

Wolfe Vindicated Again!

The Urth list — 6 messages, 3 voices, 07 Dec 2011

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6135>

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Dec 2011, 16:59

It appears that there may be something to the inheritance of acquired characteristics:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/12/111205102713.htm>

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

António Pedro Marques — 16 Dec 2011, 15:53 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

I think I should say what I think regarding GW's science (and history and mythology).

Some apparently believe GW to be some sort of expert physicist and biologist (and historian, and mythographer), who cannot make any mistakes or ignore any facts. That's obviously untenable. NOBODY can know everything Mankind knows today, and never make mistakes, and even if one could, Mankind itself has not progressed that far in its knowledge that such a person would never err. To believe that current knowledge is unshakeable and its progress will be merely gradual from now on is recentist. It really is the same as all those data tapes in early sf. Now, what people don't usually realise is that so-called hard sf is itself a matter of abundant data tapes. Then there's the opposite - people who consider that since current knowledge is never complete, then anything goes when devising their sceneries.

I don't think GW falls into either trap. For one thing, his stories are sf because sf frees him to do what a 'naturalist(ic)' framework wouldn't allow. Otherwise, they might do without the sf element. Yes, sometimes he is interested in exploring the real-sf possibilities of sf (as opposed to just the freedom from 'naturalism'), but that's not imo a very significant part of his work. Now, how does he cope with the problem of recentism vs absurdism? Quite well, I think - he does what he thinks can be reasonably defended. He doesn't try to make it defensible, nor offer tedious explanations for it; he just avoids that which would be awkward to defend. So if he wants an item that current knowledge has no way of producing, what he has to look into is whether it is possible that a breakthrough in the understanding of the Universe will make it achievable. If so, why not use it? (Conversely, Ray Cummings's Insect Invasion or tGitGA, while interesting, are simply too difficult to defend - but then RC's objectives were different from GW's.)

GW doesn't mean to teach science or history. He uses them carefully in building his world(s). He takes care not to do anything with them that can be absolutely invalidated. For instance, the Sun's visibility from Blue may or may not agree with current astrophysics, but our knowledge of astrophysics is not only seriously in its infancy, but the only way it will progress significantly is if most of it is wrong [and we come to be able to observe more of the Universe than it allows us today].

As to what hard sf really should be, I think some of AC Clarke is a good example - and it has nothing to do with projecting current knowledge and technology. It's rather having stories driven (at least in part, of course) by the logical outcome of actions and starting conditions, as

understood by a science that may or may not be our own but is consistent. RVwM is a good example of this, imo, if one excepts the part about the 3-limbed aliens (which however was integral to the story, but I think the book would be better if the episode had been left out - the implication was there anyway, and one might think of better alternatives than the one presented).

Jeff Wilson — 16 Dec 2011, 16:43 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

On 12/16/2011 9:53 AM, António Pedro Marques wrote:

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However, it is possible for an educated person to stay abreast of general established science, available popular science literature, and the abstracts of past and new developments in their fields of interest. I would hope that the science relevant to a science fiction story they plan to sell would count as within those fields of interest.

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Star visibility isn't astrophysics, it's just plain physics. We have very well worked out distances and apparent vs absolute magnitudes of nearby stars and have had for over a century now. This of course does not restrict a writer of fiction, but a writer of believable science fiction needs to have a bit more care with its inherent appeal to the authority of science for suspending disbelief and at least suggest by implication a reason for deviating from science as the astute reader is likely to know it.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at clueland.com
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Which is different from being an expert in those fields, able to come up with ideas the researchers themselves aren't.

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I'll have to disagree here, both on the existence of an appeal and the restrictions imposed by current knowledge. Otoh, there are cryptic references to 'far away' worlds, and reasonable evidence that the narrator may not be interpreting facts correctly, so there.

Jeff Wilson — 16 Dec 2011, 17:33 · in reply to António Pedro Marques

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An unreliable narrator is a start, but he has to be shown to be unreliable in certain ways that allow the deviation but not in others, lest the story lose coherence entirely and dissolve into aimless fabulation.

How can you have science fiction without authoritative science?

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at clueland.com
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You don't? Some people think that not only an sf writer has to know everything there is to know about the plausibility of time travel and green men, but also be able to explain to an unlimited degree of precision how those things are to come about.

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What's 'scienceless science fiction' got to do with what I wrote?

What appeal to the authority of science to suspend disbelief is there in the narrator's assessment of the position of the Red Sun in his night sky? With daily news about galaxies that look older than possible, neutrinos that may or may not travel ftl and 'habitable' planets 600ly away which nobody had seen before, what's a red dot in the sky?

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What's authoritative science? Where is it in sf?