

# completed version - Donaldson, Moorcock etc

The Urth list — 10 messages, 6 voices, 08 Aug 2011

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Sergei SOLOVIEV — 08 Aug 2011, 17:11

(by error I have sent unfinished message)

This is the completed version -

Dear Jeff,

I didn't write that the heroes (or anti-heroes) - Covenant and Elric - were repulsive to me. I wrote that the books were (their authors writing style). I don't remember to be shocked by the "rape scene" from Donaldson (I was not a teen), but I remember an intense dislike of how the book was written.

I glanced at the "Elric". I have to admit that this time (after many years) my dislike was much less, I was just bored.

I'll try to explain. There is no doubt that Moorcock is quite an erudite. But I don't like how he uses his erudition. To me it is like a badly done theatric background - the pieces of this and that squeezed into some rough picture.

It is told that Elrik is in some way antagonist to the heroes of Tolkien. To Conan, that you mention, as well.

But Tolkien used his knowledge of history, folklore, languages to create depth, what is most impressive in his "Lord of the Rings" is more than 10000 years of history subtly influencing the present.

Howard was young and while his knowledge of history, geography etc is sometimes ridiculous, his books thrive with vital energy, that is completely absent in Moorcock's...

My impression was that Moorcock simply borrows the elements for his story.

- Melnibone looks (from the point of view of history and background) as Numenor in the "Lord of the Rings".

- Its labyrinth is borrowed from the stories about Atlantis.

- Master torturer in Elric story - hybrid of torture device from "In the penal colony" by Kafka:  
an elaborate torture and

execution device that carves the sentence of the condemned prisoner on his skin in a script before letting him die (Wiki) and some stories about Chinese torture.

- The idea that the (future) villain is an Albino is also an n-th reuse of similar ideas (great literary villain - Uriah Heep by Dickens, there were many villains of that type afterwards - recent - Malfoys in Potter stories)

- It seems that he uses some provocative symbolism without any real need (his "pulsing cavern" reminds very much an anatomic description of human or animal colon), I think it is also borrowed from medieval symbolism (bowels of the devil), but used clumsily.

- Gold-plated ships - it is just not practical.

Of course my remarks are subjective, I think it is bad (artless) use of interesting sources - that his sources are more interesting than the result.

All the best

Sergei Soloviev

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Gerry Quinn — 09 Aug 2011, 11:24 · in reply to Sergei SOLOVIEV

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

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from "In the penal colony" by Kafka:

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Wolfe also pinched that idea! It is one of the devices shown by Gurloes to Thecla before her  
excruciation, though he mentions that it does not work.

- Gerry Quinn

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Sergei SOLOVIEV — 09 Aug 2011, 16:55 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

Gerry Quinn wrote:

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does not work.

- Gerry Quinn

Exactly! And look how Wolfe uses it. In his book it is part of "historical lecture" by Gurloes, so, it is a token of immense depth of time. It is woven into the subtle fabrics of references to our own time, like the photograph of lunar landing (or maybe its painted copy) cleaned by Rudesund, like the Pope's translation of Homer used in Chrasmologic writings and many others. (Notice also that the machine breaks in the end of Kafka's story, and Gurloes says it does not work.) The meanings and references play beautifully.

And if we take Moorcock, the use is quite the opposite. He takes a rich deep story and "flattens" it to suit in some very straightforward way his purposes. So his torturer is just a sadist, and he

borrowes the image, using only the idea of extreme cruelty.

It comes to my mind to compare three torturers: Gurloes (complex man who tries to look simple brute) - by Wolfe; Noliet in the Inversions by Banks who is a real brute but his brutishness is described with great skill by Banks, so he has interesting human dimension (he tries to use the teeth of his victims as his own prostheses) and the main hero Vosill even tries to negotiate with him because she cannot believe that he may be truly so brutish; and Dr. Jest of Moorcock borrowed from other contexts and transformed into one-dimensional sadist. I think the Wolfe's is the best on literary scale and Moorcock's the worst (no talent, no imagination and even no honest references to the sources).

Another example (I have forgotten to mention it) is that Arioeh is borrowed from "The Lord of the Flies" by Golding (he comes as a fly to Elric) and the whole tradition concerning Beelzebub, and again flattened very much (though at least he is not one-dimensional character).

I still had no time to analyse Donaldson.

Best

Sergei Soloviev

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David Duffy — 09 Aug 2011, 22:40 · in reply to Sergei SOLOVIEV

On Tue, 9 Aug 2011, Sergei SOLOVIEV wrote:

And if we take Moorcock, the use is quite the opposite. He takes a rich deep story and "flattens" it to suit in some very straightforward way his purposes.

