

Sorcerer's House Comment

The Urth list — 20 messages, 12 voices, 03 May 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6247>

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Fred Kiesche — 03 May 2012, 20:18

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/books/review/neil-gaiman-shares-his-reading-habits.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all

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What was the last truly great book you read?

?The Sorcerer's House, by Gene Wolfe, amazed me. It was such a cunning book, and it went so deep. A foxy fantasy about a house that grows, with chapters that are the Greater Trumps of a tarot deck.

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F.P. Kiesche III "Ah Mr. Gibbon, another damned, fat, square book. Always, scribble, scribble, scribble, eh?" (The Duke of Gloucester, on being presented with Volume 2 of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.) Blogging at The Lensman's Children (<http://theeternalgoldenbraids.blogspot.com/>).

Gwern Branwen — 03 May 2012, 20:44 · in reply to Fred Kiesche

On Thu, May 3, 2012 at 4:18 PM, Fred Kiesche <godelescherbach at gmail.com> wrote:

?The Sorcerer's House, by Gene Wolfe, amazed me. It was such a cunning book, and it went so deep. A foxy fantasy about a house that grows, with chapters that are the Greater Trumps of a tarot deck.

Hm, we didn't think it was very deep - Bax was indeed the evil twin who by the end murders his brother and usurps his wife and possessions, just like Emlyn was the evil twin and leyuan misunderstood. Maybe we missed something by not looking at the Greater Trumps?

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

Fred Kiesche — 03 May 2012, 20:46 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

Or...we have read a lot of Wolfe. Gaiman is talking to an audience who probably has never heard of Wolfe. So he might be aiming his remarks to get folks interested and actually pick up a book.

On Thu, May 3, 2012 at 4:44 PM, Gwern Branwen <gwern0 at gmail.com> wrote:
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Daniel Petersen — 03 May 2012, 21:00 · in reply to Fred Kiesche

Aside from some of his own great stuff, I'll never stop liking and being grateful to Neil for bigging up my two faves: Wolfe and Lafferty. From the same interview:

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

As a teenager I wrote to R. A. Lafferty. And he responded, too, with letters that were like R. A. Lafferty short stories, filled with elliptical answers to straight questions and simple answers to complicated ones.

He was a sui generis writer, the oddest and most frustratingly delightful of American tall-tale tellers. Not a lot of people have read him, and even fewer like what he wrote, but those of us who like him like him all the way. We never met.

The last time I wrote to Lafferty, he had Alzheimer's and was in a home in Oklahoma, shortly before his death, and I do not believe he read or understood the letter, but it made me feel like I was doing something right by writing it and sending it.

-DOJP

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nate jarvis — 04 May 2012, 12:56 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Was it 2 sets of twins in TSH? Or did they send one human and a changeling back to the real world and keep one human and a changeling in faerie (ie, is Bax a changeling, or a human, and if he's a human is one the twins from faerie his brother and the other a changeling meant to pass as him?)

Nate.

Antonin Scriabin — 04 May 2012, 13:38 · in reply to nate jarvis

Neil Gaiman rubbed shoulders with a bunch of big writers (Wolfe, Lafferty, Douglas Adams). I have liked his stuff for the most part, although American Gods and Neverwhere weren't anywhere near as good as Sandman or Fragile Things.

On Fri, May 4, 2012 at 8:56 AM, nate jarvis <natejarv at gmail.com> wrote:
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Craig Brewer — 04 May 2012, 14:26 · in reply to Antonin Scriabin

I tend to agree. He always seems best when he's doing something oblique, like collaborating or writing for varied formats. I don't think that's a bad thing because parts of Sandman stand up with the best sf writing. But he's always described himself more as a storyteller in something of an old fashioned sense rather than "a writer," and I think that's apt.

I also think of him as a channeler of other things to broader audiences. That's not only because he always promotes people I like, but even stuff like Sandman brought some "literary" stuff to comics, and it brought non-comics readers to graphic novels, etc. He makes people who don't like genre stuff...like genre stuff, and that's a good thing. He also just seems to me like a guy who "gets it" in all the right ways, both in terms of knowing what's good (anything he edits is worth the price) and in knowing what he does best for the most part.

On May 4, 2012, at 8:38 AM, Antonin Scriabin <kierkegaurdian at gmail.com> wrote:
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Nate.

Darth Ed — 04 May 2012, 14:33 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On May 3, 2012, at 4:44 PM, Gwern Branwen wrote:
Maybe we missed something by not looking at the Greater Trumps?

I think so. I'd certainly be interested in the definitive Tarot reading of TSH. I'm not sure anyone has quite cracked it yet, other than perhaps Gaiman.

Gaiman has mentioned the similarities to the Tarot before in his review of TSH on GoodReads (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/97189634>), and it's been discussed on this mailing list by Dave Stockhoff, Dave Tallman, and others. Dave Tallman got the furthest, I think. Relevant links:

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2010-April/014621.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2010-April/014624.html>

<http://lists.urth.net/pipermail/urth-urth.net/2010-April/014631.html>

But, alas, the topic is dropped just as the list starts to make some progress.

