

Heresy

The Whorl list — 8 messages, 5 voices, 19 Feb 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1198>

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BMeyer7 — 19 Feb 2001, 16:34

OK, I'm sure I'll be the target of the wrath of many, but here goes. First, let me set forth my background--I've been reading SF/F for my entire life (I'm 40), have read every published word of Wolfe, and, while not nearly as sophisticated as many on this list, am not a total Wolfe-dummy. I figured out lots of stuff (including what was going on in "Fifth Head") on my own, before such lists provided the insights of others. OK, reading this list, it is striking that after 7 books in this series, the very, very, smart people posting cannot come up with a consensus about what the hell is going on with respect to key issues. Now a series of rhetorical questions: At what point does intentional obscurity on the part of an author become a self-indulgent pretention that gets in the way of artistic expression? How much do we really love Wolfe because he's a great writer and how much because it's fun to solve puzzles? Has Wolfe crossed the line from not giving all the answers to creating texts that must be pored over by talmudic scholars rather than actual readers of novels? Is Wolfe writing for a smaller, and smaller audience of expert Wolfe-interpreters? Discuss.

Michael Andre-Driussi — 19 Feb 2001, 12:43 · follows BMeyer7

BMeyer7 at aol.com wrote:

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Well BMeyer7, as you no doubt recall from the days of GENie, if not before then, it all boils down to "you like it" or "you don't like it."

Case in point: Henry Kaiser, in his review of RTTW for Amazon.com, I think makes some of the same statements you are making, but he is making them from the clear position of "I like it." For example, iirc, Henry says that Wolfe is making it harder rather than easier on his readers, and Henry =likes= this detail, it amazes him that Wolfe may be writing for a smaller group.

At every step along Wolfe's career there have been those who felt he had crossed some line:

people who loved 5HC but found TBOTNS to be something of a fakeout (I believe we can safely put Robert Silverberg in this "New Sun is a fakeout" category); people who loved TBOTNS but feel that URTH is a fakeout (witness recent revival of that chestnut); people who loved the Urth Cycle but didn't like TBOTLS (Christopher Culver is a gracious example). Or people who like everything =but= when Wolfe gets contemporary, as in CASTLEVIEW, THERE ARE DOORS, PANDORA, FREE LIVE FREE, LETTERS HOME (alga is the gracious example).

You probably remember more than most what my least favorite Wolfe novel is. Everybody has their own taste. The rest is just ferreting out the details of why we like or dislike something, and like I tried to illustrate above, the same elements can be used for liking or disliking something. I myself am not too good at figuring out why I dislike something--it is too much labor, whereas figuring out why I like something is an intoxicating joy that I have done for free, regardless of the real cost.

=mantis=

Sirius Fiction

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

William Ansley — 20 Feb 2001, 00:51 · follows Michael Andre-Driussi

At 11:34 AM -0500 2/19/01, BMeyer7 at aol.com wrote:

OK, I'm sure I'll be the target of the wrath of many, but here goes. First, let me set forth my background--I've been reading SF/F for my entire life (I'm 40), have read every published word of Wolfe, and, while not nearly as sophisticated as many on this list, am not a total Wolfe-dummy. I figured out lots of stuff (including what was going on in "Fifth Head") on my own, before such lists provided the insights of others. OK, reading this list, it is striking that after 7 books in this series, the very, very, smart people posting cannot come up with a consensus about what the hell is going on with respect to key issues. Now a series of rhetorical questions: At what point does intentional obscurity on the part of an author become a self-indulgent pretention that gets in the way of artistic expression? How much do we really love Wolfe because he's a great writer and how much because it's fun to solve puzzles? Has Wolfe crossed the line from not giving all the answers to creating texts that must be pored over by talmudic scholars rather than actual readers of novels? Is Wolfe writing for a smaller, and smaller audience of expert Wolfe-interpreters? Discuss.

I think you bring up some interesting issues. As I think my recent posts have indicated, I agree to a great degree with your implied criticisms of TBotSS. I also strongly agree that I, as well, am not as sophisticated or as knowledgeable as many others who post to this list. I find it very satisfying to have certain incidents in Wolfe's books made clear (or at least clearer) to me by someone who posts the appropriate Biblical, mythical or historical reference and or analysis. This was my motivation in posting my long series of messages on the Oz references in "The Eyeflash Miracles." I hope I provided a bit of that satisfaction to someone else.

Despite my satisfaction in revelations, I believe that a novel should be entertaining on a surface level so that it can be enjoyed by someone who isn't aware of all the buried layers of meaning that may be present, even if that enjoyment is shallow compared to the "deep" enjoyment of the reader who does make the extra effort to penetrate as many of the underlying layers as he or she can.

Given my many carks and quibbles with RttW and the other SS books the following opinion may

surprise many readers of this list, but I think Wolfe has succeeded in this with these books. Even though I was disappointed in RttW as a source of clarification, I did enjoy reading it. Despite my complaints about Olivine's speech patterns, I was moved by her plight and devoutly hope Marble will be reunited with her and be able to make her whole (eyes excepted, of course). That, to me, is the mark of a great writer.

But I worry because I also think that Wolfe has succeeded less in the SS books in providing both an accessible surface layer and a coherent framework for understanding the underlying layers. Wolfe should write what he wants to write, of course, but if he really is writing for a smaller and smaller group with each book, how much longer will his books continue to be published? Publishers exist to make a profit, especially now. Perhaps Wolfe's oft stated fears that his next submitted work will not be accepted for publication are more realistic than we realize.

