

Wolfe's "New Sun": Severian Unmasked!

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Charles Dye — 20 Sep 1995, 02:02

SEVERIAN UNMASKED:

Gene Wolfe's "The Book of the New Sun" epic is one of the most complex, ambitious masterworks in the field of science fiction. Wolfe draws upon dozens of literary sources to enrich his world; I will cover a few here. My intentions in posting this explication are twofold: first, to enrich the Severian experience for those who have missed some of Wolfe's references; second, I'd like to hear from others who have insights I don't.

I, SEVERIAN:

The work most frequently referenced in "The Book of the New Sun" is Robert Graves's "Claudius" cycle. I have a horrible suspicion that the grave robbers in Chapter I of "Shadow" are there partly as a punning homage to Graves. Certainly there are too many similarities between the two works to be explained by coincidence.

"I, Claudius" is the autobiography of the Roman Emperor, Claudius, "translated" by Robert Graves. Claudius stresses the point that he is writing the story himself: "I am my own mere secretary...." He intends his manuscript for an audience in the distant future, and at one point considers the idea of sealing it in a lead casket for safekeeping.

"The Book of the New Sun" is the autobiography of the Autarch Severian, "translated" by Gene Wolfe. Severian also does his own writing, "... sitting up writing all night here in the clerestory." He decides to send his story to a distant time, possibly even a different universe, by sealing it "in a coffer of lead" and launching it from Tzadkiel's starship.

Both Claudius and Severian have a tendency to write long, complicated sentences. Claudius's writing style mimics his stumbling tongue, too slow to keep up with his darting thoughts; Severian's perfect memory allows him to match subject to verb despite any numbers of intervening clauses.

Claudius and Severian are both lame (Claudius has a withered leg, Severian a battle wound.) Both become Emperor through unlikely twists of Fate. Both lead armies into battle, and successfully prosecute a war. Both are deified after their deaths. Severian's gentle brutality reflects Claudius's patrician tyranny.

Claudius' wife, during the early part of his reign, is the lady Valeria Messalina. Severian, shortly after assuming the throne, marries a lady named Valeria. Since Valeria is a heliotropic (sun-seeking) plant, this is a case of Wolfe bettering Graves!

"The Book of the New Sun" is littered with dozens, if not hundreds, of similar references. If you have not read "I, Claudius" and "Claudius the God", you are missing much of "The Book of the New Sun", as well as a work of literature which is great in its own right.

SEVERIAN AS CHRIST:

Most of the references to Jesus Christ in the "Book of the New Sun" are too obvious to give special mention to: Severian heals the sick, brings the dead to life (and vice versa, of course), changes water into wine, et cetera. More subtle, I think, is Severian's encounter with Typhon in Chapter XXVI of "The Sword of the Lictor". Typhon's offers correspond exactly with Satan's temptations of Christ in Matthew, chapter 4: bread from stones, flight, power over the world. This chapter (in "Sword") also hints darkly at "The Inferno". Severian's confusion at "descending" from the mountain's lap to its summit recalls Dante's puzzlement at Virgil's descent/ascent from Hell. Oddly enough, Typhon only gets two heads and one sinner to chew on.

SEVERIAN, THE MEMORIOUS:

The character of Severian benefits somewhat from "Funes, the Memorious" in the short story of the same name by Jorge Luis Borges (about whom more later). Funes has a mind crippled by a perfect memory. He is incapable of any level of abstraction; since dog-1 (asleep, at 10:20 am) is so obviously different from dog-2 (playing outdoors at 10:25), Funes is unable to consider them aspects of the same dog, or even to put the same name to them.

Severian, on the other hand, seems an absolute philosopher of abstraction. However, he does hint that his gift may be linked to "poor judgement" and at one point even states baldly that he is insane. Certainly he does display a certain messianic madness at times.

TERMINUS EST:

A "terminus" is the end of the line, of course. Severian does not know, but Wolfe certainly does, that the "terminator" is the division between night and day on a planet's surface. The sword's name could be translated "Edge of Day".

MASTER ULTAN:

His character is drawn partly from Claudius' history tutors, Athenodorus and Sulpicius. (Ultan at one point mentions a reading room reserved for the use of "the Autarch Sulpicius".) Athenodorus is described as possessing a large, perfectly white beard stretching to his waist, and a gentle wisdom. Sulpicius is the human Dewey-decimal catalog, who will always "know what authority had treated of these points, in which book, and from which shelf of which case in which room of which library they were to be obtained."

