

This Week in Google Alerts: more _Home Fires_

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 26 Apr 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5997>

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Gwern Branwen — 26 Apr 2011, 00:25

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<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/spring-books-short-reviews/Content?oid=3640854>

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At the very beginning of *Home Fires*, Skip has difficulty distinguishing between his actual memories and false memories from a dream. After this explicit reference to dreams, the prose combines with Wolfe's typically labyrinthine storytelling to give the text a dreamlike quality. This quality was frequently observed in Wolfe's masterpiece, *The Book of the New Sun* (1983), but while the effect may be similar, in *Home Fires* it is achieved using the completely different style that has characterized the novels Wolfe has published since *The Book of the Short Sun* (2001). The prose is extremely lean, providing only a minimum of description. Although there are short first person interludes, the story is told mostly in a third person that is privy to Skip's thoughts but rarely takes advantage of this access. This style has the effect of focusing the reader's attention almost exclusively on dialogue. It's said that actions speak louder than words, but almost all the important actions in *Home Fires* have many different interpretations. Dialogue is therefore the best window into the characters' souls, and as a defense attorney, this is Skip's natural mode for interacting with the world.

...Every few pages in *Home Fires* something bizarre happens, and although there is a reasonable explanation five (or more often fifty) pages later, by the time the reader has learned it some other strange thing has happened. By doing this, Wolfe is able to inspire moods associated with magical realism while depicting a completely rational world.

...We learn about the novel's world through the smallest possible details. What emerges is a strange mishmash of popular tropes. Most notably, *Home Fires* is set in an energy-poor world reminiscent of Paolo Bacigalupi's fiction. Electricity is fiercely rationed, "bullet trains" reach the "incredible" speed of 70 kilometers per hour (twice as fast as a car, Skip notes), and ships of all sizes are powered by sails instead of engines. Politically, developed countries have merged into three Orwellian superstates controlling North America, Europe, and "Greater Eastasia" with the third world left in grinding poverty. Brains can be scanned, uploaded, and downloaded into other people's bodies, but this technology is rare and only available to the rich. One scene even has zombies in it, albeit in their traditional voodoo role as summoned creatures rather than the apocalyptic variety.

Does it make sense that, in an energy-starved future, humanity would be fighting an interstellar war

with aliens for colony planets? Surely not, but because the novel's world is revealed in such tiny increments, there's not enough substance for us to attack it as unrealistic...Likewise, many readers will roll their eyes when a character mentions that the novel's European Union follows Sharia law, but this huge departure from present circumstances is mentioned exactly once and how it came to pass is left to the reader to decide.

...Although this is a science fiction novel, readers of fantasy will recognize Skip's position in the world from the way other characters treat him. To them, he is someone with power over reality. If they have money, he can sue them and take it. If they have freedom, he can accuse them of a crime and have them imprisoned. If an enemy threatens them, he can protect that enemy from any repercussions. People know what this power makes Skip capable of, but its nature is too arcane for them to be sure of its limitations. Most of all, he has acquired this power by making accommodations to it that suggest he can't possibly be a truly good person. His knowledge of the law makes him a sorcerer, in other words, not a wizard.

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

Allan Anderson — 26 Apr 2011, 00:42 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On Mon, Apr 25, 2011 at 5:25 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:
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I appreciate the Google Alerts; thanks for making them happen! This spurred me to once again check my local library, which is pretty good about keeping up with Wolfe stuff--and they've finally gotten a copy of Home Fires, which is now on my reserve list.

Stuart Hamm — 26 Apr 2011, 00:45 · in reply to Allan Anderson

oh yeah I read the updates...

I have a flight from hell coming up..SFO-JFK-Moscow-Vladivostok...saving Home Fires on my kindle for the trip...

???????? ? ?

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--- On Mon, 4/25/11, Allan Anderson <rubel at goosemoon.org> wrote:

From: Allan Anderson <rubel at goosemoon.org>

Subject: Re: (urth) This Week in Google Alerts: more _Home Fires_ To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net> Date: Monday, April 25, 2011, 5:42 PM

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-----Inline Attachment Follows-----

Matthew Keeley — 26 Apr 2011, 01:00 · in reply to Stuart Hamm

I read the emails too.

Stu — The things the cruise ship in *Home Fires* goes through might well make you grateful for your hell flight. Or not.

-Matt

Gerry Quinn — 26 Apr 2011, 09:15 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

From: "Gwern Branwen" <gwern0 at gmail.com>

On a side note, is anyone reading these emails? I can't tell; often there are no replies. Google Alerts doesn't take all that long to go through, nor picking out ones to link & excerpt, but it does take time.

Definitely yes, Gwern, you always have interesting links! I haven't read *_Home Fires_* yet, so I can't comment on it!

- Gerry Quinn