

'King Rat' and the abuse of women in Gene Wolfe's stories

The Urth list — 23 messages, 11 voices, 08 Mar 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5987>

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Daniel Petersen — 08 Mar 2011, 22:39

On a wholly different note, have you all read the latest Silk for Calde blog post on Wolfe? A really well reasoned article on this issue of misogyny in Wolfe:

<http://silk4calde.blogspot.com/2011/03/king-rat-and-abuse-of-women-in-gene.html>

<<http://silk4calde.blogspot.com/2011/03/king-rat-and-abuse-of-women-in-gene.html>> DOJP

Jane Delawney — 09 Mar 2011, 00:39 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Sorry can't remember as of this moment if I'm supposed to be top-posting, bottom-posting or interlining, these mailing lists get confusing they all have different rules and I don't have much time.

Hard to believe that there are still peeps out there who will admit in public that they have mistaken the writer's depiction of his/her characters/world for that writer's own personal view on whatever subject.

It's fiction. GW has created worlds with certain societal norms; given the world we see in BOTNS it's not at all surprising to me that women get something of a raw deal in that world. It's kind of a might is right, chivalry duhhhh? what's that? universe. Despite this GW gives us strong, independent female characters who are obviously up against it in their world but who survive and pursue their goals none the less: Agia of course; and Dorcas, a real tough cookie who despite looking like a teenage girl and despite her internal disarray none the less makes her way back from Thrax to Nessus unmolested in time (we are led to assume) to be reunited with her son. Actually a happy ending, if an obliquely signalled one.

(I'd love to have more information about what happened to Cyriaca, who attempted to do much the same thing, but we'll never know).

Oh I could go on, but I do think that the idea that GW is a dyed in the wool misogynist is very, very silly.

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On 08/03/11 22:39, Daniel Petersen wrote:

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David Stockhoff — 09 Mar 2011, 02:39 · in reply to Jane Delawney

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And of course there are those who believe Wolfe is a right-winger, when he is plainly just an American Catholic of his times. Such people used to be considered "liberal," at least in the old sense of the word---no different from anyone else.

It was Catholics who threw fake blood on ICBM silos in the 1970s. Now they picket clinics. But Wolfe is no extremist, just a farm boy and an ex-Marine.

About the only charge he could be found guilty of that I can see is his scarcity of female protagonists/narrators. But it's not that weird in Wolfe's generation---he's a bit older than my own father, fer chrissakes, who was in Korea a few years after hostilities there ended. And he's an SF fanboy. Until a few decades ago, female writers typically used male pseudonyms when wrote male narrators. Male writers rarely wrote female narrators directly.

When Cordwainer Smith (under a different but male name) wrote a novel with a female narrator in the 1940s, this was considered "experimental." Even now, not many writers, male or female, successfully cross the gender divide. Margaret Atwood is one who does it with almost chilling precision.

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Thomas Bitterman — 09 Mar 2011, 02:57 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

On Tue, Mar 8, 2011 at 5:39 PM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen@gmail.com> wrote:

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A couple of flaws stand out from the others.

First, the author of the essay writes: "Wolfe generally avoids using his protagonists or narrators to proclaim his own beliefs". If this is true it is incumbent on the essayist to find other means of defending Wolfe from these charges of misogyny. He does not, but picks a single character (Silk) in a single scene to make his point. The essayist provides inadequate reasons to accept his initial point (after all, there are plenty of good novelists that use their protagonist to proclaim the author's beliefs) and no reasons to accept his example as an exception in Wolfe.

To further muddy the water, in regards to the story under question (King Rat), the essayist provides an excellent example of where the actions in the story are both misogynist and rewarding. The moral of the story would seem to be "misogyny pays", regardless of any (nonexistent in this case) protestations to the contrary by the protagonist (whom, after all, we cannot trust to reflect the author's intentions).

And second, the essayist writes: "We are *meant* to be horrified by the sordid nature of this man...". No contextual evidence is provided to support this reading. This despite an earlier section titled "DEPICTING THE ABUSE OF WOMEN: TEXT AND CONTEXT".

DOJP

David Stockhoff — 09 Mar 2011, 03:06 · in reply to Thomas Bitterman

A little bit of analysis is all that is needed on your second point.

Accepting that the moral of King Rat is that "misogyny pays" ... OK, so what? (So does dramatically entertaining torture and execution, for an expert at the trade, in a certain other

fictional world resembling medieval Europe.)

Well, look that the world King Rat lives in, in which "misogyny pays." Do you like it?

Point made. Wolfe does not support misogyny.

