surprised me, as I think there's a lot going on in that particular passage. One of my very first posts here was about the Tower as a combination of a) the Tower of Babel and b) Dante's Purgatory.

<http://lists.urth.net/htdig.cgi/urth-urth.net/2006-September/006826.html>

-Matt

On Wed, Dec 8, 2010 at 5:11 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:  
Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:  
'If the blogger cannot understand the artistry involved in such a flawed narrator, well, I wish him the best of his Cormac McCarthy.'

Totally agree with your point about his missing the artistry of writing through Able. But just want to say Cormac McCarthy and Gene Wolfe are not mutually exclusive alternatives! It's funny you should mention McCarthy because he's one of the only other authors I read that stands up very well next to Wolfe for me. Two very challenging and satisfying authors with unbelievable virtuoso prose styles and depth.

-DOJP

---

Jerry Friedman — 09 Dec 2010, 06:26 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

From: Matthew Keeley <matthew.keeley.1 at gmail.com>  
In the comments, the blogger talks about the Tower of Glas being one of the more "videogamey" aspects of TWK. This rather surprised me, as I think there's a lot going on in that particular

passage. One of my very first posts here was about the Tower as a combination of a) the Tower of > Babel and b) Dante's Purgatory.

<http://lists.urth.net/htdig.cgi/urth-urth.net/2006-September/006826.html>att

No matter what else is going on, climbing an immense stair while being attacked by one flying monster after another strikes me as kind of "videogamey".

On Wed, Dec 8, 2010 at 5:11 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:  
Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:  
'If the blogger cannot understand the artistry involved in such a flawed narrator, well, I wish him the best of his Cormac McCarthy.'

Totally agree with your point about his missing the artistry of writing through Able.

...

I'm not sure I do. I like a lot of TWK, but I think Able's writing is inconsistent, as the blogger said, and I don't see the artistry of that. Unless someone is suggesting that Able is only pretending to write like an American teenager through most, but not all, of /Knight/?

Jerry Friedman

---

Jeff Wilson — 09 Dec 2010, 06:33 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On 12/9/2010 12:26 AM, Jerry Friedman wrote:

\*From:\* Matthew Keeley <matthew.keeley.1 at gmail.com>

\*\*

> In the comments, the blogger talks about the Tower of Glas being one of the more "videogamey"

> aspects of TWK. This rather surprised me, as I think there's a lot going on in that particular

> passage. One of my very first posts here was about the Tower as a combination of a) the Tower of > Babel and b) Dante's Purgatory.

>

<http://lists.urth.net/htdig.cgi/urth-urth.net/2006-September/006826.html>

No matter what else is going on, climbing an immense stair while being attacked by one flying monster after another strikes me as kind of "videogamey".

How about swordfighting an intemrinal series of sea serpents while swimming in full armor?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >