

THE FRIED HAT REVIEW

an occasional supplement to WINNIE, the fried hat review offers discussion, investigation, obfuscation, and the secret wisdom of the ages; whatever it may or may not contain or not contain, it is published on a highly irregular schedule by Michael Ward, he of P O Box 45, Mountain View, CA 94040

PART 1: ANTHONY VILLIERS CONTINUED

In the fourth issue of FRIED HAT REVIEW I demonstrated that Alexei Panshin's third Anthony Villiers adventure, MASQUE WORLD, was not the minor bit of light reading most reviewers took it to be, but instead was an involved allegory of the second coming of Christ. This analysis was based largely on the third book itself, but did use certain facts taken from the first two books in the series, STAR WELL and THE THURB REVOLUTION. Religious themes appear in all three of the books, but in the third come to dominate the story to the point where no review of MASQUE WORLD can make any pretense of analysis without treating the religious aspects of the story in some detail. Nevertheless, in the three or four published reviews I have run across, the stories are categorized as "mere fluff, very interesting reading for an idle hour or two, but not to be taken seriously" and the like.

The review called forth a postcard from Alexei, and a return postcard elicited a letter commenting on both the postcards, and the review. They are reproduced below,

Dear Mike,

The Villiers books are, in an explicit way, both religious in spirit and about religion—though it is only one element in them. They are in no way, shape, or form an allegory, let alone a Christian allegory. Of the evidence you cite, the only relevant pieces are Claude the plonk, and Dodd the Christian historian. The rest do not have a specifically religious character.

Allegorical interpretations can be made of anything. Because of the religious concerns and trappings of the Villiers books (most of the non-Christian of which may have passed you unnoticed), they perhaps lend themselves even more readily to allegorical interpretation, but it isn't my point in writing them.

Yours,
Alexei Panshin

P.S. I do appreciate the interest shown by the review.

I responded with a postcard saying essentially,

Dear Alexei,

So little SF is written on a specifically Christian theme (CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ stands out) that the Villiers series has to be discussed from that viewpoint. // Yes, I note the reference to Mithraism, earlier. // But the key to the Christian interpretation is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the tongues of fire/cones of light, and I can't believe that was unintentional.

Yours,
Michael Ward

Alexei responded with a letter,

Dear Mike,

You say: "So little SF is on a specifically Christian theme...that Villiers series has to be discussed from that viewpoint." I agree on the first part-- little SF is specifically Christian, or even concerned at all with religion. But the Villiers books are not "specifically Christian". The characters are not specifically Christian. The themes are not specifically Christian. The references are not specifically Christian.

As far as Biblical references go, the ones that occur to me as ones I have used are Old Testament rather than New. Dodd is a Christian historian. Daisy Bell Smetana was raised to be a Christian. But, as you say, there is a reference in STAR WELL to Mithraism. Smetana in Thr is a religious Jew. The Monists are religious, but not Christian. There are extensive quotations from THE ANALECTS OF CONFUCIUS and the KAMA SUTRA. Claude the plonk is not a Christian style god--in fact he talks in the words of Deuteronomy and Micah, which may be a reflection of contact with Smetana.

But the direction of the Villiers books is not specifically Christian--not exclusively Christian. If it were, I would have limited myself to Christian references and made my parallels explicit. If I had meant to invoke the Holy Spirit--well, I think I do, though not as you suggest or in terms of Christian dogma--I would have used the words, or deliberately evoked them. Which I didn't do. If you want an explanation of the brighter light cone over Villiers' head, you might say that it was a reflection of the relatively greater interest of the company in him than in anyone else--this is certainly consistent with what is said in the book, as for instance on the top of page 86. And to be orthodox (ou) is not to be necessarily an orthodox Christian--wouldn't it be more reasonable to take it that Orthodoxous were named that because they love regulation?

All that I have said so far is that you are wrong, which may not be any particular help to you. I wish I could tell you exactly what I think I am doing and what everything means and how everything will turn out, but I don't feel myself able to. That's what the remaining four books are for. I don't want to give them away or undercut them--and to say adequately what I do have in mind will take the full four books. Still, quite a lot of it all should fall into place in the next book.

Be well,
Alexei Panshin

Further discussion, then. My first statement simply means that any work of science fiction that appears to have some Christian (or generally religious) theme should be discussed from the standpoint of its religious theme, and that this is doubly important because so little SF is written on either a Christian or a "religious" theme in the first place. In the case of MASQUE WORLD, a number of interesting facts seemed to fall into place when I looked at it as a Christian allegory. One point you did not make is that Christian themes so permeate our culture that any literary product of the culture is in great danger of becoming a Christian allegory, intentional or not.

Miller's CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ stands out because it asks why man insists on destroying himself, and implies that this is the meaning of Original Sin. The framework of an established church (the monastic Catholic church) is used more for historical reasons than for any reasons of doctrinal relevancy, and the person of the wandering Jew allows the author to make necessary comments from time to time on the world's progress

or lack of it. Blish's A CASE OF CONSCIENCE asks explicitly if Original Sin is confined to the race of Man (a question Catholic theologians were asking in the early post-Sputnik era) and if so, why. There is, of course, Blish's more recent BLACK EASTER, which investigates precisely that point of doctrinal difference that most noticeably separates liberal protestantism from modern catholicism, and does it badly.