Background for those who missed the Tarot discussion the first time:

Wikipedia says: "The Major Arcana (greater secrets), or trump cards, consists of 22 cards without suits: The Fool, The Magician, The High Priestess, The Empress, The Emperor, The Hierophant, The Lovers, The Chariot, Strength, The Hermit, Wheel of Fortune, Justice, The Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, The Devil, The Tower, The Star, The Moon, The Sun, Judgement, and The World."

There are 44 letters/chapters in TSH, exactly twice the number of cards in the Major Arcana. Two of the letters (letters 22 and 23) have the same title ("Silver Bullets"). Presumably, we have a double deck of the Major Arcana with each letter can be associated with one of the cards of the Major Arcana in some fashion. Also, the repetition of "Silver Bullets" at exactly the midpoint of the book implies a thematic mirroring relationship to the letters on either side of the midpoint.

Hope this spurs some additional analysis,
Ed

My WolfeWiki profile: <http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=Profiles.DarthEd>

Marc Aramini — 04 May 2012, 14:41 · in reply to Darth Ed

--- On Fri, 5/4/12, Darth Ed <darthed77 at gmail.com> wrote:
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I've never been convinced that Gaiman is necessarily a great interpretive analyst. His strengths are elsewhere.

Daniel Petersen — 04 May 2012, 15:30 · in reply to Craig Brewer

I think **Anansi Boys** is his best novel, far tighter than **American Gods** (you can feel a lot of both Wolfe's and Lafferty's influences in those two novels I think). He is, though, like you've noted he acknowledged, a better 'storyteller' than 'writer' and best as a sort of artist-activist who gets great things known to diverse audiences. You can't help but like the guy.

-DOJP

On Fri, May 4, 2012 at 3:26 PM, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:
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Gwern Branwen — 04 May 2012, 15:32 · in reply to Marc Aramini

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gwern
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Darth Ed — 07 May 2012, 16:49 · in reply to Gwern Branwen

On May 4, 2012, at 11:32 AM, Gwern Branwen wrote:

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I don't think the letters/chapters are out of order per se with regards to some canonical ordering of the Major Arcana and that we need to reorder the chapters/letters to fit that canonical ordering. In a Tarot reading, the cards are shuffled and the ordering of the cards is significant to the person who is being read by the reader. And I don't think the titles are necessarily related to the Major Arcana, but rather the principle characters and/or action that takes place in each letter/chapter can be matched to each of the Major Arcana. In that respect, I'm keen on David Stockoff's interpretation which identified several such matches for a handful of the letters/chapters. He also incorporated the mirroring nicely into his interpretation. His identifications seemed quite reasonable to me, and I think further study is warranted and may come up with additional identifications between the letters/chapters and the Major Arcana. I'll certainly be looking for such connection on my next reading of TSH, but I suspect that's probably years from now, unfortunately.

In a sense, we, the readers of the book, are like the Tarot reader who reads the past, present, and future of a person/character. The cards/chapters represent the past and the present; the reader interprets them and uses them to foretell the future of the person/character.

Later,
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My WolfeWiki profile: <http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=Profiles.DarthEd>

Fred Kiesche — 07 May 2012, 20:47 · in reply to Darth Ed

Tarot: Read a long time ago was NOVA by Samuel R. Delany. I just got a hardcover of the "first" edition (SFBC, long story as to why that is the hardcover). Much of the story revolves around the Tarot; I have not read this in years and will be putting it on Mount Tobereread.

On Mon, May 7, 2012 at 12:49 PM, Darth Ed <darthed77 at gmail.com> wrote:
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David Stockhoff — 07 May 2012, 22:31 · in reply to Fred Kiesche

I think I know that mountain. Legend says its summit stands unseen above the clouds and may be reached by no man or woman.

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 07 May 2012, 23:47 · in reply to David Stockhoff

The Tarot is not the organizational schema of NOVA, but it's one of the things used to produce meaning.

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David Duffy — 08 May 2012, 01:00 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On Mon, 7 May 2012, David Stockhoff wrote:
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You've read Calvino, I take it?

Cheers, David Duffy.

David Stockhoff — 08 May 2012, 01:42 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Well ferget it then! ;)

I couldn't find it for the Kindle anyway.

On 5/7/2012 7:47 PM, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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David Stockhoff — 08 May 2012, 01:44 · in reply to David Duffy

Yes, but which one? /Castle of Crossed Destinies/? That's on my list....

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In addition, since the novel is epistolary, IIRC the letters cross overtly at least once (a standard trick) and maybe less obviously at other times. So there is already a chance of "shuffling," which not only blows up the idea of an ordered, predictable series but points to the shuffling of identities and perhaps memories as well. Pick a card, any card.

Andreas Muegge — 10 May 2012, 14:49 · in reply to David Stockhoff

What made me wonder a bit: we know that Gene Wolfe is a master at hiding things in the text. Why has he made it so obvious that Bax has taken over the identity of his brother? Is he luring us on a wrong track so that we stop looking deeper?

-Andreas