

# Book of the Long Sun, by Gene Wolfe (spoilers)

The SF-Lovers list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 Nov 1996

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Peter Cash — 04 Nov 1996, 22:55

I have, for some time, been wanting to write a review of Gene Wolfe's latest series, a tetralogy collectively called, "The Book of the Long Sun", once I had read the last book. But after having finished that final volume, Exodus from the Long Sun, I find myself unable to do so. One reason for this is that a long time has elapsed since I read the earlier books, and too many of the details have escaped me. (I have resolved never again to start reading a series until all the books are available; it just detracts too much from the experience.)

However, the most important reason why I cannot write a review is that I would find it impossible to do so without discussing at length the ending of Exodus, and that means my review would consist mostly of major spoilers. If you have not read this series, I will tell you that I enjoyed all the books tremendously, right up to about the last twenty pages of the last one. The ending left me feeling, well "disappointed" is too mild; "crushed" may be better.

## SPOILER WARNING

If you haven't read all four books of the Long Sun, I urge you to read no further - there are major spoilers ahead. They will ruin everything for you.

One of the reviews quoted on the inside of the dust jacket of Exodus says: "...One thing is apparent: Mr. Wolfe loves his characters, and it is not possible to accompany them on their long and strange journey without sharing that feeling". Well, that's exactly spot on: I really got to love Calde Silk, Chenille (of the perpetually "jutting breasts"), Hyacinth, Maytera Marble, Maytera/General Mint, and even thieving Auk and Oreb the talking bird. Wolfe got me to care about what happens to them, and then right at the end, Wolfe sandbags me.

Mind, I know that Wolfe isn't exactly what you would call an upbeat writer. For example, he treats some of the characters in his Soldier books very roughly but, that's the kind of books these are, and you figure it out pretty quickly (by the end of Soldier of the Mists, anyway). And considering the tone and subject matter throughout the New Sun books (the first one's called Shadow of the Torturer, for heaven's sake) the ending is positively light-hearted.

But the Long Sun books don't come across like this - their tone is not one that would lead you to anticipate the very dark ending. In fact, the ending appears to be shaping up to be positively rosy - everybody falls in love and gets married, peace looks like it will be restored to Viron, the first colonization ship leaves the generation ship (the "Whorl of the Long Sun") to carry out its destined mission of conquering new worlds, and so forth. In fact, things did look a bit too rosy, and I would have expected Wolfe to throw in a bit of a shocker to balance the sweetness.

What he did was far more than that. (If you are reading this far and haven't read Exodus, I beg you to stop now, before it's too late...) It's as though Wolfe says, "Hah, so you think I'm going to

give you a happy ending? Well, this is a Gene Wolfe (tm) novel, and I'm not going to give it to you! In fact, I'm going to show you that everyone you thought was good was in fact rotten, and that life sucks and then you die (if you're lucky) even in this novel of mine. So there!"

Here's what happens in the last few pages (in no particular order of importance):

1. We find out that Maytera Marble lied and isn't the soldier's long lost "Molly", and that her marriage with him is based on this lie.
2. Hyacinth isn't a Hooker with a Heart of Gold (there's even a long speech by Chenille near the end where she tells Silk, "Hyacinth is pure gold, Patera".) Really, she's a fickle slut who abandons Silk during a hissy fit. Right after Silk tells her how much he loves her.
3. Before #2 even happens, Silk is so depressed by what he finds out about the evils of the world that he nearly kills himself. (And it's really not clear what happens on the roof of that airship gondola, is it?) But what, exactly, did Silk realize? I don't think we're ever told.
4. Viron is going to hell and is being bombed back into the stone age, and it doesn't look like anybody can stop the carnage. General Mint is now totally ineffectual. Even if things recover, the town is bankrupt, since Silk has taken all its currency - gold circuit cards - to plug into the landing craft. (Huh? You can just take some random circuit cards and plug them in anywhere and they work? Never mind.)
5. Whatever happened to the Gods? They were among the most interesting characters, but we never find out more about them and their conflicts. The Goddess of Love was being hunted; did that stop? The whole plot line just gets dropped. Plunk.
6. We find out that the destination of the colony ships is not...er...a very desirable locale, being populated with evil blood-sucking shape-shifters who can mimic human form, and all. (Apparently, the head of the Vironese church, Quetzal, was one of Them, and how the hell did he get on the Ship anyhow? Were the shape shifters really running the show all along?) In fact, the destination is, shall we say, familiar to anyone who has read The Fifth Head of Cerberus novellas. Yuck.
7. We never find out what happens to Silk after he runs off to chase the petulant Hyacinth, but it doesn't really matter, since Pas has already said everybody's leaving for the lovely locale described in #6, or else.

Do you see what I mean? Isn't this a bit over the top? Or am I overreacting? Should I send Wolfe that box of poisoned chocolates, or not? I would really appreciate hearing from anybody else who's read all four books. Hey, I probably missed the really bad stuff.

For what it's worth, I think item 6 would have satisfactorily shocking and ironic without all the other bits.

P.S. The bit about the poisoned chocolates is a joke. I shouldn't have to say it, but on the net, you never know...