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Jeff Wilson — 09 Mar 2011, 06:20 · in reply to Jane Delawney

On 3/8/2011 6:39 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

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Skipping bathroom trips and not bothering to dress might help you get back on schedule.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

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

Jeff Wilson — 09 Mar 2011, 06:31 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On 3/8/2011 8:39 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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Daniel Petersen — 09 Mar 2011, 08:14 · in reply to David Stockhoff

Clarification: that urth post heavily criticising the Silk for Calde blog post on the abuse of women was *NOT* from me - that is, not from 'DOJP' (Daniel Otto Jack Petersen) - though somehow in the cutting and pasting my initials ended up directly at the bottom of his ('Thomas Bitterman') comments.

Interesting observations though, Thomas. But not exactly a generous reading of Silk for Calde's case. I think Stockhoff's comment effectively answers your second point about 'King Rat'.

DOJP (really this time)

On Wed, Mar 9, 2011 at 3:06 AM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

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Yes, I'm shocked there's not more commentary on Wolfe's *many* sympathetically and admiringly painted strong female characters of a wide variety, rather than worrying over misogyny. (Nettle, Maytera Mint, Maytera Marble, Captain Chris's lover in Pirate Freedom [can't remember her name, misogynist that I am!]) could all be added to the list).

On Wed, Mar 9, 2011 at 2:39 AM, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

And of course there are those who believe Wolfe is a right-winger, when he is plainly just an American Catholic of his times. Such people used to be considered "liberal," at least in the old sense of the word--no different from anyone else.

Glad you can see political shades - some people are so binary about it.

Anyway, if a passionate left-winger like China Mieville can love Wolfe even with what he takes to be Wolfe's 'conservatism', then I think everyone else should be able to remain open minded and appreciate Wolfe as an artist too.

It's not like Wolfe is some neo-Nazi fascist - yeesh! Surely Catholic Wolfe writing almost nothing but tales about 'pagans', sympathetically and intelligently drawn, gets compassion in a pluralistic world far more than his ungenerous readers accusing him of being a crusty reactionary.

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David Stockhoff — 09 Mar 2011, 12:31 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Thanks, I always get that wrong.

On 3/9/2011 1:31 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 3/8/2011 8:39 PM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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Not disagreeing with your message, just wanted to point out that he served in the Army's Seventh Infantry Division rather than the Marines.

Gerry Quinn — 09 Mar 2011, 14:01 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

I agree he gets it about right. Wolfe is unlikely to win any awards for feminist SF, but accusations of misogyny are a bit strong, unless misogyny is defined so widely as to be useless for descriptive purposes..

Definitions of misogyny vary from the literal "hatred of women" to "holding a distasteful opinion about women as a group". Clearly anybody holding an opinion about women as a group is at risk of falling into the latter category for someone, even if the opinion might be considered complimentary by many.

I think the accusations of misogyny stem from two, perhaps three sources. First, Wolfe's female characters are typically not so much in the forefront or as strongly delineated as the males. This may reasonably be excused on the grounds that Wolfe is male; for most authors, writing one's own gender seems likely to be an easier task. I would not harshly criticise a woman author for writing stronger female characters!

Second, Wolfe clearly believes that traditional gender roles reflect certain realities of human nature, and his books tend to reflect that. For many, this belief is so obviously true as to need no debate. For others, to state or imply it is to take a reactionary stance that opposes all that is pure and good according to current progressive thinking. In their view, making such a statement is in itself a thoughtcrime sufficient to warrant the accusation of misogyny, even when the gender roles are just different, without one being intrinsically inferior.

The third source is exemplified by rantings such as those of 'Lepton', who asserts in effect that any mistreatment of women depicted in a book demonstrates the author's misogyny, even when equal or greater mistreatment of men is depicted just as prominently. My guess is that Lepton is actually motivated at base by the second source above, but does not have the wit to express it in coherent form, so he falls back on this. His argument might have some force if Wolfe were wrining porn, or torture porn, but clearly he is not. Wolfe's sex scenes are not lubricious. The most visceral torture scene is that in which Thea's maidservant has her leg flayed, and I find it hard to believe anyone would read it to enjoy the evocation.

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As a side note, it is of course exactly that "different, without one being intrinsically inferior" that is contested. But yes, I think the criticism is classic kneejerkism.

Wolfe is more interested in moral explorations than social ones, to the extent that they can be separated, and he's no Octavia Butler. *There Are Doors* postulates a society that is arguably more female-dominated than our own in some ways, and it's clearly a dystopia. But it's hardly worse than our world, and if it is worse, it's only in the same ways, or analogous/reversed ones, that our world is bad. It's a projection based on misogynist male fears, but not on misogyny per se. It incorporates rules that are false here, but very familiar (being Faery-like).