However, the character of Master Ultan derives mostly from a real man, Jorge Luis Borges. Borges is considered the greatest Argentine writer. When he realized that his vision was failing, Borges set to work memorizing great quantities of literature. After becoming completely blind, Borges was named director of the Argentine National Library in Buenos Aires.

Borges's "Fictions" deliberately muddy the distinction between truth and fiction, giving them a slippery, eerily vague air. Borges himself would be delighted to know that he has taken on new life as a fictional character.

(And how would Gene Wolfe feel about similar treatment? Little Severian, demanding a bedtime story, states: "It should have wolfs in it.")

ONWARD, UPWARD

Severianology is a new science. When, one fine day, the critical world outside of "science fiction" discovers "New Sun", we can expect to see many scholarly dissections and annotations of Wolfe's work. Until that day dawns, however, information is scarce and hard to come by. If you have insights that you'd like to share, post them here, or email me.

raibeck — 20 Sep 1995, 21:01 · follows Charles Dye

Unfortunately I can not add anything to your discourse since I have not yet read the series. However maybe you (or someone else) can give me some advice.

I have been trying to get started with this series for quite some time. It's supposed to be one of the masterworks of the field. Yet, no matter how hard I've tried, I just can't get past the first 30 pages or so of the first volume (The Shadow of the Torturer). Obviously this is not light reading.

I like to think I'm at least half-bright, but this book has me stumped. How can I best approach this series? Is there a particular background I need? (Wolfe's extensive vocabulary doesn't make things any easier; even my Random House College Dictionary doesn't have a lot of the words.)

Thanks in advance.

Andy

The Cutest Man on The Net — 21 Sep 1995, 16:03 · follows raibeck

raibeck at tiac.net (Andy Raibeck) writes:

I have been trying to get started with this series for quite some time. It's supposed to be one of the masterworks of the field. Yet, no matter how hard I've tried, I just can't get past the first 30 pages or so of the first volume (The Shadow of the Torturer). Obviously this is not light reading.

Very true. One of the things that has cropped up in a couple of email discussions about this book I've had recently, is that it takes a long time for things to fit together. For example, the scene in the start of _Shadow_ where Severian is saved from drowning isn't really explained until quite late in _The Claw of the Conciliator_, so on the first read through at least, things can seem quite disjoint..

So what I'm saying is 'it reads best when you have already read it' which isn't much help.. hmm.. it's certainly the only series that makes me want to reread it immediately I finish it every time - six so far.

I like to think I'm at least half-bright, but this book has me stumped. How can I best approach this series? Is there a particular background I need? (Wolfe's extensive vocabulary doesn't make things any easier; even my Random House College Dictionary doesn't have a lot of the words.)

The vocabulary is one of the many things I like about the series, in that every obscure word is both real and used appropriately.. some of the beast names are prehistoric species names, for

example. There is a piece in _Castle of Days_ where Wolfe goes through the obscure vocabulary in _Shadow_, I think someone has done a _Lexicon Urthus_ but I'm not sure exactly what it entails - and it is rather expensive. I don't think there's any specific background you need to appreciate it, but I certainly have taken more out of it as I brought more to it, there are many levels in there.

It's quite a contrast with the Long Sun books, where things seem to develop in a much more linear fashion.. is that just me, or does anyone else have the same reaction — I think the Long Sun books would certainly be more accessible to a first-time Wolfe reader.

Emmet

Andy Raibeck — 22 Sep 1995, 03:07 · follows The Cutest Man on The Net

BTW, any opinion on "The Urth of the New Sun" and "The Book of the Long Sun"? How do you rank these with "The Book of the New Sun"?

Thanks again.

Andy

Mark Andersen — 22 Sep 1995, 08:53 · follows Andy Raibeck

Who do you believe was Severian's mother? I read a good argument once (can't remember where offhand) to the effect that his mother was the Autarch. (The Autarch Severian succeeded on the throne is the only Autarch mentioned in the story with neither name nor epithet. The Autarch refers to Severian as "My son". One could argue that the Autarch androgyny may just as well have come about through being deprived of femininity, as through being deprived of masculinity.)

