

This Week in Google Alerts: Will No One Rid Me Of This Troublesome Writer?

The Urth list — 15 messages, 12 voices, 10 May 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6003>

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Gwern Branwen — 10 May 2011, 03:30

Just in time for Gene's birthday celebrations:

<http://foreverness.createforumhosting.com/what-to-do-about-gene-wolfe-t337.html>

This is driving me nuts. I'm far beyond my limit of tolerance for cover-jacket blurbs declaring Gene Wolfe to be "... the greatest writer in the English language alive today." and "... there is nobody who can even approach Gene Wolfe for brilliance of prose, clarity of thought, and depth in meaning." That's Michael Swanwick's embarrassing fawning, which has apparently become required promotional jibber-jabber for every book Wolfe gets published. Other literary critics who don't know anything about science fiction take this at face value, and occasionally regurgitate it with their own variations, completely oblivious to Jack Vance's work. And, readers new to science fiction (or speculative fiction if you prefer) are being grossly misled. They're amazed by the pebble but aren't told about the mountain. Don't get me wrong; I don't dislike Gene Wolfe's writing. I pounce on every new chunk of fiction he comes up with. I'll go so far as to say that his "The Book of the New Sun" is required reading for anyone who believes that some sci-fi is serious literature equal to the best in mainstream fiction. But, Wolfe is derivative. He obviously used Vance as a starting point, whereas Vance developed his literary voice independently. Vance is authentic and original, and Wolfe is the brilliant student. It's true that Wolfe's most recent work seems to be moving in a direction that is more of Wolfe himself and less of Vance's style and technique. Hopefully, Wolfe's future works will be ships with a wind in their sails that flows from Wolfe's lungs alone. But we're still being pounded over the head with the uninformed blather of Swanwick, et al. What to do? Who will sound the trumpet for Vance? Who will illuminate Vance's status as the progenitor?

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<http://www.gwern.net>

Matthew Keeley — 10 May 2011, 03:46 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

What would happen if the post's writer discovered William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land*, a novel about a world where the sun has **already** gone out?

-Matt

Lane Haygood — 10 May 2011, 05:22 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

This is just demonstrably false to boot! Vance's prose, his diction, and his writing style are highly distinct from Wolfe's. I mean, the only line of intersection is that they each chose a certain thematic motif (a dying world) for a few of their stories. But Wolfe's writing tends to be more dialogue-heavy and witty, whereas Vance eschews dialogue in favor of lyricism and structured prose. The "Dying Earth" stories are lighter and more mythic (not to mention fairly straightforward), whereas Wolfe's tend to be labyrinthine and multi-layered.

I enjoy both, but to compare Wolfe to Vance is to compare apples to oranges.

That said, aren't all writers at least somewhat derivative? Talk to any of them and they can list a whole line of authors that influenced their development. But there's a clear difference between, "Oh yeah, Borges was totally influential on my work" and "Hey guys, I totally rewrote a Borges story with spaceships and swords."

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Jack Smith — 10 May 2011, 09:47 · in reply to Lane Haygood

Wolfe is derivative? Yes, but so is Shakespeare.

On Tue, May 10, 2011 at 1:22 AM, Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com> wrote:
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Daniel Petersen — 10 May 2011, 11:17 · in reply to Jack Smith

Yeah, this just looks like a red herring to me. Wolfe is the 'brilliant student' of far more writers than Vance, many of the others being 'mainstream'. Even if we were to only consider fantasy pre-cursors, just the mere fact of mixing something of Vance with healthy doses of the likes of Hodgson and Lovecraft already creates something wonderfully new and fresh (something that some will far prefer to Vance it has to be said).

It's no secret that Wolfe almost never invents any new s.f/fantasy scenario

- his originality is all in the exquisite craft and artistry of the prose itself, the utterly weird sleight-of-hand form of storytelling, and the dense depth of psychology and narratology (all of which have their derivations - but Wolfe truly sounds, in the thick of his narrative, like no one else).

