

It's Mostly the Ending

The Whorl list — 7 messages, 5 voices, 11 Apr 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1340>

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David Lebling — 11 Apr 2001, 09:15

From: <akt at attglobal.net>

Like the godling. No reason at all to introduce it/him, and a completely irrational sort of creature to put in a closed environment.

As I think I said before, the godling reminded me of similar closed environment creatures in Varley's Titan trilogy. In both books they are manifestations of the bad temper of a god. Wolfe writes science fantasy or "science" fiction, so it didn't bother me all that much. Of course, I think anything with telepathy, astral travel, possession is pretty much science fantasy anyway, so a few square-cube law violations are a minor additional offense, barely worthy of a traffic ticket.

Also like

Merryn, whose appearance just seems bad-tempered on the author's part..

Merryn's appearance, which struck me as a case of Asimov's syndrome, had as a saving grace the fact that we didn't find out she was Severian's sister, which would have been an even worse case of the above. For me, the only positive of the Red Sun sections was to get an outsider's view of Urth and Severian. To the people from Blue, who are much more like modern Americans than the people of Urth, we get a better idea of what a decayed, run-down, utterly tired and hopeless place Urth is. That part I liked. Hints that Silk is the ghost of Malrubius? Bah. Cilinia/Scylla buried in the Necropolis? Bah, again.

Oh, honestly, what nonsense--this isn't the Torah!

As a regular reader of this list, I wonder about that sometimes.

It's not my fault

that Wolfe abandoned Mucor, murdered Jahlee, sent Nettle and Seawrack off on a Star Trek menage a trois with the saintly Silk, ditched Babbie, gave us no word of Oreb and in general tossed his whole story out the window--or off-planet as the case may be. Leaving both Blue and Green to go to hell together, Neighbors, inhumani and whatnot. Tra-la, let's be off.

RttW exhibits a serious case of Heinlein syndrome, where the story just rumbles to stop and disgorges something intended to be transcendent or stirring, leaving loose ends all over the place. I thought the ending forced, possibly because Wolfe wanted to come up with something that was T or S, this being the conclusion of a twelve volume epic, but he doesn't do that sort of thing, so it falls flat. It does have a "lighting out for the territories" feel about it, to uplift the Star Trek reference a bit.

That strikes me as more nonsense. Why in the world would he be offering an "homage" to Robinson, a very different kind of writer. Proust, maybe, but Robinson? I don't think so.

I enjoyed the Mars trilogy, once I got beyond the didacticism. I rather doubt Wolfe would enjoy it, or write an homage to it, or even a response. The Short Sun books are a planetary adventure of an almost Vancean nature at the "what the plowman saw" level, with the genetic-engineered offspring of a psychological novel and an imitation-of-Christ novel on top of it to carry the real message. As such, I found it excellent until the rushed and unsatisfactory ending.

I do not even object to Jahlee's death
per se. I object to the hasty, melodramatic and far-fetched (would
Jahlee really have attacked Nettle so foolishly--allow me to doubt it)
B-movie manner in which it is fobbed off

I've gone on record as thinking Jahlee's behavior and fate make sense in the terms of the novel. She attacks Nettle out of jealousy the day after Horn and Nettle spend the night together. She is killed because she violated her agreement with Horn. This makes sense but it's sudden and disappointing in its suddenness.

I think he ran out of energy or room or ideas or some combination of the three. Up to the point where the inhumis attack the wedding, things seemed almost on track, but after that there are few scenes that are excellent (Silk and Remora is one, but it's undercut by the fact that we knew "Horn" was Silk already -- we don't feel Silk's awakening).

There are two major areas where the book as a whole lets us down on, and we've beaten them both to death, but I'll say again:

a) we get the huge buildup on the secret of the inhumis, and it turns out the secret doesn't meet the expectations that the narrative builds up for it. We were expecting something more than we guessed in the first volume, but that was it.

b) the fact that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body has been obvious since the first volume, so the climactic revelation that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body falls flat.

These are the two Big Ticket Items in the trilogy, and both are disappointments. The rest of the problems (and Alga has enumerated them in a properly annoyed way) are problems of narrative construction that a careful editor or Wolfe himself could have dealt with.

Which is not to say I didn't enjoy the trilogy; I've already read it more than once and gotten more enjoyment each time.

-- Dave Lebling
aka vizcacha

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

Michael Straight — 11 Apr 2001, 10:46 · follows David Lebling

On Wed, 11 Apr 2001, David Lebling wrote:
There are two major areas where the book as a whole lets us down on, and
we've beaten them both to death, but I'll say again:

b) the fact that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body has been obvious since
the first volume, so the climactic revelation that the narrator is Horn in
Silk's body falls flat.

I thought the climactic revelation was that the narrator is Silk in Silk's body.

-Rostrum

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

Kevin J. Maroney — 11 Apr 2001, 11:10 · follows Michael Straight

At 09:15 AM 4/11/01 -0400, David wrote:

b) the fact that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body has been obvious since the first volume, so the climactic revelation that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body falls flat.

