

Lilies, quits and balls

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Oct 1997

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/456>

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Gordon Brain — 25 Oct 1997, 20:18

Hello. I'm new to this list and this is my first message to it. I've only recently got access to the Internet. As an enthusiastic reader of Gene Wolfe's work, one of the first things I did was to search for items on that subject. Thus I discovered this mailing list, and, to my surprise discovered my own name mentioned in it. It was in a message from Michael, aka Mantis, dated 12 Sept 97, in which he mentioned some points I raised in a letter to him about his booklets. After that I thought I'd better join in. So here goes:

I am interested in the words Wolfe uses and their origins, e.g. the use of cant in the Long Sun volumes. Some of the terms, apparently derived by Wolfe from 18th century thieves' slang, were familiar to me, as they're still in common use over here (e.g. 'shag', which is neither a bird nor a dance in this context, as I see has been pointed out previously). Others seemed to have a ring about them which suggested they might be rhyming slang – e.g. 'lily' (short for lily white = right, as in Cockney slang, the word which actually contains the rhyme is often dropped, making the jargon doubly obscure to outsiders, as in 'butcher's', from butcher's hook = look). I think there are more of this sort, but I haven't worked them out yet.

Also on the subject of cant, there was a message from Doug Eigsti, dated 8 Jan 97, where he gave 'we're quits' = we're outta here. I'm not sure if it's just a British usage, but I always understood 'we're quits' to mean 'we're even' i.e. neither side is indebted to the other, which seems to tie in with the meaning of the passage (I, 24)

Re. the other point in Michael's message, about Wolfe's mother's family origins in Ayr, Scotland, I got that from correspondence with the man himself, which was a point of interest as it is also my home country.

I have just started to reread the Long Sun books, which as you'll all no doubt appreciate is a quite different but rewarding experience. One thing I noticed was the nature of the ball game, during which Silk receives enlightenment. I've seen this referred to somewhere as a basketball game, but it doesn't sound like one to me. For one thing he puts the ball in his pocket at the end – he'd have to have pretty big pockets for a basketball. Also, the double score for the ball bouncing back through the ring sounds new. I wondered if it might be something akin to the ball games played by the Aztecs and Maya.

This might tie in a bit with a Latin American feel to some aspects of Viron, e.g. the Spanish terms for government offices and institutions, the drinking of mate and some superficial similarities of the state religion. (Not to mention the possibly South American origin of the population of the whorl, assuming Typhon's domain included the area comprising the later Commonwealth). On the other hand it could just be a game which I haven't heard of. Does anyone else have ideas on this?

To change the subject, a book I read recently which readers of Wolfe might enjoy is The Mask Of The Sorcerer by Darrell Schweitzer. Set in a vaguely (but not explicitly) ancient Egyptian

setting, the narrative does have a Wolfean (Wolfish? what is the adjective to use here?) feel to it, although the story and characters are totally different. I'd recommend it anyway. It also gets an endorsement from Wolfe himself on the back cover.

Finally, while 'mining the archives' I noticed references to a comic book adaptation of part of the Book of the New Sun, and an audiobook version of Soldier In The Mist. If anybody could give me any clues as to how to get hold of copies of either of these I'd be very grateful.

That's it for now. All the best,

Gordon (I've already got a serviceable Vironese surname, so need for a nickname, I suppose).