

Short Story 72: War Beneath the Tree

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 29 Jul 2014

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Marc Aramini — 29 Jul 2014, 06:10

“War Beneath the Tree” first appeared in *Omni* in 1979.

SUMMARY:

Robin’s toys, the spaceman, bear, dancing doll, and guardsmen, provide him with more company and guidance than his mother, who wonders what he will do when he doesn’t have robotic sycophants to spoil him. Her robot maid readily agrees with everything she says. The maid tells the toys to straighten up. Bear and Robin hold a conversation about squiggling and problems sleeping, and Robin says that he will get something for Bear on his birthday tomorrow. Bear sings a Christmas Carol and thinks of the problems with the other toys and of the toys from the previous year. Bear goes out to plan strategies with the other toys for the coming battle. Robin dreams of ice skating and hitting his head, but awakens in bed. He creeps out to see his mother, Mrs. Jackson, described as fat as Santa, and all the new toys under the tree.

Robin watches all the new toys move and get out of their boxes: a clown, a raggedy girl, and a climbing monkey, along with cowboys, Indians, and a knight with a dragon. The fierce battle begins and the old toys are burnt and defeated one by one. Bear considers running and hiding in a box in the basement but fights on.

In the morning Robin is playing with his toys, and says one of the Native Americans doesn’t work, damaged in the previous night. The maid asks where the new toys are, and Robin’s mother says, “They’re programmed to self-destruct, I understand — But Robin, you know how the new toys all came, the Knight and Dragon and all your Cowboys, almost by magic” Well, the same thing can happen with people. Robin looks frightened as she finishes, “The same wonderful thing is going to happen here, in our home. ?

COMMENTARY:

A fairly straightforward satire of poor parenting and the isolation of childhood, it also provides an interesting metaphor for an interesting part of growing up — the putting aside of childish things in favor of almost equally but perhaps slightly more age appropriate new, shiny things, that soon die and lose their luster in turn. The lonely children in Wolfe’s fiction occupy a pretty important part of his writing, and here, despite the fact that there is very little more than the surface metaphor of objects that mean the world when they are new and are then are almost easily replaced with fickle novelty, we can see that fantastic escapism at work. There is a slightly more critical tone to the treatment of the mother, Mrs. Jackson, who is completely out of touch with her child’s feelings and perspective.

The toys do the parenting, with the Spaceman saying it is time for bed and the mother echoing it, and with a doll programmed to begin the boy’s sex education, and the mother remains blind to her own pampered surroundings by “transistorized sycophants.” Her smoking while pregnant

is another example of her rather poor parenting (this was, after all, written in the late 70s). Finally, Wolfe shows us what an only child would feel at the prospect of a new baby: fear of being replaced, destroyed inside and out and meaning nothing to a parent. To a young child, it might very well be like being thrown into the fire emotionally. Her lack of empathy for the son's potential horrified response (albeit influenced by the absurdity of the literal situation he witnessed) is captured quite nicely.

I feel there is an indictment of the consumerism inherent in Christmas and birthdays here, where Robin considers buying his toy a present, but this is more innocent and sweet than the impression we are left of the mother, and a father who is completely absent as he travels in Brazil over Christmas.

What makes the story effective is the emotional truth of the tale: how does it feel to be forgotten and cast aside? The early everyday horrors of childhood that stem from unfamiliarity with the world are nicely captured here.

One other detail is that besides the Christmas Carol the Bear sings, there is little mention of what Christmas is actually supposed to connote — salvation and the birth of Christ, instead merely being a time of new toys replacing old ones.

Wolfe commented "This is simple truth: Tonight you and I, with billions of others, are sitting around the fire we call 'the sun', telling stories; and from time to time it has been my turn to entertain. I have occasionally remembered that though you are not a child, there is a child alive in you still, for those in whom the child is dead will not hear stories. Thus I wrote "War Beneath the Tree", and certain others.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

This has a dark parallel with the much later "And When They Appear", but Wolfe's treatment of isolated and lonely children found their best expression in "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" and "The Death of Doctor Island."