The climax isn't the "revelation", since that fact is clear to a reader who is paying **any** attention at all during *_Green_* or *_Return_*. The climax is the narrator's **acceptance** of the truth he has been denying since page 1 of *_Blue_*.

Overall, I found *_Return_* a disappointing novel for many of the reasons that Alga did, but I thought the climax was one of the parts that was completely satisfying.

I can probably elaborate on what I'm going to say next, but not today: One of the things which sets *_Blue_* and *_Green_* apart from the majority of Wolfe's work is their naked emotionalism. *_Return_*, on the other hand, feels much more distant, and that change of tone is frustrating.

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

James Jordan — 11 Apr 2001, 14:29 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

A few thoughts on some of these issues:

Also like

Merryn, whose appearance just seems bad-tempered on the author's part..

Merryn's appearance, which struck me as a case of Asimov's syndrome, had as a saving grace the fact that we *_didn't_* find out she was Severian's sister, which would have been an even worse case of the above.

I strongly suspect that Merryn appears because so many fans wanted her to appear. She's been MUCH discussed over the years. I think that there are probably several places in the SS novels that reflect interaction with fans/readers. I recall a number of years ago telling Wolfe that Patera Bunny (a Presbyterian pastor) mentioned to me that while in a counselling situation with a parishioner, he found himself thinking, "What would Silk do?" Then I noticed almost exactly this sentence from the Narrator at one point in either *Blue* or *Green* (I cannot recall where). Someone else here also pointed to a place where something he had said to Wolfe seemed to appear in the SS narrative. (Sorry, I cannot recall who or what.) At any rate, if we did not like Merryn's appearance, we have found the enemy and it is us!

For me, the only positive of the Red Sun sections was to get an outsider's view of Urth and Severian. To the people from *Blue*, who are much more like modern Americans than the people of Urth, we get a better idea of what a decayed, run-down, utterly tired and hopeless place Urth is. That part I liked. Hints that Silk is the ghost of Malrubius? Bah. Cilinia/Scylla buried in the Necropolis? Bah, again.

This also struck me as overly coincidental -- though Wolfe has pointed out that in real life we encounter strange coincidences more often than we might think we would. But perhaps there is some method in this. Both Silk and Severian are Sub-messiahs (to coin a term), "Christian figures" who are replicating in a very significant way certain central aspects of Christ's life and work. Perhaps Wolfe is positing a kind of "spiritual attraction" or magnetism between the two, and between their companies.

I've gone on record as thinking Jahlee's behavior and fate make sense in the terms of the novel. She attacks Nettle out of jealousy the day after Horn and Nettle spend the night together. She is killed because she violated her

agreement with Horn. This makes sense but it's sudden and disappointing in its suddenness.

Maybe. But to me it was fitting, and her death in Nettle's forgiving arms was very moving. I think Wolfe wanted us to think about the soul of Jahlee. She really is human in every way that really counts. Now she dies. Is that really the end of her? Is she just an animal? Or does she perhaps "go to heaven" in a way analogous to the other character's ascension at the end of the novel?

I think he ran out of energy or room or ideas or some combination of the three. Up to the point where the inhumis attack the wedding, things seemed almost on track,

Long Sun ends apocalyptically. Silk has gone to heaven-mainframe, and now returns to an Armageddon in Viron, after which Silk's people go to "heaven" (outer space), leaving the Whorl behind. If my guess was right, in my post on Revelation 19, Wolfe intends Short Sun to have the same kind of referential ending: the Marriage Supper is also a Great Battle. And, it is the Last Battle in Revelation. So we move to a kind of final armageddon in New Viron, after which once again certain people go to "heaven" (outer space) -- which turns out to be the Whorl. But, in the Short Sun series, the Whorl functions as heaven in some ways, for it is the place where Messiah Silk is, and it is the place from which we get the new seeds for "our daily bread."

There are two major areas where the book as a whole lets us down on, and we've beaten them both to death, but I'll say again:

a) we get the huge buildup on the secret of the inhumis, and it turns out the secret doesn't meet the expectations that the narrative builds up for it. We were expecting something more than we guessed in the first volume, but that was it.

Granted, that can be a problem for US. But if someone is re-reading the trilogy, I'd like to know if the "secret" is something anyone other than Horn and then the Narrator knows. I came away thinking, "well, everyone knows this secret," but now I doubt it. We learn it early on, but only because we see Horn learn it, and figure it out for ourselves. By "secret" here I mean that the inhumis become intelligent and ensouled as a result of human blood.

But this brings us back to what the Secret really is. Since Horn and the later Narrator don't intend to reveal it, why is it so clearly revealed to the reader in the course of the trilogy? I continue to think that the "great secret" that Jahlee tells at the end is not THE Secret, just "a great secret." One option, discussed here, is that the Secret is how the inhumis really get to Blue, which clearly is not by travelling through outer space. But that would not seem to fit the "too heavy to bear" aspect of the Secret. I suspect that the Secret is ... secreted away in the text, and that we in this discussion have not yet ascertained it, or ascertained it fully.

b) the fact that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body has been obvious since the first volume, so the climactic revelation that the narrator is Horn in Silk's body falls flat.