Neither world is fair; both worlds are run by compassionately depicted flawed humans who do the best they can under the rules.

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Ryan Dunn — 09 Mar 2011, 15:01 · in reply to David Stockhoff

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He said the hardest part about finishing that book was not being able to write her character anymore.

Hardly a misogynistic emotion, I would say. More likely Wolfe is simply more prone to story concepts built around men, no? Not to the express exclusion of writing a female protag, but these gender selections do trend toward matching the gender of the author.

As an aside, whenever a story pops into my head, the hero is usually a troubled young man or boy. I have to force him to be anyone else more often than not.

Any writers on this list have a similar experience with their muse?

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Lane Haygood — 09 Mar 2011, 15:27 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

I tend to write (almost exclusively) male protagonists and narrators. Because I am male. I don't have any direct, subjective experience of being female. I do not think I could write a female narrator from a first-person perspective. Third-person limited is probably the only voice I could use for female protagonists.

I think it would be more misogynistic (and presumptuous) of male writers to attempt to relate female experiences that they clearly do not have, as if saying, "Oh, we really get what it's like to be women, too. We're so smart and better than everyone else."

But that's me.

LH

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Wolfe is more interested in moral explorations than social ones, to the extent that they can be separated, and he's no Octavia Butler. *There Are Doors* postulates a society that is arguably more female-dominated than our own in some ways, and it's clearly a dystopia. But it's hardly worse than our world, and if it is worse, it's only in the same ways, or analogous/reversed ones, that our world is bad. It's a projection based on misogynist male fears, but not on misogyny per se. It incorporates rules that are false here, but very familiar (being Faery-like).

Neither world is fair; both worlds are run by compassionately depicted flawed humans who do the best they can under the rules.

On 3/9/2011 9:01 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:

I agree he gets it about right. Wolfe is unlikely to win any awards for feminist SF, but accusations of misogyny are a bit strong, unless misogyny is defined so widely as to be useless for descriptive purposes..

Definitions of misogyny vary from the literal "hatred of women" to "holding a distasteful opinion about women as a group". Clearly anybody holding an opinion about women as a group is at risk of falling into the latter category for someone, even if the opinion might be considered complimentary by many.

I think the accusations of misogyny stem from two, perhaps three sources. First, Wolfe's female characters are typically not so much in the forefront or as strongly delineated as the males. This may reasonably be excused on the grounds that Wolfe is male; for most authors, writing one's own gender seems likely to be an easier task. I would not harshly criticise a woman author for writing stronger female characters!

Second, Wolfe clearly believes that traditional gender roles reflect certain realities of human nature, and his books tend to reflect that. For many, this belief is so obviously true as to need no debate. For others, to state or imply it is to take a reactionary stance that opposes all that is pure and good according to current progressive thinking. In their view, making such a statement is in itself a thoughtcrime sufficient to warrant the accusation of misogyny, even when the gender roles are just different, without one being intrinsically inferior.

The third source is exemplified by rantings such as those of 'Lepton',

who asserts in effect that any mistreatment of women depicted in a book demonstrates the author's misogyny, even when equal or greater mistreatment of men is depicted just as prominently. My guess is that Lepton is actually motivated at base by the second source above, but does not have the wit to express it in coherent form, so he falls back on this. His argument might have some force if Wolfe were wrining porn, or torture porn, but clearly he is not. Wolfe's sex scenes are not lubricious. The most visceral torture scene is that in which Thea's maidservant has her leg flayed, and I find it hard to believe anyone would read it to enjoy the evocation.

- Gerry Quinn

From: Daniel Petersen <mailto:danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com>

On a wholly different note, have you all read the latest Silk for Calde blog post on Wolfe? A really well reasoned article on this issue of misogyny in Wolfe:

<http://silk4calde.blogspot.com/2011/03/king-rat-and-abuse-of-women-in-gene.html>

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 09 Mar 2011, 16:58 · in reply to Lane Haygood

Lane Haygood wrote:

I tend to write (almost exclusively) male protagonists and narrators.

Because I am male. I don't have any direct, subjective experience of being female.

But SF is all about writing the Other. If you can't write a female character, how can you write an alien?

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Lane Haygood — 09 Mar 2011, 17:00 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

I don't write aliens or elves or dwarves or any of that.

Although it does raise some questions. Is there a universal male or female experience across different species or worlds?

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 9, 2011, at 10:58 AM, "Dan'I Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Lane Haygood wrote:

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--

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 09 Mar 2011, 17:06 · in reply to Lane Haygood

Okay, you don't write any of that. But are all your characters exactly like you? That's the logical consequence of not writing what you don't have "direct, subjective experience of."