Having said that, I actually agree that the oft-repeated (re-bleated) blurbs can be rather misleading. Gene Wolfe will live up to his praise in a way that probably many (most?) people just won't 'get'. And I don't necessarily blame them. It just depends on your tastes and

backgrounds. I think the 'problem' is that some of us have been willing to follow Wolfe into and through his literary labyrinth and thereby been shown wonders that have resonated so deeply and lastingly that we can't heap enough praise on him. This is understandable but perhaps unhelpful and misleading to the non-initiate. Wolfe needs blurbs that will perhaps rather more cautiously entice readers into his rare brew if they they can be convinced to pay the fee (because, frankly, reading Wolfe is costly, as most of us will admit).

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David Stockhoff — 10 May 2011, 11:40 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

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This makes no sense. All writers derive.

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Jerry Friedman — 10 May 2011, 14:28 · in reply to Lane Haygood

From: Lane Haygood <lhaygood at gmail.com>

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I must have missed the lyricism in the Dying Earth series, but I do remember a good deal of stylized dialogue.

The "Dying Earth" stories are lighter and more mythic (not to mention fairly straightforward), whereas Wolfe's tend to be labyrinthine and multi-layered.

And Wolfe brings in religion and philosophy, which are missing from the Dying Earth, and makes you feel that he's talking about a world instead of a sequence of stage sets.

But the most important difference to me is the characters. Wolfe's characters are varied and have many resemblances to people (robots, aliens, etc.). Almost all the characters in the Dying Earth books are simple mechanisms of selfishness distinguished, if at all, by their different obsessions. That's why, when I tried to find out what people saw in those books, I had to force my way through them.

I enjoy both, but to compare Wolfe to Vance is to compare apples to oranges.

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Yes, I think Vance owes something to Dunsany and Cabell and probably others I haven't read (A. Merritt?).

Jerry Friedman

James Wynn — 10 May 2011, 14:48 · in reply to David Stockhoff

All *comprehensible* art is derivative. Language is metaphor and metaphor is by definition derivative.

Irony is derivative. Homage is derivative. Response is derivative. Humor is derivative. Genre is derivative. Surrealism is derivative. Dadaism is derivative. Form is derivative.

J.

On 5/10/2011 6:40 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:
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Sergei SOLOVIEV — 10 May 2011, 15:03 · in reply to David Stockhoff

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James B. Jordan — 10 May 2011, 15:10 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

At 06:17 AM 5/10/2011, you wrote:

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Certes. In the New Sun, there is a lot of Proust's In Search of Lost Time.

JBJordan (formerly Nutria)

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Craig Brewer — 10 May 2011, 15:14 · in reply to Sergei SOLOVIEV

Of course it's true that all writers "derive". But what people really mean (I assume) is that a writer is piggy-backing on an idea/style that another writer made popular or executed in a particularly excellent way.

The problem here is that the "dying sun" motif is only one part of New Sun, and it's not even what makes the book(s) exceptional. The opinion was obviously just written by someone who loves Vance, as do many of us on the list, and they're venting because Wolfe gets more praise. Understandable, even if the criticism is misplaced. I don't think anyone sees this as a valid criticism of Wolfe...the comments on that post seem to say as much, too.

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Lane Haygood — 10 May 2011, 15:19 · in reply to Craig Brewer

I find it odd that someone would assume Wolfe gets more praise than Vance. Certainly when triple-A authors put out a Wolfe-inspired short story collection somewhere along the lines of "Songs of the Dying Earth" then we can claim Vance isn't getting his due as a sf progenitor.

LH

(In short, go read "Songs of the Dying Earth," edited by George R.R. Martin!)

On Tue, May 10, 2011 at 10:14 AM, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:
Of course it's true that all writers "derive". But what people really mean (I assume) is that a writer is piggy-backing on an idea/style that another writer made popular or executed in a particularly excellent way.

The problem here is that the "dying sun" motif is only one part of New Sun, and it's not even what makes the book(s) exceptional. The opinion was obviously just written by someone who loves Vance, as do many of us on the list, and they're venting because Wolfe gets more praise. Understandable, even if the criticism is misplaced. I don't think anyone sees this as a valid criticism of Wolfe...the comments on that post seem to say as much, too.

