

Gene Wolfe is for Socialists

The Urth list — 19 messages, 12 voices, 16 Dec 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5835>

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James Wynn — 16 Dec 2010, 22:21

Blog recommends The Fifth Head of Cerberus as a science fiction work that socialists should read...and not as a "know thy enemy" recommendation either.

<http://kasamaproject.org/2010/12/15/50-works-of-fantasy-science-fiction-for-socialists/>

Lane Haygood — 16 Dec 2010, 22:35 · in reply to James Wynn

This socialist enjoys his Gene Wolfe.

Sent from my iPhone

On Dec 16, 2010, at 4:21 PM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:
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Ryan Dunn — 16 Dec 2010, 22:39 · in reply to Lane Haygood

And that Gene Wolfe enjoys him some Conservatism.

...ryan

On Dec 16, 2010, at 5:35 PM, Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:
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Sent from my iPhone

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David Stockhoff — 17 Dec 2010, 01:38 · in reply to Lane Haygood

They left out Samuel Delany. ???

On 12/16/2010 5:35 PM, Lane Haygood wrote:
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Urth Mailing List

To post, write urth at urth.net

Subscription/information: <http://www.urth.net>

Jeremy Francis — 19 Dec 2010, 08:38 · in reply to James Wynn

Wishful thinking on behalf of the blog author, I think. Fifth Head is a good post-colonial text but, given how vague and variable (depending on your interpretation) the identity between the colonial powers and the natives is, attributing any socialist purpose is pretty difficult. Further, if you buy Borski's interpretation of the character VRT as being a fairly despicable sort (I do), the issue becomes even more confused. The writer might not pick up on the identity questions as being as difficult as they are, though, which doesn't necessarily fault him (God, if not for this list I wouldn't pick up half of what goes on in Wolfe's books).

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

From: urth-bounces at lists.urth.net [mailto:urth-bounces at lists.urth.net] On Behalf Of James Wynn Sent: Friday, 17 December 2010 6:21 AM To: The Urth Mailing List Subject: (urth) Gene Wolfe is for Socialists

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Pedro Pereira — 19 Dec 2010, 14:31 · in reply to Jeremy Francis

I don't see why is it wishful thinking on the part of the blog author (it's not even the author, this is a list by Mielville for the blog site). Mielville didn't claim Wolfe was Socialist or that his work was socialist bent. What he says is this:

Referring to the Fifth Head of Cerberus:

Wolfe is a religious Republican, but his tragico-Catholic perspective leads to a deeply unglamorized and unsanitized awareness of social reality. This book is a very sad and extremely dense, complex meditation on colonialism, identity and oppression.

Now, everyone interprets Wolfe's work according to his own views, and that is pretty clear in this Urth List too. Mielville may certainly see the work as emphasizing a speculation on colonialism, identity and oppression (since those are possibly the things that most ring a bell to him and touch him) but nowhere do I see any hint that Mielville sees this work as "Socialist", as you seem to imply.

Pedro

From: francisj at iinet.net.au

To: urth at lists.urth.net

Date: Sun, 19 Dec 2010 16:38:37 +0800
Subject: Re: (urth) Gene Wolfe is for Socialists

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From: urth-bounces at lists.urth.net [mailto:urth-bounces at lists.urth.net] On Behalf Of James Wynn
Sent: Friday, 17 December 2010 6:21 AM

Matthew Knight — 20 Dec 2010, 02:23 · in reply to Pedro Pereira

I'm with Pedro on this one. I think the list's author is finding something of value in 5HOC when viewed through a socialist lens, despite recognizing vast differences between Wolfe's perspective and his own. Here's my own sweeping generalization that is likely logically unprovable: most good art can be appreciated from a variety of angles, insofar as the art reflects something true about life and the angles from which the art is viewed are able to discern some kind of truth, even if distorted.

On Sun, Dec 19, 2010 at 7:31 AM, Pedro Pereira <domus_artemis at hotmail.com> wrote:
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Matthew Keeley — 20 Dec 2010, 02:40 · in reply to Matthew Knight

My politics are very far from Mielville's, though I admired the one Mielville story I've read so far. And Mielville admits that not all the writers he cites are anywhere near socialist, or even on the left. Consider his comments on Keith Roberts' Pavane:

These linked stories take place in a present day where Elizabeth I was assassinated and Spain took over Britain. This examines life in a world where a militant feudal Catholicism acts as a

fetter on social and productive functions. Though Roberts was no lefty at all, and you could probably power France on the energy from his spinning grave at being included in this list.

-Matt

On Sun, Dec 19, 2010 at 9:23 PM, Matthew Knight <jacobeiserman at gmail.com> wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 20 Dec 2010, 02:52 · in reply to Matthew Knight

On 12/19/2010 8:23 PM, Matthew Knight wrote:

I'm with Pedro on this one. I think the list's author is finding something of value in 5HOC when viewed through a socialist lens, despite recognizing vast differences between Wolfe's perspective and his own.