On Wed, Mar 9, 2011 at 9:00 AM, Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:
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Lane Haygood wrote:

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--

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Gerry Quinn — 09 Mar 2011, 17:19 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com>

Lane Haygood wrote:

I tend to write (almost exclusively) male protagonists and narrators.
Because I am male. I don't have any direct, subjective experience of being female.

But SF is all about writing the Other. If you can't write a female character, how can you write an alien?

Aliens are easy compared to those inscrutable women!

But seriously, I guess the answer is that aliens will probably not be reading your books just yet, but women might be. An author's depictions of the opposite gender will be held to a higher standard, because some of that gender will be reading it. And indeed, even those of the same gender will be more familiar with the opposite gender than with aliens, robots, talking cats or whatever. So you can get away with much less in the way of infelicities.

- Gerry Quinn

Lane Haygood — 09 Mar 2011, 17:26 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

No, my characters are not like me. I can only imagine what I would be like as a literary character. A bookish, somewhat awkward lawyer with a penchant for self-deprecation and sarcasm? Heaven save us from such characters.

LH

On Wed, Mar 9, 2011 at 11:06 AM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Okay, you don't write any of that. But are all your characters exactly like you? That's the logical consequence of not writing what you don't have "direct, subjective experience of."

On Wed, Mar 9, 2011 at 9:00 AM, Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:

I don't write aliens or elves or dwarves or any of that.

Although it does raise some questions. Is there a universal male or female experience across different species or worlds?

Sent from my iPhone

On Mar 9, 2011, at 10:58 AM, "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com> wrote:

Lane Haygood wrote:

I tend to write (almost exclusively) male protagonists and narrators. Because I am male. I don't have any direct, subjective experience of being female.

But SF is all about writing the Other. If you can't write a female character, how can you write an alien?

--

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Gerry Quinn — 09 Mar 2011, 17:50 · in reply to Lane Haygood

From: Lane Haygood

No, my characters are not like me. I can only imagine what I would be like as a literary character. A bookish, somewhat awkward lawyer with a penchant for self-deprecation and sarcasm? Heaven save us from such characters.

Replace 'lawyer' with 'academic', 'writer' or 'publisher', and you have described the hero of 50% of comedic literary fiction.

- Gerry Quinn

Craig Brewer — 09 Mar 2011, 18:27 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

You should probably put "comedic" in quotes, too....heh

Jeff Wilson — 10 Mar 2011, 05:58 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

On 3/9/2011 12:20 AM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 3/8/2011 6:39 PM, Jane Delawney wrote:

Sorry can't remember as of this moment if I'm supposed to be top-posting, bottom-posting or interlining, these mailing lists get confusing they all have different rules and I don't have much time.

Skipping bathroom trips and not bothering to dress might help you get back on schedule.

I'm sorry, that was unworthy of me.

I'm resigned to people's disdain of expected behavior but I feel sorely provoked for someone allegedly in a hurry to spend extra time and effort to make a point of saying they don't have time to check or the inclination to remember, outside of traffic lanes approaching areas of increased hazard, that English is written left to right and top to bottom.

Marc Aramini — 19 Mar 2011, 23:51 · in reply to Lane Haygood

--- On Wed, 3/9/11, Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:

From: Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) 'King Rat' and the abuse of women in Gene Wolfe's stories To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net> Date: Wednesday, March 9, 2011, 7:27 AM

I tend to write (almost exclusively) male protagonists and narrators. Because I am male. I don't have any direct, subjective experience of being female. I do not think I could write a female narrator from a first-person perspective. Third-person limited is probably the only voice I could use for female protagonists.

I?

But that's me.

LH

On Wed, Mar 9, 2011 at 9:01 AM, Ryan Dunn <ryan at liftingfaces.com> wrote:

As an aside, whenever a story pops into my head, the hero is usually a troubled young man or boy. I have to force him to be anyone else more often than not.

Any writers on this list have a similar experience with their muse?

...ryan

A bit late chiming in on this, but my best fiction can be found in my analysis of Gene's work, posted here throughout the years. (just kidding eh?)

I've found if I let my pen get away from me the characters become psychotic/neurotic sociopaths with a penchant for cruelty, something I certainly would deny?being -?I, who cry at Starman, or even the music to it, or when I am reminded of the Bridge of Birds marrying heaven and earth one day out of the year.

But yeah, I don't think I would ever try a female 1st person. And come, the abuse of women in a story does not a misogynist make. I think Henry Miller is one of the biggest misogynists of our time, but I rarely hear the accusation made. And his fiction wasn't fiction, really. Right up there with accidentally shooting your wife in the head, Burroughs.