On May 10, 2011, at 10:03 AM, Sergei SOLOVIEV <soloviev at irit.fr> wrote:

I read Vance partly because he was mentioned with great respect by Gene Wolfe as one of the writers who influenced the New Sun series (with his "Dying Earth"). Honestly, I was disappointed by literary quality of his work. The characters are in general very schematic, the language is sometimes interesting but dialogues are extremely artificial, nobody does speak like this, the composition very linear (Vance does use most of the time "travelogue" plan - "Ports of call" and travels of Cugel are typical examples). It doesn't mean that there is no impressive episodes/ideas - and great deal of intelligent irony that I like. I liked "Guyal of Sphere" for example.

Best

Sergei

David Stockhoff wrote:

Writer _X_ is not derivative?

Writer _Y_ is derivative?

This makes no sense. All writers derive.

On 5/9/2011 11:30 PM, Gwern Branwen wrote:

Just in time for Gene's birthday celebrations:

<http://foreverness.createforumhosting.com/what-to-do-about-gene-wolfe-t337.html>

This is driving me nuts. I'm far beyond my limit of tolerance for cover-jacket blurbs declaring Gene Wolfe to be "... the greatest writer in the English language alive today." and "... there is nobody who can even approach Gene Wolfe for brilliance of prose, clarity of thought, and depth in meaning." That's Michael Swanwick's embarrassing fawning, which has apparently become required promotional jibber-jabber for every book Wolfe gets published. Other literary critics who don't know anything about science fiction take this at face value, and occasionally regurgitate it with their own variations, completely oblivious to Jack Vance's work. And, readers new to science fiction (or speculative fiction if you prefer) are being grossly misled. They're amazed by the pebble but aren't told about the mountain. Don't get me wrong; I don't dislike Gene Wolfe's writing. I pounce on every new chunk of fiction he comes up with. I'll go so far as to say that his "The Book of the New Sun ?"

i

?s required reading for anyone who believes that some sci-fi is serious literature equal to the best in mainstream fiction. But, Wolfe is derivative. He obviously used Vance as a starting point, whereas Vance developed his literary voice independently. Vance is authentic and original, and Wolfe is the brilliant student. It's true that Wolfe's most recent work seems to be moving in a direction that is more of Wolfe himself and less of Vance's style and technique. Hopefully, Wolfe's future works will be ships with a wind in their sails that flows from Wolfe's lungs alone. But we're still being pounded over the head with the uninformed blather of Swanwick, et al. What to do? Who will sound the trumpet for Vance? Who will illuminate Vance's status as the progenitor?

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António Pedro Marques — 10 May 2011, 15:36 · in reply to Craig Brewer

Craig Brewer wrote (10-05-2011 16:14):

Of course it's true that all writers "derive". But what people really mean (I assume) is that a writer is piggy-backing on an idea/style that another writer made popular or executed in a particularly excellent way.

The problem here is that the "dying sun" motif is only one part of New Sun, and it's not even what makes the book(s) exceptional. The opinion was obviously just written by someone who loves Vance, as do many of us on the list, and they're venting because Wolfe gets more praise. Understandable, even if the criticism is misplaced. I don't think anyone sees this as a valid criticism of Wolfe...the comments on that post seem to say as much, too.

Moreover, Gene Wolfe doesn't ride on other people's themes' success. He willfully reuses concepts and settings, but not for their success or for being unable to create his own.

Nor are those concepts and settings the reason people are drawn to his work, nor why some of them express strong admiration of it.

And he's the first to point out the people he's indebted to.

James Wynn — 10 May 2011, 15:59 · in reply to Sergei SOLOVIEV

Pleasure I get from The Dying Urth stories is the irony and subtle humor. It's the way that whenever Cugel is about to be outsmarted, he refers to himself as "Cugel the Clever". It's the way certain plot details are described rather than explained.///// Terry Pratchett owes as much to Vance as Wolfe, but I can see that Wolfe learned more from Vance than the plot element of a dying sun.

J.

On 5/10/2011 10:03 AM, Sergei SOLOVIEV wrote:
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of Cugel are typical examples). It doesn't mean that there is no impressive episodes/ideas - and great deal of intelligent irony that I like. I liked "Guyal of Sphere" for example.

Best

Sergei

James Wynn — 10 May 2011, 18:58 · in reply to James Wynn

The Dying EARTH of course... heh heh

On 5/10/2011 10:59 AM, James Wynn wrote:
Pleasure I get from The Dying Urth stories [...]