Dr. Mark Andersen
Department of Fishery and Wildlife Sciences
New Mexico State University

Ethan A Merritt — 22 Sep 1995, 16:37 · follows Mark Andersen

manderse at nmsu.edu (Mark Andersen) writes:

Who do you believe was Severian's mother? I read a good argument once (can't remember where offhand) to the effect that his mother was the Autarch. (The Autarch Severian succeeded on the throne is the only Autarch mentioned in the story with neither name nor epithet. The Autarch refers to Severian as "My son". One could argue that the Autarch androgyny may just as well have come about through being deprived of femininity, as through being deprived of masculinity.)

I'll keep that in mind next time I read the New Sun and see if I come across any evidence one way or the other. The only thing that comes to mind is the resulting irony. Remember that Severian is told in _Urth_ that the reason the autarch's are neutered is to prevent the establishment of a dynasty, so if Severian is nevertheless the offspring of the previous autarch...

Ethan A Merritt

Pat McMurray — 23 Sep 1995, 17:55 · follows Ethan A Merritt

manderse at nmsu.edu (Mark Andersen) wrote:

Who do you believe was Severian's mother? I read a good argument once (can't remember where offhand) to the effect that his mother was the Autarch.

Aha! That was John Clute writing in his book "Strokes" published by Serconia Press in 1988. This is a closely reasoned, very convincing argument - however I have heard the theory's been repudiated by Gene Wolfe. This is third hand news at best, from sources I'd believe reliable, so take it as you will.

Pat

The Cutest Man on The Net — 24 Sep 1995, 15:45 · follows Pat McMurray

BTW, any opinion on "The Urth of the New Sun" and "The Book of the Long Sun"? How do you rank these with "The Book of the New Sun"?

Urth I liked, but not as much as the Book.. it comes a long time after _Book of the New Sun_, and.. how to put this without spoilers.. made some of the ambiguities I really liked about the Book less so.

Book of the Long Sun I am really enjoying, it doesn't seem to have quite the depth and number of levels to it that _The Book of the New Sun_ did but that's after reading only the first three. It's a great deal more accessible, things are much more gradually linear rather than fitting together suddenly at odd moments.

Emmet

Charles Dye — 25 Sep 1995, 00:35 · follows The Cutest Man on The Net

raibeck at tiac.net wrote:

I have been trying to get started with this series for quite some time. It's supposed to be one of the masterworks of the field. Yet, no matter how hard I've tried, I just can't get past the first 30 pages or so of the first volume (The Shadow of the Torturer). Obviously this is not light reading.

"New Sun" is one of those novels that you either love or despise; I guess you've figured out which camp I'm in. And there's no reason to force yourself to read something you can't stand. (Unless you're still in school ...)

Why do I love this book? First, I'm a logophile. And Gene Wolfe is a stark, raving logomaniac. I think it's great trying to figure out where he got all his words. (Latin _fuligo_, "soot" -> English _fuliginous_, "sooty, dark"; if this word were in common use it probably would drop the adjectival ending and become _fuligin_.) A "lictor" carries a "fasces", a Roman symbol from which we get "Fascist"; Severian is to uphold Abdiesus's rather fascist government with punishment and death. If you enjoy these games, then "New Sun" is Disneyworld. If not, well, no shame to you but, Wolfe is going to be a long haul.

Second, the sheer enormous SCOPE of the thing. Wolfe has a genius for hugeness. Did you get a kick out of the sense of Deep Time in, say, "The City and the Stars?" Wolfe can convey that ancientness a lot better than Clarke ever could. For instance, there's a scene in "Sword" in which Severian descends a sheer cliff more than a mile high. As he climbs, he studies the fossils embedded in the rock. The fossils at the top are from far in our future. And so are the fossils at

the bottom. Likewise, Severian's "Commonwealth" better illustrates a large, varied culture than, say, Asimov's "Galactic Empire." Wolfe's partial continent is bigger than Asimov's galaxy.

Third, it's great fun picking out Wolfe's literary allusions. I said that Graves's "I, Claudius" cycle was the major source. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of others. The bedtime story Severian reads to little Severian is an ingenious blend of "Romulus and Remus" and Kipling, among others; Doctor Talos's play borrows from Shakespeare. Mythology is also heavily represented; we get myths prehistoric, classical, medieval, and modern, as well as Bible references. Again, the sort of puzzle you either enjoy, or not.

