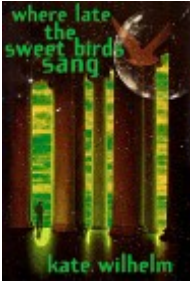




Lambda Sci-Fi

DC Area Gaylaxians



Where Late the Sweet Birds Sang
By Kate Wilhelm
Discussed July 1999

Background

Kate Wilhelm's novel, *Where Late The Sweet Birds Sang* (1976), won many awards and is considered a classic in the genre.

Discussion Questions

1. Cloning is only a technology -- what do you think is the real issue dealt with in this book? Is there anything more specific than 'what does it mean to be human'? Are there any issues of group vs. individuality, and if so how are they covered?
2. Did you think, knowing humans as they are in *this* world, that the behavior of the clones was believable? If so, would it have been if there wasn't the 'telepathy' that Wilhelm gives them? Why do you think that they started to lose the capacity for creative thought? If they functioned as a unit, could not the unit as a whole still be creative? Or is Kate Wilhelm writing a morality play about 'Science gone haywire'? Do you accept the explanation of it being similar to a 'generation gap'?
3. Do you think that the given scenario, the (apparent) total absence of other humans on the planet, was believable? Wouldn't there be some kind of survivalist groups still around? How about military groups? Or national leaders and their entourages?
4. Is the 'Old House' a metaphor? Is it a metaphor for more than just the old culture (the pre-clone culture)?
5. Did you believe that Barry could be so blind as to the demise of his own 'civilization'? He seems to be one of the only ones who would appreciate Mark. Do you think he really understood Mark, fundamentally?
6. Although there is a lot of physical intimacy between the clones, it does not come off as at all erotic. Does this seem to be an artistic choice of the author, to convey a point about the clones (their 'alienness') or is it simply the time in which the book was written, or else the author's own avoidance of the issue? That the contact was not erotic, do you think it makes the book any more acceptable to the public?

7. At the end, was the suddenness of the disappearance of the clone civilization believable? Wouldn't some of the older, and still able to be creative clones, such as the Barry brothers, be able to survive? Would they not have come down to join Mark and his new civilization? Or would Barry have opted not to do so, so that the new group would have a better chance at survival?

8. "What's a woji?" Think of it on more than one level. Is it a 'shocker' to get the clone children out of their uncreativity, their lack of wonder or originality? Or is it a way to help them see that the world (the forest) is unpredictable?

9. What role does religion play in the novel? Does it seem that cloning was accepted a little too easily, knowing how adverse our society is to cloning? (Admittedly the issue had not really come up so much when the novel was written). Is the outlook on life of the clones, in the second part of the book, a religion? It has elements that might be called 'superstitious', but it is clear that Mark doesn't seem to believe in those, yet he sees the need for them.

10. This book was originally published 23 years ago, in 1976. Do you think it seems dated? Have any of Wilhelm's scientific assumptions been proven or disproven since then? Have any of the aspects of the world she created come to pass? Would you consider this a book of "hard" SF? Why or why not?

11. Do you consider Wilhelm's characters to be believable? Three-dimensional? Likable? Admirable? What are Wilhelm's assumptions regarding gender? What characteristics does she assign to male characters? To females? Which of these characters are positive, which negative? How does her use of gender compare with the use of gender in other books we've read? Do you consider this a feminist book? What did you think of the ending?

12. How does Wilhelm use homosexuality in this book? What unspoken attitudes toward homosexuality does the book display? How do these attitudes compare with the attitudes displayed in other books we've read? Contrast these attitudes with the attitude toward heterosexuality. What does heterosexuality symbolize in this book?

13. This book clearly displays a particular attitude toward "individuality" and "diversity." How does this attitude compare with the attitude in *The Merro Tree*? Do you think that this book carries an underlying political message? What message? How effectively does the book convey that message? How does this effectiveness (or lack thereof) compare with the effectiveness of the message in *The Merro Tree*?