

Charles Williams

The Urth list — 12 messages, 6 voices, 17 Dec 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6331>

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Antonin Scriabin — 17 Dec 2012, 15:30

Hello! Is anyone familiar with the work of Charles Williams? From a brief look online, he seems to have some similarities to MacDonald, and I thought there was a good chance some of you Wolfeans (?) would have some input. Any suggestions for a novel of his to start with?

Daniel Petersen — 17 Dec 2012, 15:51 · in reply to Antonin Scriabin

Oh goodness, yes! In terms of sheer intensity and originality of imagination, I put him up there with Wolfe and Lafferty and Lewis and Tolkien (as a theological myth-maker). And I think he possibly veers more into *weird* fiction (ala Lovecraft, Howard, Hodgson, Machen, etc.) than the others. Some of his visionary passages are flesh-crawling in their numinous grotesquery. He's not a great prose writer as a novelist and the passages can come and go as to stylistic excellence. But overall incredibly enjoyable to me. His tone is very middle-to-upper-class English and the settings are almost Edwardian - a bit like Chesterton or Sayers if they were writing weird fiction. In fact, Williams is one of the early practitioners of 'Noird' fiction (noir detective + weird), at least in the novel *War In Heaven*. In some ways too he's a bit of a prototype for Tim Powers's version of 'urban fantasy' or 'urban magical realism'. Lewis has an excellent essay on Williams's fiction in the collection *On Stories*.

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<kierkegaardian at gmail.com> wrote:

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On Dec 17, 2012 10:51 AM, "Daniel Petersen" <

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 17 Dec 2012, 16:12 · in reply to Antonin Scriabin

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Gwern Branwen — 17 Dec 2012, 16:52 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

On Mon, Dec 17, 2012 at 10:51 AM, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:

I thought I remembered Wolfe mentioning Williams favourably in an interview once. Anyone know?

JJ: So Lewis and Chesterton would have been among the formative influences in your paradigm.

GW: Oh yes, very definitely.

JJ: Could you name others, within the area of theology and Christianity.

GW: The problem with this it is hard to see where to stop. Later you say, "Gee, I should have included so and so," and you didn't think of that person at that time. J.R.R. Tolkein, just to start with. Charles Williams, not as much as the others, but to some extent. David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus*, which is really strange, and I think very theologically oriented. Much of the theology I disagree with, but I thought it was marvelous as a work of fiction. It is a marvelous example of someone's expressing his theological beliefs in a novel.

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

Fernando Gouvea — 17 Dec 2012, 16:57 · in reply to Antonin Scriabin

I would definitely start with *War in Heaven*, which does indeed seem to have influenced Powers and Blaylock. The two best of his novels are, in my opinion, *Descent into Hell* and *All Hallows Eve*, but they are much less accessible than *War*.

Williams' poetry is worth a look, but many people find it impenetrable. It's certainly old-fashioned.

Fernando

On 12/17/2012 10:30 AM, Antonin Scriabin wrote:
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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 17 Dec 2012, 17:04 · in reply to Fernando Gouvea

Fernando Gouvea wrote:
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Several good reasons to start here, including it's Williams's first novel. There is a definite development of the density of his novels as they go along.

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Not surprisingly, these are his last novels and quite dense.

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It's certainly old-fashioned.

If by "old-fashioned" you mean "early 20th-century modernist," I must agree. There is a strong kinship between Williams' poetry (I refer to the Arthurian poetry, which is all I have read) and Eliot's work. (Eliot, by the way, praised Williams's novels and wrote an introduction to at least one of them.)

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Fernando Gouvea — 17 Dec 2012, 17:34 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On 12/17/2012 12:04 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
Fernando Gouvea wrote:

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Several good reasons to start here, including it's Williams's first novel. There is a definite development of the density of his novels as they go along.

I think the first is actually /Shadows of Ecstasy/, though it was published only later. And probably should have remained in the drawer.

The two best of his novels are, in my opinion, /Descent into Hell/ and /All Hallows Eve/,

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And also the ones that read better if the reader understands Williams's rather strange theological ideas. That said, /Descent/ is a wonderful study of the notion of damnation.

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I think that's a good description, though there are some late-Romantic things there as well. What's most old-fashioned about it is that it is intended as narrative, rather than as an exploration of the personal, which is where most poetry seems to be these days.

Fernando

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Fernando Q. Gouvea <http://www.colby.edu/~fqgouvea>
Carter Professor and Chair
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Colby College Editor, Carus Mathematical Monographs
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Waterville, ME 04901 <http://www.maa.org/maareviews>

Food for thought is no substitute for the real thing.
-- Walt Kelly, "Potluck Pogo"

Daniel Petersen — 17 Dec 2012, 17:53 · in reply to Antonin Scriabin

I haven't read the rest of Powers's 'Faultlines' trilogy, but I greatly look forward to it - everybody says they peter out a bit, but I'm just excited to see what the heck he's going to do with time, space, ghosts, and so on. Wonderfully inventive and playful imagination in usually crisp and enjoyable prose.

Blood Meridian has an extended tarot reading scene by circus performers round a campfire that seems to suggest a lot philosophically (incredibly dense novel). I read an academic paper that very convincingly argued that one of the main tarot predictions came true in detail late in the novel, bringing the novel out of strict realism, the paper argued, and into romance and myth.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes: Williams pretty much invented modern "urban fantasy."

Yes! And this only recently dawned on me. And Lewis's essay brings this out very effectively.

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Thanks, Gwern! Knew I'd seen that.

And for the record, I LOVE *some* of Charles Williams's poetry, especially in the Arthurian cycle. I mean, heck, at one point both Merlin and Lancelot are werewolves! (Lots of things in this cycle remind me of Wolfe too.)

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David Duffy — 17 Dec 2012, 22:51 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

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Agree with all the Williams recommendations (our uni library had his complete set of novels). Sidetracking onto other tarot novels (this has happened before, I think), Calvino and Eco.

Cheers, David Duffy.