

Finding the Wolf(e)

The Whorl list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 14 Feb 1997

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David_Lebling — 14 Feb 1997, 09:44

I first encountered Wolfe in Damon Knight's _Orbit_ collections. At the time I wasn't terribly impressed. I vaguely recall thinking "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" was overwritten and "mannered," whatever that's supposed to mean.

In retrospect, I realize that I was reading very fast, very uncarefully. That was a period in which I would have listed Niven, Tiptree, Cordwainer Smith, and Leguin as my favorite SF authors (which is not to say I don't like them today). None of them, whatever their gifts, writes the way Wolfe does. No one in SF writes the way Wolfe does, and Nabokov being dead, I'm not sure anyone anywhere comes very close. (What Nabokov did was a different sort of similar thing, anyway).

I reencountered Wolfe in _The Devil in a Forest_, which is one of his more accessible books (probably YA originally). I recall reading it twice in fairly short order, and it rekindled my interest.

I'm much more of a novel reader than a short story reader, so although I saw and even read some of his short stories, it was not until _The Shadow of the Torturer_ (which I bought based on a reviewer recommendation), that I really began to aggressively seek out his work.

I know I read the _New Sun_ books much too fast the first time, and missed almost everything. As someone remarked, it hardly matters with Wolfe, because you know in advance that you will read his books multiple times. I've read all of Wolfe's work I can find. (How many of you have read _Pandora_ by Holly Hollander? Raise your hands!)

My literary tastes are not terribly high. I read a great deal of SF, less fantasy (although I'm always on the lookout for good non-Xerox-of-Tolkien). I read the occasional mystery. For a writer who uses something like Wolfe's "don't tell them more than once" style, check out George V. Higgins (_The Friends of Eddie Coyle_, for example). Higgins, like Wolfe, is someone I recommend to friends, but always say, "I like him, but he can be a tough read."

I read a lot of history. I've read Borges, and Nabokov (though not all of Nabokov, by any means), and Barth, and Joyce, and Pynchon, and Coover. My typical taste in mainstream fiction runs more to Patrick O'Brian, though.

I don't think most people want to work when they read. Wolfe is hard work, and the more you read, the harder he gets.

For example, what was the business with Eland having pus on his legs, and Urus not, when they were lifted out of the tunnels in _Exodus_? He even comments about "the old man." Is this another Quetzal bite?

The thing about Wolfe is you never know when something like that is significant. I've fantasized

about scanning _Long Sun_ into my computer so I can do searches on it, set up hyperlinks, and so on. Paper is _so_ annoying.

Dave
(david_lebling at avid.com)

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

CoxRathvon — 14 Feb 1997, 11:58 · follows David_Lebling

Yipes, I hope I haven't diverted our Wolfe-chat into a literary sidebar that's too... hifilutin. I guess my list of favorite authors (Calvino, Borges, Nabokov, Barthelme) does include some modernist Heavy Hitters. I should add that I don't always try to bust my brains when I read. I like Tony Hillerman's mysteries set in Navajo country, and some of Sue Grafton's alphabetically titled mysteries. I like P.G. Wodehouse, which is about as fluffy as you can get. Heck, I crack up over Dave Barry.

As for sf, I grew up liking Tolkien and Bradbury. In high school and college I went for Heinlein, Clark, and Asimov. More recently I have liked LeGuin, Vance, Cordwainer Smith (getting a bit brainy again there), and Lafferty (who absolutely kills me, though I have read only half a dozen short stories in anthologies and would love to find more).

I can't remember how I got into Wolfe. I think I just pulled "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" off a library shelf one day with a shrug--and was soon agog over it. I know what Dave Lebling means about it being "mannered"--but I guess I have a taste for that sort of style, as my bent for Nabokov shows. The thing that slayed me about "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" was the way "self" defied being pigeonholed. What is the true nature of "self" if you're a clone? or an artificial intelligence? or a shape-shifter borrowing an identity? or a shape-shifter who's *forgotten* about borrowing an identity?

These variations on an elusive theme made me laugh and gasp at the same time. On top of that, I thought the prose was terrific. And I wondered, who is this guy Wolfe? And why aren't the critics who love Updike and Doctorow talking about him?

After "Cerberus" I tackled the New Sun series and definitely read it too fast, missing almost everything. I did the whole thing over again with slightly improved understanding, meanwhile reading everything else of Wolfe's I could find. I think I've tracked down everything except Wolfe's "Letters." (Yes, Dave, I have my hand raised for "Pandora by Holly Hollander.") I really love "There Are Doors" and dozens of the short stories. I also like the Latro books a lot, and "Peace." I think "Castlevue" finally went too far for me--I actually burst out laughing at the end because I couldn't believe how many loose ends Wolfe was just leaving there! I still don't know what the hell a lot of it was about.

For me the Long Sun series is right up there with his best stuff. I remember approaching "Exodus" with sort of a wary feeling. I guess I felt that there had been a lot of ambitious setting-up and that "Exodus" had a lot to prove.

About two-thirds of the way through--maybe at about the point of Silk's dinner with Siyuf and Quetzal et al.--I lowered the book and said aloud, "He's delivering!" I could feel the threads coming together, and the characters deepening, and the climax approaching with a lot of force. For me, it was working as pure page-turning sf excitement--even though, as we've been saying, there's so much else going on with Wolfe.

Sorry to gab on and on. I know there are a lot of Long Sun puzzle pieces yet to ponder. I'm very appreciative of the Time Line, the list of theophanies, etc. See you all later!

--Henry Rathvon

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

Fernando Q. Gouvea — 15 Feb 1997, 09:18 · follows CoxRathvon

I first found out about Wolfe from Algis Budrys' review of *The Claw of the Conciliator*. It was such a rave, that I decided I had to find those books and read them. But since I was living in Brazil, that wasn't easy to do! While I was looking for a way to get the New Sun books (the SF Book Club eventually obliged), I found *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and other stories*. I remember I read it when I was home sick for several days in a row, one enormous rush through all those amazing stories. And I fell in love. Later, I discovered I owned a copy of *Fifth Head of Cerberus*, which I had bought much earlier for obscure reasons. I only read it after I'd read the New Sun books; by then, I knew what Wolfe was about, and greatly enjoyed it.

I read lots of sf, though these days I always get the feeling that the sf I like is a minority taste... I read Connie Willis, Howard Waldrop, Kate Wilhelm, Kim Stanley Robinson, Iain Banks, some others. In some moods, I like "hard sf" a la Niven or Forward. I read lots of short stories. Beyond sf, I read Christian theology, history of mathematics, some literary fiction, a few mysteries, and the occasional strange book that doesn't fit any categories.

One of the things I like in Wolfe is the multi-level structure of his work. One can enjoy the ride without plumbing the depths, or one can spend lots of time exploring, like we do here. I think I've read everything he's written except for Operation Ares and some of the Cheap Street stuff (which I can't afford!).

Fernando Q. Gouvea
Chair, Dept. of Math & CS Editor, MAA Online
Colby College <http://www.maa.org>
fqgouvea at colby.edu fqgouvea at maa.org

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Heavy, adj.:
Seduced by the chocolate side of the force.

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