

This Week in Google Alerts: Tolkien, obits, Auschwitz

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 02 Jun 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6558>

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Gwern Branwen — 02 Jun 2014, 16:54

- on orc/wargs: http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Letter_to_Gene_Wolfe

- short TSH review:

<http://bookishlywitty.blogspot.com/2014/05/from-tbr-shelf-sorcerers-house-by-gene.html>

- obituary for https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Lake :

<http://io9.com/r-i-p-jay-lake-totally-irreplaceable-science-fiction-1584527320> "R.I.P. Jay Lake, Irreplaceable Science Fiction And Fantasy Author"

...The Campbell Award-winning author put out a slew of novels that defied categorization. He helped make the New Weird into a vibrant movement with the urban fantasy-tinged *City Imperishable* series. He blurred the lines of steampunk, epic fantasy and religious weirdness with the *Mainspring* trilogy. And he created one of the great memorable female characters of recent years with the courtesan-warrior in *Green* and its sequels. We praised the beautiful, evocative writing and mixture of brutality and cleverness in the worldbuilding in *Green*).

...And in a 2009 interview (

<http://travisheermann.com/blog/?p=229>), Lake talked about his love of writing, and how he worked his entire adult life to achieve "overnight" success:

I first knew I wanted to be a writer in my early teens. I just didn't know what to do about it. I read Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* when I was 20, and thought "You're allowed to do *this* with the language?" I was hooked but still clueless. At 26 I found my way into my first writers' group. I wrote, critiqued and mailed out stories for eleven years before I sold the first at the age of 36, in 2001. That year I sold three stories, and turned 37. So figure a twenty year take-off roll, the last eleven with serious effort behind it.

Three years later, in 2004, I made the Hugo ballot and won the Campbell Award. In 2005 my first small press novel was released, and in 2007 my first trade press novel was released. My career arc looks meteoric to some outside observers, but that is the result of literally an adult lifetime of effort, and the patience to keep trying right into my middle age before succeeding...

- <http://travisheermann.com/blog/?p=229> Jay Lake interview, continued:

...TH: Have you reached the point at which you realized that you had "made it" as a writer and author? If so, can you describe the milestone or circumstances where you had that realization? Do you recall how that felt? If not, what is the milestone you're seeking?

JL: Oh, I'll never really believe that. A writer is always very conscious of being able to fall off the ladder at any time. But I do remember the day when I felt like I was a real boy. Spring of 2004,

about the time I landed on the Campbell and Hugo ballots, I received in the mail a stack of signature sheets for PostScripts issue one.

There on the page where I was to sign my name, Ray Bradbury and Ed Gorman had already signed theirs. I was to send my stack on to Joyce Carol Oates. Eventually, Gene Wolfe would receive these same sheets. That was when I knew that in some real sense, the Eagle had landed. There will always be more milestones, new ambitions, breakthroughs, but that day was the first time when denying I was a pro felt like false modesty.

- <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/02/hopes-justice-amid-atrocities-auschwitz-stalin>

"Hopes of justice amid the atrocities of Auschwitz: Otto Dov Kulka's book tells a disturbing story of people about to be killed putting hopes of revenge and justice in Stalin's tyranny"

In Otto Dov Kulka's telling, three things above all were denied in Auschwitz: life, hope and justice. Justice and hope were intimately connected, since both concerned the future. Some of the most chilling stories in his book *_Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death_* concern the disappearance of even the idea of justice, but for me the most disturbing comes from a story about where people put their hopes of justice....Against the metronomic murder, every night, of hundreds or thousands of innocent people, what do any acts of individual torture matter? And in fact he says at the outset of this section of the book that he can remember very few: death set a horizon within which ordinarily terrible things could not be seen or distinguished.

He interrogates his memory and comes up with two scenes of individual cruelty. In the first, a prisoner is first informally beaten and then formally flogged to death in public: he is also forced to count out loud each stroke as he is whipped until the silence falls. The peculiar horror that the author notes is the absence of horror, of emotion, or even outrage:

"What I retain from this scene comes down to a feeling of a peculiar 'justice' that resided in all this; a feeling that it was some sort of actualisation of a perplexing 'order' that overlay the camp's everyday life — an autonomous system, utterly divorced from any feeling of pity, repulsion, cruelty — even the distinction between victim and perpetrator seems to disappear here completely. This was the way I remembered that scene, that scene of violence-as-ritual, as part of the system, not of the Great Death or of the games of the small death, but of everyday life."

This is surely a vision of hell in which all hope of real justice has been entirely extinguished. It is beyond humanity in the same sense that some of the tortures of nature — a cat playing with its victim, or the flourishing of parasitic worms inside the eyeballs of their hosts — are similarly terrible but we can't appeal against them to any idea of justice. Nothing involved in those processes could change, or even want to change. And in the annihilation of even the possibility of appeal to a better nature we seem to have passed beyond humanity.

There is a curious parallel here with the profoundly disturbing *_Book of The New Sun_* by Gene Wolfe, a science fiction novel whose narrator is a torturer who also seems to enter into a terrible

companionship with his victims. But Wolfe is writing from a perspective of hope, and of communication. What happened in Auschwitz, whether or not it was beyond communication — as Kulka suspects — was certainly never intended to be communicated. That is part of its distance from humanity.

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