While some of my conclusions may be based on a misreading of Panshin's intentions, he has not yet explained the evocation of the Holy Spirit, which I earlier called the key to a Christian interpretation of the novel. Further, the distinctions made between the Old Testament, and the Old plus New Testaments, are much less pronounced in MASQUE WORLD than Alexei implies in his letter. Slyne and McBe are described in the review as members of the Jewish theocratic establishment at the time of Christ, as Pharisee and as scribe, and I indeed took Slyne's Orthodox nature to an orthodoxy (lower case) in the rules and laws of his religion. The real nature of the Nashuite Empire remains somewhat vague, though what central governing body there is seems to be a British-style bureaucracy. Comparisons with the Roman Empire might be worth making, in addition. The government on Delbalso, however, has little, if any, similarity to the theocratic regime necessary for an extended allegory, and makes for one of the weak points in the argument. Yet Slyne's main concern is with the laws themselves, to a degree quite plainly religious (this is made clear in the first sections of the book), and although he might be a Canon lawyer, the temptation is overwhelming to bring him into line with the Christ motif and the Jewish state.

McBe is nearly as important a character as Slyne, but I have less to say about him. I place him in whatever convenient cubbyhole I can reach, and the post of a minor theocrat seems about right.

The grafting of the Greek Mysteries and Druidic teachings onto the Old Testament and the revelations of Christ and the Apostles was complete by the end of the first millenium AD (except in such isolated places as South and Central America, where the process of incorporation into the existing body of Indian religion is still going on today) and the anachronistic intermingling of Jewish, Christian, and Judeo-Christian concepts in one book should not cause too many raised eyebrows. Alexei himself alludes to this process in STAR WELL, with his discussion of the date of birth of Mithra.

Obviously, there's a lot more to be said on the questions pointed up in these discussions. To go further at this point, however, would be to try to anticipate the creative act, a procedure that is sometimes useful (see, for example, Mark Walsted's analysis of Jack Vance's Demon Princes stories in NIEKAS 18) but generally proves futile. The conclusion will have to wait for the next four books in the series, and I suspect, from the mail I've gotten on the review, that there will be several other people waiting for the books to come out.

PART 2: THE SNOW WOMEN and THE TWO BEST THIEVES

This is basically a discussion of another work in progress, and like the Villiers series, the stories of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser are being published in paperback form for the first time. Unlike the Villiers stories, however, the Leiber series dates back in some cases to the late thirties, and Leiber has traced the origin of the series back even further, to a number of letters to a friend, written in the mid thirties.

Much of the popularity of the series, laid in the space-time universe of Newhon, can be traced to the companionship of the two dissimilar figures, Fafhrd the northern barbarian I with all that implied in the WEIRD TALES school of the thirties) and Grey Mouser, the small, silent deadly sneak-thief and gut-slicer.

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The Sword and Sorcery genre has for some time been under attack for its repressed homosexuality (or, in the case of certain amateur comic strips, its not-so-repressed homosexuality) and Leiber has previously chosen to deal with the problem by ignoring its existence. His two characters are "just good friends", and from time to time have whatever heterosexual experiences he can get published in the magazines. In "The Two Best Thieves of Lankhmar", however, he introduces homosexuality, female, to be sure.

The story is as follows: Our two heroes have just returned from a successful expedition, bringing with them the hard-won loot. They congratulate themselves on being the two best thieves in Lankhmar. As the story unfolds, however, each of our heroes is dilled out of his share of the proceeds by a wily woman, and towards the end of the story they are forced to set out on another task. The two women, we learn, are lesbian lovers, and it is they, we realize, who are the two best thieves in Lankhmar.

The symmetry is too perfect to be ignored. However, we might ignore the implications were it not for the most recent story, "The Snow Women" (Fantastic, April 1970. The earlier story was published in Fantastic for August 1968) in which we learn something about Fafhrd's childhood. We learn that he grew up in a strongly matriarchal society, where the strength of the men was emasculated by their fear of the women's magic. The fact that their magic is based on the use of cold in an arctic tribe, and Fafhrd's deep fear that his mother was responsible for the death of his father while climbing a mountain, combine to send Fafhrd south toward the warm lands and the cities.

Having been brought up in an emasculating society, he's certainly going to have some strange ideas about women. To be fair about it, Leiber draws him as a horny enough character, and one of the reasons he runs away is to get away from his wife-to-be and unborn child, finally running off with an exotic dancer from a troupe of traveling entertainers.

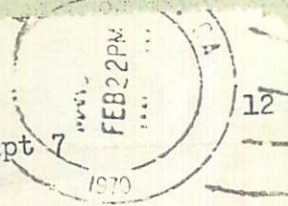
Again, we'll have to wait for further stories to find out for sure. We still know nothing of Grey Mouser (other than the slight references in the earlier stories) and we still haven't seen the two meet for the first time (though there is an obscure reference to a hedge wizard in "Snow Women"). The story is very good, by the way; read it, and write letters to Fritz Leiber asking for the rest of the series.

I'm sending a copy of this to Dr. Wertham. I hope he doesn't try to have FANTASTIC censored. Wonder if he's ever seen VIMPIRELLA....

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