

Tiny reviews of Gene Wolfe novels

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Dan Rabin — 16 Jan 1993, 20:01

Everybody seems to be recommending The Book of the New Sun as *the* series of novels by Gene Wolfe to read first. Yes, they are the best, and The Fifth Head of Cerberus is almost as good, but what about Wolfe's other novels? Here follow some short reviews of them, ordered from most recommended to least. I omit the Soldier series, which other posts have addressed. I also omit Peace, which I have not yet read, and Operation Ares, which I have not yet obtained.

There Are Doors

The reader has a problem here. The narrative is in the third person, restricted to the point of view of the protagonist, who is obsessively in love with a woman from an alternate universe. He goes there to seek her. Or does he? We have reason to doubt...

OK, I've told you too much already. It is characteristic of Wolfe that an abstract problem like the foregoing provides enough tension to hang a novel on. Of course, the alternate world itself is surreal and frightening. And of course there are surprises and brilliant ideas galore, and of course the book grabs your mind and firmly twists it.

Pandora, by Holly Hollander

This book is a refreshingly light murder mystery set in the present day in the far suburbs of Chicago (where, incidentally, Gene Wolfe resides). The narrator is a teen-age girl who seems to have personal relationships with most of the suspects. Thus all of Wolfe's authorial personality has to be expressed through the limited voice of a young person of a different generation and sex from the actual author. It doesn't work all of the time, but it's lots of fun to read. And short, too.

Castleview

Illinois, again. A small town. All Hell breaks loose. Literally. Once again, Wolfe concerns himself with points of contact between two worlds. The small-town characters (and even their pets) become elevated to a heroic plane again, quite literally. There is no lack of action and excitement. There *is* a lack of much indication of what the ****** is going on, but if you've gotten this far down the list, you expect this from Wolfe.

Free Live Free

A very odd book indeed. Four down-and-out mutual strangers are thrown together in house that is then demolished. The old man disappears - what was his secret? Escapades ensue, ranging from comic to suspense-thriller fare. There are many chapters of these, and then there is a conclusion, which doesn't quite justify the journey and is drawn from yet a different genre.

I hope these reviews prove useful to somebody. I'm writing this out of a sense of duty, because I found it difficult to make up my own mind two years ago to explore Wolfe's works beyond *The Book of the New Sun* and *The Urth of the New Sun*. There seems to be something compelling about certain created universes that makes me reluctant to read other works by the same author. Perhaps I fear that to do so would reveal that these worlds, which seem so real, are actually artifices.

How do other readers feel about, for example,

* J.R.R. Tolkien's non-Middle-Earth works? (*Leaf by Niggle*, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Smith of Wootton Major*).

* Frank Herbert's non-Dune books? (admittedly, there are other reasons to regret having read *The God Makers*)

Dan Rabin

K R Maxson — 18 Jan 1993, 23:20 · follows Dan Rabin

I would take exception with those who say that Wolfe's New Sun material is his best work, but to each his own. My personal favorite is *There Are Doors*, followed closely by *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, "The Death of Doctor Island" (not to be confused with any of the other short stories about death, doctors, and islands), and *Peace*.

To describe many of Gene Wolfe's novels before they are read is, in my opinion, to diminish them. I have never read a Wolfe piece that I regretted, so read all of them. His *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days* and *Endangered Species*, both collections of short stories, are good places to start.

The New Sun material is an attempt to weave a Wolfesque story into the tapestry of commercial fantasy and science fiction. I think it is done rather slickly, but that much of the current SF market would rather bypass books that aren't reassuringly shallow and don't spell out the point for the reader by the end. (Personally I feel that if the writer can sum up his or her thesis in a few sentences at the end of the book, the book should have only been a few sentences and save the gloss. If a book doesn't make me think at least as much as walking in the woods does, I'd just as soon walk in the woods.)

Castlevision and the *Pandora* I both found disappointing, although still enjoyable.