

IGJ, impressions, riddles, many spoilers! (of course)

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 29 Jul 2000

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Dave Lebling — 29 Jul 2000, 12:04

I finally got the book and the time to read it (had to put aside the new Harry Potter, which has its own attractions as my children have now both read it first and want to talk about it).

Some of the things I noticed have already been covered (what an astute and careful-reading bunch!). Some, like Horn's arrival at the Citadel on the day `_Shadow of the Torturer_` starts, I thought no one would get, and was itching to report first, but no...

We get a surprising amount of throw-away detail in this book. One item that struck me particularly was Horn's tale of his and Nettle's early years on Blue. In OBW we got the "story of our life I tell around the dinner table to the family." It's told in the slightly whitewashed family-legend style, and we heard it so often I just accepted it. In IGJ we get the harder-edged details, the hardship, the failures, the fights with the relatives (and all this is very understated as well -- it must have been hell to live through it), but included is the throwaway about how the colonists produced their first generation of livestock, the twisted flower of a seed planted in Mucor's life history in the Long Sun books.

The funny thing about IGJ is that as I read it the book as whole didn't come into focus, partly because it didn't seem to be progressing what I thought of as the plot (fool!). I expected, having been given the `_Odyssey_` in book one, to get (sneaky Wolfe) the `_Iliad_` in book two, or maybe the `_Anabasis_`. That is to say, the war against the inhum. Instead, we get a different and apparently irrelevant war (but one won by a clever trick, so there's the `_Iliad_` poking up). In any event, just sitting here reflecting on it after reading the first batch of posts, it's a much much more wonderful book than it seemed as I was reading it, and it hangs together incredibly well considering the latticework narrative structure. It's full of little set-pieces and scenes that are wonderful, as is typical of Wolfe. (An aside: everyone has noticed the parallel with the eucharist in the scene at the Neighbor's altar. What about the parallel with Abraham and Isaac? Horn has been muttering about how Oreb would make a great sacrifice, or maybe a horse, mutter, mutter... Then he takes Hide up the mountain to the altar... and serves communion. There's your whole bible-study course in a nutshell.)

The big questions:

1) What have we learned about the secret of the inhum?

First, the inhum derive their intelligence and personality from the creatures they feed on, and almost certainly can pass them on to their offspring. We know the former from any number of examples, and we may infer the latter from Krait's mother's drinking Sinew's blood. As inhum are apparently oviparous (Fava's story), we may discount the possibility of `_in utero_` influence.

Second, and more importantly (and here we are getting close to the true secret), there are actually no inhum. There is only, poignantly, "a girl trapped in the body of a blood-drinking reptile." The inhum only have "spirits" because their victims have spirits, only have intelligence

because their victims have intelligence, and so on. Crucially, they also have the goodness or evil of their victims, their moral sense. Jahlee describes the pursuit of Horn at the end of OBW, and how the inhumani all felt they should kill him, but each hoped that another would do it first. They feel this way out of gratitude and also, I think, because the people whose blood they have absorbed would not be quick to kill either. Few are eager to cast the first stone, sinful or not. Result, Horn escapes.

Perhaps the secret is that if the inhumani are treated justly, treated as we would like to treat other human beings, they will gradually become less of a threat. This has been hinted at on several occasions. Krait asks, "why do you hate me?" and when Horn responds with responses about inhumani in general, asks "did I do those things?" I think there is a similar scene with Jahlee in IGJ. I don't mean this idea to be a reprise of the "Golden Rule" theory, but rather a "Rule of Law" theory. If humans treated inhumani as though they were human, as individuals who can be reformed or punished or rewarded based on their own actions, they would act in a more moral manner. Horn describes the Neighbor's history briefly, and the implication is that the inhumani were enslaved by the Neighbors, but it didn't help, it only made things worse. They were unleashed on the Neighbor inhabitants of Blue, but that only made things worse. Horn sees that as a possible future for humanity as well, and on Green it is coming true; the villages capture other humans to sell to the inhumani as slaves.

Does anyone other than me see a strong parallel to racism and African slavery here? (Though at times the inhumani are the stand-ins for Africans and at other times it's the humans). One could write an entire essay on this one aspect of the book. It's understated but everywhere.

2) Where is Silk and what's up with Horn/Silk?

This one is clear. Silk is Horn (half a spirit) and Horn is Silk (half a spirit plus a body). However, Silk is also "an aspect of Pas." But Horn is also only half of Silk (in some unit of measurement appropriate for the task), so he doesn't claim to be Silk, though sometimes he is, and is becoming more like him, just as the inhumani are human and for similar reasons (if using a less messy mechanism). Horn/Silk was kidnapped by the Gaonese (on the _Whorl_) because they thought he was Silk (I think this is explicitly stated in OBW). Also, the Gaonese had a working lander which made multiple trips to the _Whorl_ (Inclito's telling of Eco's story). (What happened to it?) Many people on the _Whorl_ knew and could identify Silk, so the Gaonese got the right man.

Some of Horn's powers are given by the Neighbors: he can find or create a path in OBW, he draws the sword to himself during his sewer-cleaning expedition, so this is not either a function of his merger with Silk or of being in a dream in the later segments. Reshaping the sword may be a dream-only function. Besides, it's not dreaming, it's astral projection. It happens in current time, affects those involved whether fellow-projectors or not, etc. The Neighbors can do it, the inhumani can do it if Horn is around (and Horn is a friend of the Neighbors). Could it be purely a Neighbor ability? Obviously Fava and Jahlee are frightened by it, it's not a normal inhumani thing, like flying.

I think Horn is slow to reveal himself to Hide because he no longer looks like himself, and wants Hide to come to the conclusion on his own. It's difficult enough at first for Hide to go along with the "pretend I'm your father" thing. If Horn had said, "I _am_ your father," Hide would have freaked out. Horn pushes all the clues out, and lets Hide do it himself. (There's a lot of this in the book. It happens with Mora, too. I wonder if Wolfe does this a lot in his real life? Must have been very frustrating for his children.)

Horn reverences Pas partly out of inertia, partly because Pas is now Passilk, with a helping of

the enlightened Silk, and hence worthy of some reverence.

More to come, when I get time.

-- Dave Lebling
(aka vizcacha)

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