

Gene Wolfe: CASTLEVIEW

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Gareth Rees — 28 Aug 1994, 23:22

Castlevuew by Gene Wolfe

A book review by Gareth Rees

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The word goes around, among the critics, that the Gene Knight stands by the road to "Castlevuew", challenging all who would pass to single combat. And here the critics come, one by one, their standards flying, their warhorses a-glitter with bejewelled armour, their pens (mightier than the sword) unsheathed. But they are no match for the Gene Knight, who sends them packing soon enough with a quick one-two (and through and through).

So in the absence of a Gawain, amateur reviewers like myself must tread carefully around these parts, for "Castlevuew" is a chaos of a book, a cornucopia over-full with wondrous things, packed beyond its covers with characters and events and jokes and sly references to other texts that all demand an explanation but admit of none. In short, it makes no sense.

But the Gene Knight is having none of that. "Of course it makes sense, it's just that you're not as clever as I am," he says. Which is true. So let's peer over his shoulder and see what we can see.

The last living descendant of King Arthur lives, all unawares, in the small mid-western town of Castlevuew, one hundred miles from Chicago. Castlevuew is so called because on a clear night, if the magic is right, you can see the turrets of a medieval castle. The castle belongs to the sorceress Vivian Morgan, who has followed Arthur's heirs to America, and Morgan is not the only one to have come to Castlevuew, for fairy folk, the Sidhe, giants, ghosts, vampires and sasquatch all make an appearance in this novel.

Car salesman Will Shields arrives at Castlevuew with his wife Ann and daughter Mercedes, and as if this unremarkable family is just what they have been waiting for, with terrifying and violent swiftness the magical creatures that throng around the town put their plan (I say 'plan', but these are fairy folk, and whatever it is that motivates them, what rhyme or reason their actions may possess, remain hidden to mortals like me) into effect. Among them are the sinister Archdeacon Fee, the charming Doctor von Madadh, Long Jim, who was supposed to have died in a car crash ten years before and who may or may not be a giant, and Vivian Morgan herself, still seductive after 1,500 years. The redoubtable people of Castlevuew do their best to fight, but the supernatural forces will not be gainsaid, and pretty soon the good guys are dead, or hospitalised, or lured to Morgan's castle for a last great battle. And at the end someone who may or may not be an Avatar for Galahad dies to save the others.

The style of the novel is a remarkable tour-de-force (though we have been led to expect nothing less from Wolfe), for while the circumstances of "Castlevuew" might seem perfect for an atmosphere of supernatural horror, Wolfe goes completely the other way. Even as the magical forces invade the lives of the characters, running them out of their homes, king them, driving

them to suicide and kidnapping their children, yet the style and dialogue are upbeat and playful. Even when the armies of Good and Evil (or so we suppose them to be) are drawn up for their last battle, Shields and von Madadh can't resist exchanging quips. The book is marvelously witty and humorous; the direst and strangest things happen as though they were not at all out of the ordinary; Wolfe cannot spot a reader's assumption or expectation without failing to fulfill it.

"Castlevuew" happens at such an energetic, helter-skelter pace (the entire novel covers less than 24 hours) that you could read it and never notice that anything is amiss. But turn the last page and start to think about it, and the nagging questions remain. What exactly is it that Morgan has been hanging around Castlevuew for? What motivates the fairies? Who is the enigmatic King Geimhreadh supposed to be? What is Odin doing in a book with King Arthur? And what is it all about? Someone tell me, please.

Author: Wolfe, Gene
Title: Castlevuew
Publisher: New English Library
City: London UK
Date: 1992

dani — 29 Aug 1994, 01:35 · follows Gareth Rees

Gareth Rees <gdr11 at cl.cam.ac.uk> w:

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<Shrug> I took the book to be a benign joke, a deliberate juxtaposition of every vaguely-applicable stock plot device that Wolfe could shoehorn into the book. He was having fun, and doing so skillfully. I don't believe the book repays delving deeper.

Dani Zweig