Finally, the biggest enigma of all, the character of Severian himself. Gentle, brutal, chivalrous, murderous. "I know how to treat an edge, and I sharpened it carefully." Many of the other characters are also puzzles - Dorcas, Jolenta, Jonas, Talos and Baldanders but, they serve primarily to distract your attention from the central puzzle to the "Book." Who and what is Severian?

Someone gave the advice that "you have to read it twice". Absolutely true. Despite the apparent symmetries that Wolfe gives the novel, the pivotal episode in Severian's story doesn't come until about 4/5ths of the way through the fourth volume.

In my opinion, "The Book of the New Sun" is the greatest SF ever written. It has revolutionized the field. (And no other author seems willing to pick up the gauntlet, with the happy exception of Dan Simmons.) I feel lucky to have discovered it. Those awful titles - I would never have bought anything titled "The Shadow of the Torturer", except that I found it, used, for 50 cents.

Tastes vary, however, and "New Sun" is not everyone's cup of tea. I hope you do continue with it, and find it as rewarding as I have. If not, well, that's okay too.

Charles Dye — 25 Sep 1995, 00:43 · follows Charles Dye

That "I, Claudius" post was no joke. "Claudius" and "New Sun" are complementary series that illuminate each other. And if "I, Claudius" makes you contemplate suicide, well, you may never enjoy "New Sun" either.

Charles Dye — 26 Sep 1995, 03:33 · follows Charles Dye

manderse at nmsu.edu (Mark Andersen) wrote:

Who do you believe was Severian's mother? I read a good argument once (can't remember where offhand) to the effect that his mother was the Autarch. (The Autarch Severian succeeded on the throne is the only Autarch mentioned in the story with neither name nor epithet. The Autarch refers to Severian as "My son". One could argue that the Autarch androgyny may just as well have come about through being deprived of femininity, as through being deprived of masculinity.)

Wheeeee...

We do get a fairly detailed picture of her in "Citadel." Ouen describes a woman who was dark-haired, religious (perhaps a renegade Pelerine, therefore possibly highborn), was captured by the authorities and, suckerpunch, named Catherine. (Only Gene Wolfe can suckerpunch with a name!) Since all torturers are born to torturees, Catherine seems to me a much better bet than the head of state.

Also, recall that Severian inherits his predecessor's memories ... he remembers being "unmanned" in Briah, not giving birth to <gulp> himself.

How about Severian's sister? Wolfe makes it clear that "Severian" is a twin-name. Might "Severa" have been given to the witches? And might they have changed her name to, say, "Merryn?"

/ — 26 Sep 1995, 21:09 · follows Charles Dye

I'm not sure, but isn't there a section in the third or fourth book relating a wolf-boy fable clearly drawn from Kiplings' *Jungle Book*? Or did I dream it? Ah, to have the memory of Severian... On a side note, I'm currently reading Clive Barkers' *Imajica* for the first time (and enjoying it). The Dominions thus far portrayed seem much like Urth, and the Autarchs spoken of in both series share a similar messianic, mystical, distant "weirdness" (as you can see I'm having trouble nailing down what I mean. Oh well, as Wolfe demonstrates, obscurity can be compelling.) any opinions?

Arthur Morgan — 30 Sep 1995, 19:15 · follows **/**

raster at terra.com "Charles Dye" writes:
About the identity of Severian's mother

Also, recall that Severian inherits his predecessor's memories ... he remembers being "unmanned" in Briah, not giving birth to <gulp> himself.

Agreed. There's no reason to link her with the Autarch. Severian's father is Ouen, of the Inn of Lost Loves, and his mother was probably high-born (which explains his height). Dorcas was his grandmother. Incidentally, Catherine comes from a Greek word meaning `pure' in Greek, and seems a punning reference to the Virgin birth of another, better-known Conciliator.

How about Severian's sister? Wolfe makes it clear that "Severian" is a twin-name. Might "Severa" have been given to the witches? And might they have changed her name to, say, "Merryn?"

I once wote to Wolfe about Merryn (and some other things), and he said she was probably Severian's sister.

Arthur Morgan
arthur at elfarran.demon.co.uk