I also have to admit that I enjoyed the SS books less than the LS books and those less than the NS books. If Wolfe does write another book that continues the LS/SS series, I am going to have to think long and hard before I decide whether I am going to read it. I really feel that I would have understood and therefore enjoyed RttW better if I had re-read all of the LS and the previous two SS books immediately beforehand. But I just didn't have time. To rephrase one of the questions above:

Has Wolfe crossed the line from legitimately challenging his readers to asking far more of them than can reasonably be expected?

I think he may have with these books for a great many potential readers; I think he may have for me. For those of you who disagree with this, by all means, enjoy your discussions.

I still have more to say myself.

William Ansley

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

Adam Stephanides — 20 Feb 2001, 09:08 · follows William Ansley

BMeyer7 at aol.com wrote:

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is striking that after 7 books in this series, the very, very, smart people posting cannot come up with a consensus about what the hell is going on with respect to key issues. Now a series of rhetorical questions: At what point does intentional obscurity on the part of an author become a self-indulgent pretention that gets in the way of artistic expression? How much do we really love Wolfe because he's a great writer and how much because it's fun to solve puzzles? Has Wolfe crossed the line from not giving all the answers to creating texts that must be pored over by talmudic scholars rather than actual readers of novels? Is Wolfe writing for a smaller, and smaller audience of expert Wolfe-interpreters? Discuss.

I've worried before about the apparent impenetrability of some of Wolfe's mysteries, but I think your specific complaints here are a bit off base. In the first place, it's a bit early to worry about the lack of any consensus. The book's only been out for about a month, and few of us have had the chance to read it more than once. I'm more concerned about the inability of the recent discussion on PEACE, which has been out for over two decades (iirc), to reach a conclusion on key issues.

In the second place, the fact that a few posters disagree doesn't in itself demonstrate a lack of

consensus. "Mainstream" literary criticism demonstrates that any work, no matter how clear, can spawn wildly divergent readings. For there to be a real lack of consensus on RTTW, the "silent majority" of serious Wolfe readers would have to be as split as the few who have taken positions so far; and we don't know that yet.

In the third place, speaking as one of the people involved in these arguments, I don't particularly enjoy the puzzle-solving aspect of Wolfe's books, although I do enjoy his play with narrative conventions. I've never been engaged, for example, by the questions of who was buried in the mausoleum in TBOTNS or what caused the disturbance at the gate between _Shadow_ and _Claw_. Speaking as a biased observer, while there are obscurities in TBOTSS, I don't believe they include the "key issues" we've been arguing about. I honestly think the evidence on these is clear, even though intelligent readers disagree with my positions (but how many do we don't know, as I said above; and if Wolfe really has failed to make the protagonist's identity clear, then the book _is_ seriously flawed). Nor do I think that RTTW is the most obscure of Wolfe's books, or even second most.

--Adam

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

William Ansley — 20 Feb 2001, 23:26 · follows Adam Stephanides

At 12:43 PM -0800 2/19/01, Michael Andre-Driussi wrote:
it all boils down to "you like it" or "you don't like it."

mantis,

You know, when I first read this I thought, "How facile! This doesn't help us to understand anything." (Well, what I originally thought was more like, "Hah!" But this translates as I indicate above.)

But after maundering on for a few messages trying to analyze "what's wrong" with TBotSS, I have come to realize you are right. It does boil down to the fact that I didn't like the series as much as I hoped I would. I think can give some reasons for this, but that doesn't mean that there is anything "wrong" with the SS books, it just means I didn't like them.

OK, so this is a revelation of the obvious. I tend to be a little slow, sometimes.

William Ansley

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

Spectacled Bear — 27 Feb 2001, 14:51 · follows William Ansley

At 11:34 2001-02-19 EST, BMeyer7 at aol.com wrote:

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I strongly suspect that the inability to reach a consensus is *because* of the very smart scholars

here, not despite it. There's too much invention and over-interpretation going on in those fertile brains, and the straightforward interpretation is lost among the possibilities. It's like quiz programs, where most people can answer questions like "which species of white bear roams the unspoiled wastes of ..." because they have only ever heard of one kind of bear being white. Bear experts are less certain because they know black bears can be white, even without being albino.

Spectacled Bear.

"...it represents for me all that monomaniacal fabric of argument, so tightly woven that not even the tiniest objection or spark of light can escape its net, in which human minds become enmeshed whenever the subject is one in which no appeal to fact is possible" - *_Sword_*, Ch. 38

William Ansley — 28 Feb 2001, 00:38 · follows Spectacled Bear

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So, we're too darn smart for our own good, are we? Maybe.

But, I think the very smart, scholarly and fertile brain of Gene Wolfe is as much responsible for the lack of straightforward interpretation of his works as our collective brilliance.

I would like to see a straightforward interpretation of any of Gene Wolfe's novel or novella length works, or even some of his short stories. (Well, perhaps there are a few...)

But, Mr. Bear, you did come up with the perfect Wolfe quote to illustrate your point. Bravo!

William Ansley

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

Spectacled Bear — 28 Feb 2001, 09:16 · follows William Ansley

At 00:38 2001-02-28 -0500, William Ansley wrote:

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I would like to see a straightforward interpretation of any of Gene Wolfe's novel or novella length works, or even some of his short stories. (Well, perhaps there are a few...)

I think we sorted out a straightforward interpretation of "Kevin Malone" when we discussed that. That is **very** short, admittedly. How about Pandora by Holly Hollander? Although there's always the worry that the person who wrote the blurb on the back knew more about it than I do (not a foregone conclusion either way!) and that it is more than a simple detective story. So perhaps you're right. But I still think that we do often read more into things than is actually there. Pike's ghost, for instance.

But, Mr. Bear, you did come up with the perfect Wolfe quote to illustrate your point. Bravo!

Thank you! I've been saving it :-)

Spectacled Bear.