

Book of the New Sun-Should I keep going?

The SF-Lovers list — 12 messages, 11 voices, 12 Dec 1996

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/141>

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.

(unknown) — 12 Dec 1996, 01:50

Hello everyone. It's good to be back. I have just finished reading _The Shadow of the Torturer_ and am starting on _The Claw of the Conciliator_. I am not so sure that I want to finish the whole series though. From reading TSoT I get the impression that this series is Sword and Sorcery, although some characters do have science facts, and there is some mention of interstellar travel and aliens. I think the world Urth is probably some colony world that's lost contact with civilization and had degenerated. Am I right?

What I would really like to know is why this series is so popular. Does it get better in the later books? Is there some great revelation about Urth that is to come? In general, just tell me something good about the book so I can decide to finish reading it. Help is appreciated.

Mike

Jeremy P Lakatos — 12 Dec 1996, 04:15 · follows (unknown)

Michael Wen (mswen at worldnet.att.net@postoffice.worldnet.att.net) wrote:
reading TSoT I get the impression that this series is Sword and Sorcery,

Hardly. Though there are swords, and sorcery, there are no quests to be won, no dragons to battle, no evil overlords to overthrow. It isn't Swords and Sorcery, it's fantasy (but then, scifi is fantasy too).

some colony world that's lost contact with civilization and had
degenerated. Am I right?

Yes. Except that several types of magic work: There's the mysterious witchery of the Claw. There's time travel. There are great solar ships like Space:1889. There are souls, which follow a bizarre and unscientific course of action.

What I would really like to know is why this series is so popular.

It simply reeks with mystery. That's what I like. I don't like mysteries, but I like mystery, and the New Sun books have a great sense of something which is too big to be easily known.

The characters are realistic and intriguing. They have faults and they act on them. The story would function quite well as a mainstream story (where plot is usually rather formula but the characters are very crafted).

The story is crafted. It is written deftly and Wolfe achieves the mood he sets out to achieve. His narrator is very cultured, with a endearing maudlin touch.

The series is unabashedly fantasy and exemplifies what fantasy should be. Other stories that fit this definition in my mind are Simmons' Hyperion books, Harlan Ellison's stories, and some of PKD's novels.

Does it get better in the later books? Is there some great revelation
about Urth that is to come?

It gets better, though most of the revelations are about Severian, up until the Urth of the New Sun, where the mysteries are finally revealed. The book, however, is a disappointment after the original series.

Stefan Raets — 12 Dec 1996, 12:49 · follows Jeremy P Lakatos

Michael Wen <mswen at worldnet.att.net@postoffice.worldnet.att.net> wrote:
I have just finished reading _The Shadow of the Torturer_ and am starting on _The Claw of the Conciliator_. I am not so sure that I want to finish the whole series though.

I certainly considered it worthwhile, even one of my favorites of all time. The book is beautiful blend of fantasy and science fiction - although technically it is science fiction.

More precisely it is far future-science fiction, a small subgenre in SF. The main theme in the subgenre is that it is set incredibly far in the future of our own Earth. So far that nothing remains of our present culture. So far that continents are no longer recognizable and the language is radically different. (Another excellent example in this genre: The Dying Earth by Jack Vance).

Many hints are given throughout the books that there used to be technology, but that by now most of it is forgotten or derelict. The most obvious example is the Citadel where the books start: its towers are spaceships. Reread and you'll see the hints.

Later on in the books there is a short discussion about the name Urth. It is said that long before, when the language of the earth was different, Urth meant Earth. Now however it has a different meaning (I am not entirely sure but I think it is "Past", whereas their present name for Mars means "present".)

Moreover, there is still technology. You will see that Jonas is a good example of this (don't want to spoil it for you). Also, if you ever try book five (The Urth of the New Sun) you'll see that the sequence was full-blown SF from the beginning. However, book five is definitely below standard in my opinion. The original four books are the best.

It is easy to mistake this sequence for fantasy though, because Wolfe uses so many elements of the Sword and Sorcery tradition. Again, this is possible because the civilization of Urth has degenerated to the point where it is almost medieval. And something else: without being aware of all the background literature on Wolfe's work, reading it as a fantasy sequence is very enjoyable. Nothing wrong with that.

A common interpretation of the magic in TBOTNS is that Severian is clearly meant to be a messianic figure (saving the earth, healing the sick, moving from outcast to leadership, ...). He has been described as the messiah and Apollo in one figure. The New Sun can be interpreted in multiple ways within this thesis.

Anyway, before I got this deep into the book I enjoyed it a lot as a good fantasy story, a simple plain good read, and again, nothing wrong with that. But if you are willing to dig, you can find a lot of depth in these books.

Stefan

rrhmah — 12 Dec 1996, 13:43 · follows Stefan Raets

I think that _The Book of the New Sun_ is the best science fiction of the last 25 years. And it is, in my opinion, definitely science fiction and not fantasy.

That said, if you didn't like _The Shadow of the Torturer_, you probably won't like the rest of the series any better. All the elements which make

The Book of the New Sun great are in _The Shadow of the Torturer_: the mysteries, the elegant language, Severian and his complex relationship with Thecla, his job, hints about his future, the (to me, I'm afraid, rather obvious, though no less delightful for all that) true nature of

Urth. Not everyone likes the same stuff, or responds to the same stuff. So maybe _The Book of the New Sun_ isn't for you.

Rich Horton

Eddie & Jeannie Grove — 12 Dec 1996, 16:54 · follows rrhmah

I think you would know by now whether you like it.

