

Gene Wolfe's _Peace_

The SF-Lovers list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 23 Jul 1996

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Kieran Mullen — 23 Jul 1996, 07:23

Since I don't see much discussion of Gene Wolfe (other than "when will the fourth book in the Long Sun series come out?") I thought I'd start the ball rolling.

First, Wolfe is one the best damn writers alive, IMO. He's one of the few I'll buy in hardcover :-). When I understand (in part) what he's doing, I am amazed by his work. However, I often have the feeling that I really don't quite grasp what he's trying to say. I found _Pandora_ and _Castlevew_ to be very frustrating, because I *know* that he's trying to do something, but I don't understand what. I felt better about _Free, Live Free_. But I am currently perplexed by his novel _Peace_.

Peace is about 10 years old, and recently reprinted. I thought I'd try to get some discussion started amongst those of us who have read it. Here are a few questions to kick it off:

- (1) What is the significance of the title? The only "obvious" mentioning of peace is in the silly quote from _The Lusty Lawyer_. On the other hand, there is little mention of war in the book.
- (2) Did the author die in the opening paragraph? Why is he seemingly "unstuck" in time? (Actually, he seems to create virtual worlds of his past, where he can talk to others.) What does this mean?
- (3) Where is the author at the start of the story? Where is the rest of the world?
- (4) This book is (as many of Wolfe's novels) filled with people telling stories. Why are there so many ghost stories?
- (5) What is the significance of the name "Alden Dennis Weer"? If I grasp at straws, it's "All then, then is, we are." (Wolfe is not beyond bad punning, as with "Alladin Blue" in _Pandora_.)
- (6) It's clear that the bookseller Gold has made a fake Necronomicon. Part of this substory is about books, and the reality they create. By creating a fake Necronomicon, Gold can sell it to a library that already has it listed (as a joke) in its card catalog.

Finally, Wolfe often writes novels that incorporate themes or ideas from other classic works. The New Sun series is pretty clearly (to me!) an ascending Christology. The Long Sun is closer (though *not* a trivial retelling) to the story of Abraham or perhaps Paul. _Castlevew_ has a lot of Arthurian images and themes. The Soldier books draw clearly on Greek and Roman myths and history. So what is going on in _Peace_? Is there a similar subtext? If not, what do you think are the essential themes of the piece?

Kieran Mullen

MegaLiz — 23 Jul 1996, 12:47 · follows Kieran Mullen

Kieran Mullen <kieran at phyast.nhn.ou.edu> wrote:
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However, I often have the feeling that I really don't quite grasp what
he's trying to say. I found Pandora and Castleview to be very
frustrating, because I *know* that he's trying to do something, but I
don't understand what.

Personally, I think Pandora was mostly for fun and exercise, and it can be enjoyed readily in just that way. I had to admire how believably he spoke from a young girl's point of view. I don't think any secret decoder ring is necessary.

Castleview continues to be a favorite of mine. Now that I've read it several times, I still have the feeling that I'd have to read a lot more about King Arthur to "catch" all the references; but it has such a lovely, dreamy quality to it that I can savor the setting and the confusing characters and LOVE it while still being lazy.

I felt better about Free, Live Free. But I am currently perplexed by his novel Peace.

I was amazed to find a hate review of Free, Live Free on the web. What's to hate? It was one of the first of his books I read, and I thought it was very satisfying.

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I haven't read it yet, but perhaps it refers to "peace of mind."

James Williams — 23 Jul 1996, 17:14 · follows MegaLiz

MegaLiz wrote:
(1) What is the significance of the title? The only "obvious" mentioning of peace is in the silly quote from The Lusty Lawyer. On the other hand, there is little mention of war in the book.

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Well, "Peace" is a translation of "Requiem", which is what funeral masses are usually called. (From their traditional first line "Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine." Grant them, Lord, peace eternal.) Since there is some evidence in the novel that the narrator is a ghost flitting about a haunted house, this seems to fit. (Also, my edition of the novel has a bunch of rather motley-looking ghosts peering out from behind the title.)

I think that this is Wolfe's best work, although The Fifth Head of Cerberus comes close, as does the New Sun books. I remember Wolfe stating (either in an essay or an interview) that he feels that America is something of a mythical land, and that we will become the Hy Brasil or Atlantis of subsequent ages - an impossible land populated by magicians and wonder-workers, who fly to distant worlds and carve mountains as monuments. One of the characters in the novel invents a process that "gins gold from the earth" (a chemical process that converts potatoes into synthetic orange juice). The large amount of ghosts in the novel could be attributed to America's charmed life.

Wolfe also seems to feel that the characters in books lead a sort of ghostly existence, coming to life only when a living reader disturbs their rest (such as the revenant in The Book of the Names of the Dead in the novel.)

I will have to read Peace again - it's been quite a few years.

revjack at radix.net — 24 Jul 1996, 02:35 · follows James Williams

James Williams wrote:

(Also, my edition of the novel has a bunch of rather motley-looking ghosts peering out from behind the title.)

Drawn by Gahghan Wilson, no less! Who'da thunk?

I will have to read Peace again- it's been quite a few years.

It's certainly one of his best. I almost missed it forever, but someone spotted it along with the "Aries" book at a used book sale for a buck each, and picked them up for me, knowing that I was a big fan.

One of the things that makes a book "good" for me is if it **haunts** me afterward - a good one will have me daydreaming about it and making involuntary associations with the people and things around me in the world, days and weeks after having read it. Almost everything Wolfe has written does this to me. He is wonderful, a magician.

RJ