It's not such a stretch to see how a general dystopia is also a dystopia for the working people. "5HC" is even a kind of "fiend confessional", where the narrator describes a world where people are openly bought, sold, and rented, how he and his gang of junior exploiters seek to steal and marry their way up the ladder of oppression, only to find that they are just as much exploited by their seniors, and piecemeal removal of the ruling progenitors ultimately changes nothing. (Implying wider-scale revolution is needed.)

From an adventure SF POV, "5HC" is a wonderfully subversive story where the speculative technologies of freedom or liberation from want (FTL, AI, and cloning, in once sense or another) are used instead to reach new places to rule, to make more efficient overseers over the working prisoners, and to make new races of exploiters and exploited for better returns, a good wake-up call to life's realities outside the neighborhoods of most US/UK/Commonwealth readers.

António Marques — 20 Dec 2010, 03:02 · in reply to Matthew Knight

On 20 December 2010 02:23, Matthew Knight <jacobeiserman at gmail.com> wrote:
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I don't know about others, but I enjoy reading people whose ideas are completely at odds with mine, provided they are well developed. (Of course, there is a world of difference between well developed and simply hypertrophied.)

Lane Haygood — 20 Dec 2010, 03:15 · in reply to António Marques

Mieville and I probably agree on quite a bit politically, but I have only found a few of his stories palatable. Then again, while I can respect his talent and prose, I just find a lot of the New Weird "Oh look I have a funny world with odd things and it's all very rundown and poor and disgusting but we will revel in the degradation because it's soooo much of a biting social critique" writers to be less than enthralling.

That said, all I took was that the list explored themes important to socialists, not necessarily that these were books that advocated for any sort of socialist position.

LH

2010/12/19 Ant?nio Marques <antonio at gmail.com>

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Lee Berman — 20 Dec 2010, 04:09 · follows Lane Haygood

Lane Haygood: That said, all I took was that the list explored themes important to socialists, not necessarily that these were books that advocated for any sort of socialist position.

The best explanation I've seen is the suggestion that socialists might generally be against imperialism and colonization.

The funny thing is, the deeper message in 5HoC is that the eventual result of colonization is that the natives will imitate, infiltrate and ultimately subvert the society of the colonizers. An interesting consideration in light of minority and immigrant issues currently broiling in Europe, the USA (more in the past) and what Japan seems to be vigorously trying to avoid.

I could actually see the argument for 5HoC being a must-read for anti-immigrant, neo-nazi skinheads.

David Stockhoff — 20 Dec 2010, 12:24 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

That's right---especially the second paragraph---and it's a theme in BOTNS, where the oppressive effects of this type of rule are clearly seen throughout the Commonwealth, and where the aristocracy are local colonial elites supported by alien technology. Typhon did the same with these technologies when he had them.

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David Stockhoff — 20 Dec 2010, 12:29 · in reply to Lane Haygood

I've read one Mieville and I don't quite get the hype either.

Anyway, I was thinking that it's funny that to most Americans, "very rundown and poor and disgusting" IS socialism. At least if it describes a White neighborhood.

On 12/19/2010 10:15 PM, Lane Haygood wrote:

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On 12/20/2010 6:24 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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Interesting - I'm not as sure as you seem to be that the Exultants are just Urthlings writ large, but mentioning them in conjunction with Typhon, who mentioned his slaves of larger sizes makes me think they are connected. This might explain why Exultant height is variously inherited and the result of a therapy - they're result of different experimental methods to set his favored servants litesrally above the common masses.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

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

David Stockhoff — 21 Dec 2010, 02:27 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Ah, but is not their height then another result of technology? Does it not help them keep the natives down?

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Jeff Wilson — 21 Dec 2010, 03:10 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On 12/20/2010 8:27 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:

Ah, but is not their height then another result of technology? Does it not help them keep the natives down?

still noodling that - obviously their greater size brings immediate physical advantage, and makes it much harder for commoners to impersonate exultants. Perhaps there was a sex imbalance, and the genetically large exultant men didn't have enough women of their stature to survive bearing their larger children, thus the royal jelly treatment and the cloning.

Gerry Quinn — 21 Dec 2010, 15:28 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

Agreed. Mieville made it pretty clear.

Mieville is good, though currently a little over-rated, I think. I read *_Perdido Street Station_* and enjoyed it, but am in no great rush to read the sequels. I also enjoyed *_The City and the City_* which is a pretty interesting take on a bizarre Borgesian world set on present day Earth, with no supernatural element.

- Gerry Quinn

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

From: Matthew Keeley

To: The Urth Mailing List

Sent: Monday, December 20, 2010 2:40 AM

Subject: Re: (urth) Gene Wolfe is for Socialists

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Pedro Pereira — 21 Dec 2010, 21:55 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

I've only read *Kraken*, his latest, and I enjoyed it very much. But then again, I'm partial to giant squids.

Pedro

From: gerryq at indigo.ie

To: urth at lists.urth.net

Date: Tue, 21 Dec 2010 15:28:06 +0000

Subject: Re: (urth) Gene Wolfe is for Socialists

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