Well, you've revised your phrasing, and in terms of that revision, it would be a surprise to learn that it is not a living Horn in an "empty" Silk body, but that either (a) Horn is really dead and Silk is alive, or (b) both are alive in Silk's body.

And now a question: Has anyone investigated the possibility that Seawrack is actually an inhumis? She does seem to be able physically to change shape. We've been focussed on the relationship of Seawrack with the Mother, but where did Seawrack really come from? I've thought of her as a modified human, but maybe she is a modified inhumis. Krait certainly seemed to have a negative view of her as a schemer. Is it possible that Seawrack shows, in some way, what the inhumis might be like if they were truly transformed? Just some questions....

Patera Nutria

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

Michael Straight — 11 Apr 2001, 15:40 · follows James Jordan

On Wed, 11 Apr 2001, James Jordan wrote:

Maybe. But to me it was fitting, and her death in Nettle's forgiving arms was very moving. I think Wolfe wanted us to think about the soul of Jahlee. She really is human in every way that really counts. Now she dies. Is that really the end of her? Is she just an animal? Or does she perhaps "go to heaven" in a way analogous to the other character's ascension at the end of the novel?

If Fava is any indication, then Jahlee and Hide are going to gang up and possess Seawrack whenever Hide dreams.

-Rostrum

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Kevin J. Maroney — 11 Apr 2001, 15:46 · follows Michael Straight

Patera Nutria makes some good points, which I've snipped to get to the point that I wish to disagree with:

At 02:29 PM 4/11/01 -0500, you wrote:

[Alga Alice said:

a) we get the huge buildup on the secret of the inhum, and it turns out the secret doesn't meet the expectations that the narrative builds up for it. We were expecting something more than we guessed in the first volume, but that was it.

Granted, that can be a problem for US.

Well, yes. Alga was discussing *a real-world reader's reaction to the novel*, not the reaction of someone on Blue to the book. The narrative builds up a lot of emotional energy in "the secret"; Jahlee's revelation is a crucial plot moment because of the effect it has on everyone around it... and the secret goes off like a damp squib, because *we the reader already know it*.

(An aside: We knew the basics of the secret before Jahlee's revelation. However, the particular detail that it is the children of the inhum who gain intelligence from the blood rather than the predators themselves is something that had not been revealed in the earlier volumes, I believe. I keep trying to figure out how this detail is of such significance that it transforms our understanding of The Secret, and I keep failing to do so. I suspect that Wolfe intended for that last piece to be a major revelation, because of the way that the narrative is structured, but if it is, it eludes me.)

I continue to think that the "great secret" that Jahlee tells at the end is not THE Secret, just "a great secret." One option, discussed here, is that the Secret is how the inhum really get to Blue, which clearly is not by travelling through outer space. But that would not seem to fit the "too heavy to bear" aspect of the Secret. I suspect that the Secret is ... secreted away in the text, and that we in this discussion have not yet ascertained it, or ascertained it fully.

That doesn't hold up to examination. There's a long conversation between Horn and one of the twins in *_Green_* in which Horn tries to get the twin to understand the secret of the inhumis, and it's very much about how the inhumis benefit from the blood of their prey. Also, Horn's reaction to Jahlee telling Nettle the Secret is inappropriate for anything other than **the** Secret--you know, the one which the Inhumis will kill to protect?

And even if there is a "greater secret" hidden in the book--if that's true, that's Wolfe hiding the emotional core of the novel from his readers again, and I've already expressed today some displeasure to the degree that *_Return_* is distanced from the reader. If the secret that we are shown on-camera in a big climactic moment isn't **the** secret, then that's yet another layer of distance, and it's unsatisfying.

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

Adam Stephanides — 11 Apr 2001, 17:40 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

on 4/11/01 8:15 AM, David Lebling at dlebling at ucentric.com wrote:
Merryn's appearance, which struck me as a case of Asimov's syndrome, had as a saving grace the fact that we *_didn't_* find out she was Severian's sister, which would have been an even worse case of the above.

But we did, I think. Jahlee says she doesn't know who the boy [Severian] is, and Merryn says "'He's my brother. We're brothers and sisters, we witches and the torturers.'" (267) There's a bit of ambiguity here, as her words could be interpreted as meaning only that all torturers are "brothers" to all witches; but if that's what she means, her answer is rather unhelpful.

I think he ran out of energy or room or ideas or some combination of the three. Up to the point where the inhumis attack the wedding, things seemed almost on track, but after that there are few scenes that are excellent (Silk and Remora is one, but it's undercut by the fact that we knew "Horn" was Silk already -- we don't feel Silk's awakening).

Huh? The scene with Silk and Remora is the only scene that follows the wedding attack, except for the three-page Afterword.

--Adam

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