

Gene Wolfe review: Nightside the Long Sun, Lake of the Long Sun

The SF-Lovers list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 30 Mar 1994

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/119>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

David Langford — 30 Mar 1994, 01:18

Author: Gene Wolfe

Title: Nightside the Long Sun

Publisher: New English Library

City: London

Date: 1993

Order Info: 0-450-59405-X

Pages: 333pp

Series: The Book of the Long Sun (alias Starcrossover's Planetfall) Volume: Book 1 Comments: hardback UKP 15.99

Author: Gene Wolfe

Title: Lake of the Long Sun

Publisher: Tor

City: New York

Date: Jan 1994

Order Info: 0-312-85494-3

Pages: 352pp

Series: The Book of the Long Sun (alias Starcrossover's Planetfall) Volume: Book 2 Comments: hardback \$22.95

reviewed by Dave Langford

[A version of this review appeared in the British SF Association's magazine VECTOR.]

One problem with reviewing Gene Wolfe is that often there's so little to say that isn't trespassing - peeling away at least some of his veils of sneakiness and indirection. Another is that with only the first two books of a new series to hand, critics can confidently expect a gleefully grinning Wolfe to pull the rug from under any too-rash understanding of what's going on....

As far as I can see, it is not actually stated anywhere in *Nightside*'s text that the setting, the 'whorl', is a vast generation starship modeled like a cylindrical space colony (or like Clarke's Rama), with its artificial 'long sun' running down the central axis. Part of this emerges in the blurb which after all has to tell us *something* and the picture will soon be evident to any sf reader used to picking up on clues like the skylands visible overhead when the sun is shaded, or the scavenged building material called shiprock. And does 'whorl' hint at cloud patterns shaped by Coriolis force down the long axial vista? Pay attention! (I made that tiny speculation before reading *Lake*, which explicitly gives another though not incompatible origin for the name.)

This new sequence *The Book of the Long Sun* is set 'in the world of *The Book of the New Sun*' ... but remotely and not near the period we know. The whorl's launch is ancient history in

the _Book_, its presumably slower-than-light technology long superseded by the mirrors and ships of the Hierodules. As though in passing, _Lake_ drops the name of the autarch who once ruled many worlds and ordered the launch of this 'starcrosser': we have met him in _The Sword of the Lictor_ and _The Urth of the New Sun_, after which his mere name adds a whiff of gigantic vanity and hubris to the star-voyage. That allusion apart, it is not necessary to have read the four or five books of the _Book_.

Now, three centuries on, the whorl's launch is forgotten history in this new series too ... a venerable sf tradition since Heinlein's _Universe_ (though here longer and variously reliable memories are owned by certain AIs and robots called 'chemical' beings or 'chems', for all that they appear to be metallic and nuclear-powered). Equipment is dying with age. Dwindling stocks of old-technology slug-guns, 'floater' hovercars and videophones coexist with swords, pack animals, labour-intensive farming. The gods, whose nature is best indicated by the fact of their heaven being called Mainframe, appear only very rarely at the windows of the electronic altars. The whorl is already old.

Perhaps necessarily, the setting doesn't at first seem as deep and wondrous as Urth in the _Book_. But this is Wolfe, and things are subtler than the easy sf summation above. When the new books' hero Patera Silk, teacher and priest, is touched by a god, it is not one of the nine chief gods of Mainframe who gives him enlightenment and purpose, but the shadowy (though known and accepted) Outsider. There is mystery here, and probably Mystery ... we are given to understand that the Outsider is the only god whose dominion and creation extend outside the whorl; and that once, incarnated, he may have driven merchants from a temple. Is it significant that for a little while before violence intervenes in the final chapter of _Lake_, Silk finds himself heading for acclaim in his home city and about to enter it on a donkey?

Silk is a new and likeable variant of the Wolfe hero, seen from outside in third-person rather than first-person narrative (cf. Severian, Latro) for a change. He's truly devout and even celibate despite some severe temptations so far ... yet ready to turn his hand to burglary _ad majorem deorum gloriam_ when his church and school are sold off to pay taxes. Silk's bravura attempt to steal them back forms the centrepiece of _Nightside_. The whorl's nightside refers to its criminal underworld as well as the darkness under the long sun's revolving shade, and there's some nice thieves' cant to go with this: as expected from this author, the more esoteric terms like 'dimber' (meaning approximately 'nifty') can be traced to authentic English historical slang. In the cant, to burgle a residence is, precisely but euphemistically, to 'solve' it.

