

# Digest whorl.v001.n052

The Whorl list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 28 Feb 1997

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Kieran Mullen — 28 Feb 1997, 11:34

First, there are at least two Kieran's on this list. I don't want to cause problems for the other one with my incendiary comments below.

There seems to be a certain uniform admiration for the intricacy of Wolfe's writing on this list. I feel that while admirable, this intricacy is secondary to Wolfe's sense of story. In a nutshell, the New Sun and Long Sun books are well written \*stories\* that also have hidden connections in them. I dislike some of Wolfe's work where the "puzzle" aspect overwhelms the story.

A few initial comments. First, of course Wolfe can write any damn way he pleases. He's under no obligation to make me happy. Second, of course Wolfe is more demanding on the reader than the average writer, and that's great. Third, of course Wolfe can turn out prose that is elegant, sonorous, and paints amazing images; his imagination sparkles. I think he is one of the best writers alive. (For me others include Stanislaw Lem, and Mark Helprin.)

The problem is that what I am calling "intricacy" is not an absolute good. It is one of many. For example, a fine storyline is not sufficient either, if the prose is dull and leaden. Sometimes it seems that Wolfe's intricacy can make a story, for me, unenjoyable. I still find The Fifth Head of Cerebus to be a depressing and confusing, and ultimately (\*for me\*) an unenjoyable book. Castlevision succeeds (\*for me\*) largely on the basis of the characters; the Arthurian subtext is subsubsubtext. Sure you can tease it out of the plotline, but much of it is fleeting and obscured.

I can hear outraged readers crying out in Wolfe's defense that he is more demanding of his readers, his goals more sophisticated, and basically, I'm plain lazy. All of these are true. But if you want intricacy, I can weave a haiku based on anagrams of first words of famous stories, and send it to you encrypted. What? You don't want to spend your time on it? What are you - lazy? Don't you realize how I'm pulling on the images of the entire stories by using only their first words? Don't you see how the DES encryption code generated strings that when uuencoded produced symbols from the periodic table?

It would be \*unreasonable\* to expect you to spend time on such a boring task. For me, Wolfe's New and Long Sun stories work because his stories have a sliding scale of connections, from very obscure to obvious, and his stories are fundamentally enjoyable whether you see all these levels or not. For me Fifth Head was just not as good a story. In his Endangered Species collection he has three short stories that don't make much sense when read separately, but were originally published separately. Here the story has been lost. The prose may be well written, but I don't \*care\* about what's going on.

This reminds me of some modern composers with whom I have talked. Their music is incredibly intricate, and if you understand all the internal and external references, very elegant. It just sounds like crap, that's all.

Now Wolfe can do whatever he wants. In addition he's a damn fine writer. When I'm dead and

long gone people will still be reading his works. But I'm willing to bet on which ones they'll enjoy the most.

Of course this list will naturally spend more time teasing out the connections in Wolfe's writings. It's natural, and it's often what I find most interesting in the list. I just feel a little uncomfortable sometimes that everyone thinks what I would call obscurantism is a Good Thing.

Kieran Mullen

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Questions or problems to whorl-owner at lists.best.com

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Doug Eigsti — 28 Feb 1997, 15:31 · follows Kieran Mullen

Keiran Mullen,

I emphathize with your views on the "story vs. puzzle" Wolfe. I, too, appreciate a good story more than searching for hidden clues. I have stated on these pages that I think Wolfe is magical in his ability to put thoughts in one's head without directly telling the reader every little detail. The counterpoint is that his work does reside on both the story and puzzle level. Finding arcane tidbits in a story one has grown to love is rewarding, especailly now that we have this forum to broadcast our ideas.

In LONG SUN Wolfe has surpassed even his earlier works in that the background information pieced together from NEW SUN allows the reader to play with possible Whorl scenarios that fit together to form a story in and of itself. Each reader can come up with his own favorite explanation. Interactive fiction.

I sometimes think that Wolfe is writing for a reader that doesn't exist. He has to build his audience up from people who have read his stuff once already. It is the 2nd pass reader he is really after. I can't say I am a fan of everything he writes. CASTLEVIEW left me confused, and I still don't see the point of Dr. Talos' play other than for symbolic clues. Maybe someone out there can enlighten me on this; help me find a way to like it. I always get the feeling, in every Wolfe story, that I'm missing something important. But I keep coming back for more. It's a welcome addiction.

=Talon=  
doug at nti.com

P.S. Perhaps you would like to adopt a Vironese name to avoid the Kieran confusion.

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