

Wolfe's politics; BOOK and URTH

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 18 Jun 1998

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adam louis stephanides — 18 Jun 1998, 15:40

From: Dan Parmenter <dan at lec.com>

Subject: Wolfe's politics

It's hard for me to imagine Wolfe as entirely "anti-PC"; after all, I think that 5HC is essentially a critique of colonialism.

Wolfe attacking PC doesn't surprise me at all, given his frequent populist and anti-academic remarks.

(Which rouse a certain irritation in me, I confess. Despite his sneers at academic critics, it's Wolfe, even more than James Joyce who coined the phrase, who requires "an ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia," as this list demonstrates.)

From: CRCulver at aol.com

Subject: Re: (urth) New Sun miscellany

[Me]:

<5) My final question is one that probably only Wolfe can answer, though the answer may be in some interview. We know that _Urth of the New Sun_ was not part of Wolfe's original intention, but was written as a compromise with his editor. And _Urth_ makes explicit a number of matters highly relevant to BotNS, but which are much more obscure there, and would often probably have gone unsuspected without _Urth_. My question is twofold: In doing the final revisions of BotNS, did Wolfe have the eventual existence of _Urth_ in mind? In other words, would these matters that are made explicit in _Urth_ have been equally explicit in BotNS, had Wolfe gained his first preference and not written _Urth_?

Okay, this one I should have known. In CoD p. 417 (the same passage which told me Wolfe had not originally planned to write _Urth_), Wolfe describes his compromise with David Hartwell as follows: "David would publish _The Citadel of the Autarch_ *exactly as I had written it*, provided that I would write another book in which Severian recounted his trip to the universe next door." [emphasis added] In other words, Wolfe's own plan had been to publish the four volumes of BotNS, as we have them, and nothing else (setting aside BotLS, BotSS, and the various Urth-related short stories).

What this means is that either such major plot elements as Severian's "trial" being no trial, his predecessor's trial being a put-up job, and Severian himself being the Conciliator were not part of Wolfe's original scheme, or he intended them to remain entirely unguessed-at. As someone who would like to believe that the mysteries of Wolfe's fiction must eventually yield to careful reading, I find this a dispiriting reflection.

[Me]: And to what

extent can we assume that Wolfe's vision of the New Sun universe is the same in _Urth_ as it was in BotNS?>

[Christopher R. Culver]:

It is certain there are some things in the BotNS that would make no sense and have no observable purpose if Wolfe didn't already have some elements of UotNS planned. The first thing that springs to mind is the winged Tzadkiel in the Autarch's book.

To be sure, Wolfe must have had much of what is in _Urth_ plotted out as background when he wrote BotNS (this doesn't mean, as I say above, that he intended to let us in on it). But can we assume that he didn't change his mind about any of it between completing BotNS and writing _Urth_?

--Adam

Michael Straight — 18 Jun 1998, 17:00 · follows adam louis stephanides

On Thu, 18 Jun 1998, adam louis stephanides wrote:
Wolfe attacking PC doesn't surprise me at all, given his frequent populist and anti-academic remarks.

(Which rouse a certain irritation in me, I confess. Despite his sneers at academic critics, it's Wolfe, even more than James Joyce who coined the phrase, who requires "an ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia," as this list demonstrates.)

The difference being that Wolfe seems to have great affection for popular, less demanding science-fiction and its readers, both of which get sneers from academic critics. He's just sneering at the sneerers.

(Which sounds a bit like the critique of "PC" folks that they're intolerant of the intolerant...)

Anyway, I don't think it's elitist to write very demanding fiction if you don't pretend that people who enjoy it are better than people who don't.

-Rostrum