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The Whorl list — 5 messages, 4 voices, 03 Sep 1997

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Alice Turner — 03 Sep 1997, 22:29

Wombat,

First, re: Seven American Nights and the egg: I believe that I have read a description of Wolfe answering the question about which egg contained the hallucinogen, though I do not remember the specific answer. The description of Wolfe's answer indicate that he seemed somewhat saddened by the fact that people felt they had to ask him; I sometimes suspect that Wolfe is upset by the degree to which we the readers attribute to him both infallibility and infinite cleverness. Generally, there are answers to any question we might have, and we just have to ask the text correctly.

I'm a little confused by this. Why should he be saddened? He writes puzzle stories; we, the readers who like them (not a majority of the reading public) puzzle them out and he should love the effort we put in. As an author and a professional editor (I am also a professional editor and I have some idea of what this entails), he was and is certainly knowledgeable about the author's responsibility in how stories succeed in getting through to readers. If he seemed saddened at how we +failed+ (especially of a group like this), it seems a bit arrogant to me; it means that he was unclear or too cryptic or that his editor was too distracted to straighten things out.

If, on the other hand, he was saddened by the general intellectual caliber of the crowd at a convention, perhaps we should have sympathy.

-alga-

Michael Straight — 04 Sep 1997, 09:54 · follows Alice Turner

-- Begin original message --

Alga quoted and then wrote:
of Wolfe's answer indicate that he seemed somewhat saddened by the fact that people felt they had to ask him; I sometimes suspect that Wolfe is upset by the degree to which we the readers attribute to him both infallibility and infinite cleverness. Generally, there are answers to any question we might have, and we just have to ask the text correctly.

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First of all, I'm not sure I'd agree with the description of Wolfe's works as "puzzle stories." My impression is that Wolfe is just trying to tell stories in which many of the things that happen are told in a subtle way, and that his aim is that a careful reader could catch most of what's going on.

His "sadness" is probably like when you make a comment or a subtle joke and no one gets it. It's a fine line, you want people to get your jokes, but the more subtle you can be and still have people get it, the more fun it is.

And then some of the people you know start saying "Oh! She's being SUBTLE!" and proceed to find all these "hidden meanings" in everything you say.

I'm the first to admit that I've missed major points of some of Wolfe's works that were obvious once they were pointed out, but on the other hand, I feel like some of the discussion on this list is stretching things way beyond what Wolfe was trying to do. That's not to say it isn't fun or that there might be interesting connections that he wasn't even aware of, but I can see how it would be frustrating for Wolfe both to find that something he thought was clear turns out to have been too obscure for many readers and also to find people fixating on details that he didn't mean to attach much significance to.

Frankly, considering how many people would love to be able to write half as well as Wolfe, I have little sympathy for him. :-)

-Rostrum

Kevin J. Maroney — 04 Sep 1997, 13:12 · follows Michael Straight

At 09:54 AM 9/4/97 -0400, you wrote:

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And then some of the people you know start saying "Oh! She's being SUBTLE!" and proceed to find all these "hidden meanings" in everything you say.

This is more or less what I think was meant. Wolfe seemed a bit distressed at the people who think there are infinite layers of subtle meaning piled into his stories.

Incidentally, I think that Kathryn Locey's piece on "Seven American Nights" is brilliant and everyone should read it, but I am biased, since I published it.

Hi, Alice, er, alga.

Wombat

Kevin Maroney kmaroney at crossover.com
Kitchen Staff Supervisor New York Review of Science Fiction
<http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>

Jim Jordan — 05 Sep 1997, 20:20 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

At 01:12 PM 9/4/97 -0400, you wrote:

[Posted from WHORL, the mailing list for Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun]

At 09:54 AM 9/4/97 -0400, you wrote:

His "sadness" is probably like when you make a comment or a subtle joke and no one gets it. It's a fine line, you want people to get your jokes, but the more subtle you can be and still have people get it, the more fun it is.

And then some of the people you know start saying "Oh! She's being SUBTLE!" and proceed to find all these "hidden meanings" in everything you say.

Yes, it is a gestalt thing. Once you get the gestalt of a Wolfe story, you can see how the details fit in. But if you don't "catch" the gestalt, the details will often lead you into byways.

This is more or less what I think was meant. Wolfe seemed a bit distressed at the people who think there are infinite layers of subtle meaning piled into his stories.

I tend to agree with all sides of this. Alga is right that Wolfe seems disappointed when people don't pick up stuff that he has in the text, which he thinks is "clearly" there (like that Weer is a ghost, for instance). Yet, often it is clear only to him, because he put it there. I have not found, for instance, the "obvious" fact that the family of clones in "Fifth Head" is named Wolfe. (Maybe it's that Cerberus, though a dog, is like a wolf?) I think Wolfe has a problem at this point, and this is virtually my only negative criticism of his work: He packs so much into his writing that the reader has a hard time telling what is significant and what is not. Wolfe sometime scatters too many clues, I feel.

Thus, people come up with the idea that Severian, for instance, is a deceptive narrator, which, if true, renders the whole attempt to interpret the books pretty meaningless. In other words, if the clues simply aren't there at all, then we are left only with an interesting narrative and no more. Which is why I don't buy this approach.

I also think Wolfe is dismayed when people overinterpret his stuff -- but he has asked for it! (Some of what I've seen here I'd put in that category.)

Finally, I think Wolfe, like Tolkein before him, is a bit amazed at how little Christianity is known and understood by SF and fantasy readers, so that obvious references to God (such as the Outsider) are frequently misread. So, he has to come on-line and tell us point-blank: the Outsider is God! Fact is, though, you're not going to get Wolfe or Cordwainer Smith right if you don't know the Bible and Dante and a few other things.

At the same time, some people just aren't reading very carefully. The analytical afterword in my Ace paperback edition of "Fifth Head" praises Wolfe for not telling us whether V.R.T. is an alien shapeshifter or a human being; in fact, it is clear he is an alien. (Ah, but why is he called V. I get the R.T., but why the V.)

Incidentally, I think that Kathryn Locey's piece on "Seven American Nights" is brilliant and everyone should read it, but I am biased, since I published it.

I wish you distributed it better! I was in NYC last week and shopped several places, including SF stores, and nobody had the NYRSF, and most had never heard of it. Is it available anywhere? Are you going to get the articles on line?

Hey, does anybody know if a new issue of Crank has come out? I'd like to finish the Blaylock novel....

Nutria.

Michael Straight — 08 Sep 1997, 12:04 · follows Jim Jordan

On Fri, 5 Sep 1997, Jim Jordan wrote:

Finally, I think Wolfe, like Tolkein before him, is a bit amazed at how little Christianity is known and understood by SF and fantasy readers, so that obvious references to God (such as the Outsider) are frequently misread. So, he has to come on-line and tell us point-blank: the Outsider is God!

Furthermore, I think it's a shame for Wolfe to say, in a context outside the text of the novel, that the Outsider "is" God. I'm a Christian, and so have absolutely no objections to Wolfe writing about God 'as if he really exists,' but it seems to be cheating somehow for Wolfe to give this kind of extra authorial authority to God's existence in the Whorl when we should be forced to evaluate the narrator's experiences for ourselves.

-Rostrum