Moorcock's more complex works are the Cornelius novels, *\_Byzantium Endures\_* series, *\_Gloriana\_*, *Dancers At the End of Time\_*, *\_Behold the Man\_*, *\_Warlord of the Air\_* and its sequels. The Elric stuff was written at great speed, and it shows (he would write a short novel in three days ;)).

So, I don't think it's quite a fair comparison. The allusiveness and strangeness of the Cornelius novels is a better place to start, if you are looking for depth.

Cheers, David Duffy.

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Matthew Keeley — 10 Aug 2011, 00:03 · in reply to David Duffy

On Tue, Aug 9, 2011 at 6:40 PM, David Duffy <davidD at qimr.edu.au> wrote:

Moorcock's more complex works are the Cornelius novels, *\_Byzantium Endures\_* series, *\_Gloriana\_*, *Dancers At the End of Time\_*, *\_Behold the Man\_*, *\_Warlord of the Air\_* and its sequels. The Elric stuff was written at great speed, and it shows (he would write a short novel in three days ;)).

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Cheers, David Duffy.

I mostly agree with this statement, though I'm not sure if I'd include the Warlord of the Air/Nomad of the Time Streams books among Moorcock's "more complex." Moorcock has stated he wrote them as didactic novels; his protagonist moves through a variety of alternate worlds

and encounters a number of straw men societies, none of which really convince.

On the other hand, the Warlord books are great if you're ever in the mood for a steampunk alternate history featuring mecha-Stalin vs. the a-bomb...

-Matt

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Craig Brewer — 10 Aug 2011, 01:38 · in reply to Sergei SOLOVIEV

And Moorcock's also said on many occasions that the Elric stories were exercises in a kind of pastiche of reversals. Recognizing elements that are lifted from other works and then used in certain generically deliberate and/or artificial ways isn't so much recognizing plagiarism as intention.

The fact that they've become his most famous books is something of a disappointment to him in some of his interviews, too (despite the fact that he keeps writing them...we all gotta eat, I guess). And they do read better when you think of them as quickly written thought experiments rather than "epic fantasy." In the end, he's kind of, "Hey, what if Conan was smart, over-cultured, and weak but had the same adventures?" At a certain point, the premise plays itself out, but I still enjoy the premise for what it was.

And I'm with the others that his literary merit is MUCH better judged according to the Cornelius books. The End of Time series is my personal favorite.

On Aug 9, 2011, at 11:55 AM, Sergei SOLOVIEV <soloviev at irit.fr> wrote:  
Gerry Quinn wrote:

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Best

Sergei Soloviev

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David Duffy — 10 Aug 2011, 02:26 · in reply to Matthew Keeley

On Tue, 9 Aug 2011, Matthew Keeley wrote:

On the other hand, the Warlord books are great if you're ever in the mood for a steampunk alternate history featuring mecha-Stalin vs. the a-bomb...

It could be argued that he is partly responsible for the steampunk glut.

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Craig Brewer — 10 Aug 2011, 02:45 · in reply to David Duffy

As long as we're all in a non-Wolfe-talking mood, does anyone have any recommendations for GOOD steampunk? I've only read a spattering (Vandermeer, Mieville, and random others), but I'd be interested to know of things that people enjoy that weren't written just to fit a fad.

(One note: from my largely inattentive observation: most of the really interesting steampunk stuff happens in sculpture and gadgetry, not writing. Is that valid?)

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David Duffy — 10 Aug 2011, 03:20 · in reply to Craig Brewer

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I quite like The Difference Engine, but get the impression I am in a minority there. Blaylock is often included as a 'punk, but at the more fantastical end. Christopher Priest's The Space Engine isn't strictly speaking, or is it?

David Duffy.

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Jerry Friedman — 10 Aug 2011, 04:52 · in reply to Craig Brewer

From: Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com>

...

And I'm with the others that his literary merit is MUCH better judged according to the Cornelius books. The End of Time series is my personal favorite.

That is, the four Cornelius books in /The Cornelius Chronicles/. I deny that I ever read /The Cornelius Chronicles, Volume 2/ (and the second Amber series). Also, I'd say you have to read all four of the books in TCC, even when things get really strange (like the surrealistic version of /Stand on Zanzibar/). Otherwise you might think you were just in for a rewrite of the Elric books in Ladbroke Grove, or so I'm told. Though you might be able to make do with the introduction by John Clute.

Jerry Friedman