So we shortly find the young, bright, resourceful and entirely inexperienced Silk solving a crime-lord's mansion which is surrounded by high, spiked walls and guarded by a monstrous, tracked killer robot ('talus'), oversized lynxes and birds, novel weapons, etc. People have banged on so much about Wolfe's elusiveness, his games of indirection, that it's worth noting how frequent, well-crafted and straightforward are the passages of high adventure or suspense.

Our hero is also capable of solving problems in the detective sense, like Father Brown. (Little ratiocinative treats keep recurring in this author's work: remember the lochage in _The Shadow of the Torturer_ who deduces Severian to be no impostor but a genuine torturer, without hearing him speak or looking up from his desk?) Later in _Nightside_ Silk unravels a murder in a brothel, uses knowledge painfully gleaned from his earlier adventures to tackle a case of almost literal demonic possession, conducts a ritual cleansing and exorcism, and is rewarded by a numinous encounter with one of the lesser Mainframe goddesses.

All these strange activities appear to be having a catalytic effect on Silk's home city of Viron, one of very many city-states in the whorl, whose democratic Charter has long been suspended along with the office of president or 'calde' [acute accent on the e]. Instead, a bunch of

evidently corrupt councillors (the Ayuntamiento) has held on to power for a period which seems not merely illegal but impossible. There are whispers in the streets, and by the end of *_Nightside_* the words *_Silk for Calde_* are appearing scrawled on walls....

Lake of the Long Sun illuminates much of what has gone before, with the new light casting longer and darker shadows. Further theophanies occur. This time Silk's journey to the underworld is literal: searching for the secret meeting-place of the Ayuntamiento, he finds himself ensnared and lost in endless tunnels within the skin of the whorl, down where it's colder and closer to space. Here we find the chem soldiers who were placed to defend each city against the others, most 'asleep', those on guard worrying that after three centuries the defence plans may no longer suffice: more wheels within wheels.

The underworld also contains humans in biological stasis. Devotees of the *_Book_* will wonder if it's important that Silk, already lame like Severian, helps call a 'dead' woman from the deeps of time as Severian did.... Other mysteries and wonders abound, including a window through which Silk at last sees stars and one brief dazzling glimpse of what must surely be, for him and all the whorl's passengers, the New Sun. There are confrontations with members of the Ayuntamiento. We have seemingly come to the brink of revolution and war, with portions of Viron's above-ground human army, prodded in some cases by the electronic goddess who most favours Silk, hailing him as leader. The next book is to be called *_Calde of the Long Sun_*.

I haven't even mentioned the still unexplained case of apparent vampirism, the secular rationale for possession by gods, the too-obvious-to-see system of naming which is demurely revealed in a glossary at the beginning of *_Lake_*, the talking night-cough, the thief, whore and other-city spy who variously befriend Silk, the highly-charged dreams and prophecies, the flying men who glide watchfully far above the action (and the subplot about hawking for one with an eagle), the submarine in Lake Limna, the careful delineation of the three females who run the church school with Silk (one human, one chem, one half-and-half), the ultra-black joke when one of those 'corrupt' councillors proves to be *_literally_* so, the inevitable discovery that the tokens used as coins in the whorl are not coins, and much more. These books read so very smoothly that one feels a distinct jolt on looking back to realize how thoroughly crammed they are with colourful invention and incident.

Wolfe's prose remains fine and precise. There's a temptation to remark that it contains fewer of the deep notes, the magical resonances and ironies that throb through the original *_Book_* ... but many of those moments of the *_Book_* went unrecognized or half-understood until the entire work was available for rereading as a whole. *_The Book of the Long Sun_* remains maddeningly incomplete.

So far: vintage Wolfe, indeed. His hand has not lost its cunning. Be sure to buy the whole series.

David Langford
ansible at cix.compulink.co.uk