

RTTW failures

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Feb 2000

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Allan Lloyd — 16 Feb 2000, 13:15

I just wanted to agree with some of the things Alga said about RTTW and add some of my own comments.

Although there are of course many good things in RTTW, overall I found it one of the most disappointing of Wolfe's books. The initial impression of the cover right through to the awful proof reading make it seem an unattractive and rushed book.

As Alga said, Pig's accent is extremely annoying (it sounds more Newcastle Geordie than Scottish to me), but his whole character does not convince. Compare Pig to Auk, both performing similar functions in their respective books. When Auk suffers from concussion in the tunnels we feel real sympathy and concern for him, and although he is a violent criminal he has redeeming qualities which make him a well rounded character. Pig does nothing but fawn over Horn/Silk and whine about his e'en. Like Alga, I feel that I am being manipulated into feeling sorry for him. Giving someone a quirky way of speaking is a very lazy way of showing character, and is an increasingly worrying feature of Wolfe's recent work.

Other points in the book that did not work for me-

1. Projecting astral versions of yourself to other planets is a convenient and unbelievable fantasy gimmick which may work in Edgar Rice Burroughs, but does not sit well with the predominantly sf approach of the rest of the book. Even the time travel in BOTNS is given some justification, but I find instantaneous projection over a distance that has taken the Whorl 300 years to travel completely unconvincing. And when the various groups are in their astral bodies, how can we read about Oreb without laughing. The image of Oreb as a child of four with feathers, or a feathered dwarf instantly stops your suspension of belief. The image is straight from Sesame Street or the Muppets.
2. We are asked to believe that faithful Oreb, the most honest character in the book, has been possessed by Scylla for most of the three books. This is the violent jealous Scylla who, when possessing Chenille, first ordered the sacrifice of a harmless fisherman, then changed her mind to request the sacrifice of 50 to 100 babies to attract her attention. So all the time Oreb has been possessed by a cruel vindictive Goddess. Often in Wolfe's books I don't understand what is happening, so I read again and again to try to work out the meaning. This is the first time that I have simply not been convinced. The idea reads like something that was tacked on just to produce a shock, with little preperation or purpose.
3. Seawrack. In the first book, Seawrack is a significant part of the action. We want to know more about her, why she is given to Horn, what is the motive of the Mother. So in the next two books she is just forgotten. Like Dorcas, she emerges from the water, supports the protagonist, and then is casually dumped. It is almost as if Wolfe thought "sea voyage, Odyssey, must have a Siren" and then lost interest. This makes her offstage reunion with Silk at the end of the book seem casual and pointless, and I fail to see her motive in joining the return to the Whorl.

4. The Neighbors. Mysterious Aborigines are appearing with alarming regularity in Wolfe's books, and are becoming a bit of a cliché. All-powerful near-supernatural beings are very useful for getting your hero out of a jam, but in this case come across as just one more layer of plot manipulators. Horn is given a magic ring so that he can see them, loses it on Green, is presented with a replacement which changes size and colour at random (why?). This is the stuff of fantasy and does not fit the atmosphere of the book.

And why give the neighbors (and the other fauna of Blue) a double quota of arms, legs and eyes? To see why it does not work, look at the Neighbor on the cover of IGJ. This is the worst sort of science fiction shorthand, a gimmick that saves the trouble of original thought. Can you imagine an ur-elephant with eight legs, two trunks and four eyes?

5. The Horn/Silk/Horn question has been discussed enough already. All I want to add is that I found the final revelation contrived and unconvincing, a bit like the final twist to a horror movie, there because there always is a final twist.

6. Can anyone explain why Merryn should be Severian's sister. There was no sign of recognition in their scene together in BOTNS, and there seems no reason that they should be related. Just because they are similar ages and both probable orphans, they have to be siblings. Shakespearian coincidence again?

I have probably given the impression that I hated RTTW. On the contrary I loved much of it, and wanted it to be much better. But I think, like Alga, that Gene lost interest towards the end and just wanted to finish the book.

Allan Lloyd

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.