What it has going for it is incredible writing. I remember giving it to my father, and he got as far as the opening torture scene. He told me the description was too good, and it left him nauseous. I don't know of any other book that stopped him in this way.

There are plenty of revelations, and lots of mystery. Read a third of the way through Claw, and if you don't like it by then, it probably just isn't for you.

Eddie Grove

Lawrence Person — 12 Dec 1996, 18:56 · follows Eddie & Jeannie Grove

Michael Wen <mswen at worldnet.att.net@postoffice.worldnet.att.net> wrote:
What I would really like to know is why this series is so popular. Does it get better in the later books? Is there some great revelation about Urth that is to come? In general, just tell me something good about the book so I can decide to finish reading it. Help is appreciated.

It's popular because it's vivid, baroque, raises many important moral questions (i.e., Severian's profession), poetic, erudite, and highly imaginative (among about a hundred other virtues). As for whether you should keep reading, I would say one of the primary considerations would be your age and how much SF you've read. I read SHADOW at age 16, went "Whoa, this is really baroque," and never sought out the other books. At age 26, I read all four books and loved them. But it's definitely not work suitable for beginning readers.

Lawrence Person

Christian Claiborn — 12 Dec 1996, 19:00 · follows Lawrence Person

afn39111 at afn.org (Jeremy P Lakatos) writes:

Hardly. Though there are swords, and sorcery, there are no quests to be won, no dragons to battle, no evil overlords to overthrow.

Um, maybe the versions that you and I read were different?

Of *course* there's a quest. There are bunches of them. Severian is searching for his identity. He's searching for his and Urth's place in the universe. There are evil overlords aplenty, as I recall (although I won't say who, because I don't want to insert spoilers).

TBotNS is, in my opinion, the greatest quest novel(s) written in the last thirty years.

Yes. Except that several types of magic work: There's the mysterious witchery of the Claw. There's time travel. There are great solar ships like Space:1889. There are souls, which follow a bizarre and unscientific course of action.

**** SPOILERS ****

Urth is not a colony world, it's Earth. I've always figured the Gyll to be the Amazon river, but I

can't quite remember why now. There's been an ice age or twelve since our time, and the sun's gone cold.

It gets better, though most of the revelations are about Severian, up until the Urth of the New Sun, where the mysteries are finally revealed. The book, however, is a disappointment after the original series.

I'd argue that the revelations about Urth fly fast and furious throughout the series itself. You learn about the witches, about the extrasolar fauna that Urth has imported, about the future of the planet (the Green Men), about the political system, about everything.

What I love about these books is that there's so much to discover, and Wolfe has written the prose so carefully that there is always another fact, or relationship, or understanding of the culture to discover. You can look up every term in mythology references and try to trace the bizarre images to their source, or you can simply let it sink in and allow the epiphanies to come naturally.

I'll stop ranting now.

Christian Longshore Claiborn

Kevin J. Maroney — 13 Dec 1996, 00:19 · follows Christian Claiborn

Michael Wen <mswen at worldnet.att.net@postoffice.worldnet.att.net> wrote:
What I would really like to know is why this series is so popular. Does it get better in the later books?

There are maybe a hundred people in the world who respect Wolfe more than I do; I certainly think he's the greatest living writer of f & sf, and one of the greatest living writers period.

With that as a preamble, I would say, if you didn't enjoy *_Shadow of the Torturer_*, odds are you won't enjoy the later volumes. It is possible that Wolfe is not to your taste, or that this specific Wolfe is not to your taste, or that the Wolfe is not to your taste right now.

My favorite bits are indeed in the later volumes: the meeting with Typhon in *_Sword_*, the stories in *_Claw_*, *_Sword_*, and (especially) the story contest in *_Citadel_*, and the encounter with Master Ash in the Last House in *_Citadel_*, but if you find yourself wondering "why am I reading this", it probably isn't the right book for you right now.

Wolfe demands a great deal of attention from his readers. Most writers don't, and not paying close attention is a hard habit to break. I know that I miss a great deal in Wolfe's work, especially on first reading.

Kevin Maroney

SCN User — 13 Dec 1996, 07:43 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

The four books are really one novel chopped into 4 parts. You cannot really read them independently for full comprehension. They should be read in order.

I would also strongly recommend reading the sequel to the 4 volumes of the Book of the New Sun. It is *The Urth of the New Sun*: Severian leaves the Urth on an amazing journey that reveals even more about the Urth universe and Severian's place in it. I thought *Urth of the New Sun* provides a more satisfactory conclusion, that wraps up many questions left up in the air at the end of *Book of the New Sun*.

I consider this series one of the greatest works of SF. It helps if you enjoy language for it's own sake. Wolfe is one of the most powerful writers this century. His control of language is astounding.

And now the Long Sun series is finished. Oh joy!

Michael R Weholt — 13 Dec 1996, 12:23 · follows SCN User

kmaroney at crossover.com wrote:

With that as a preamble, I would say, if you didn't enjoy _Shadow of the Torturer_, odds are you won't enjoy the later volumes. It is possible that Wolfe is not to your taste, or that this specific Wolfe is not to your taste, or that the Wolfe is not to your taste right now.

This is the one truly pertinent piece of advice. The story pretty much continues in the same vein so if you had trouble with the first book, you will have the same trouble further on. If you bail out now, I do hope you return to it someday. It really is wonderful.

Regarding Jo's point about the Gyll being the Amazon. I thought as much myself, but then started thinking that we can't really say in that the story must take place millions of years in the future (else the sun wouldn't be in such bad shape, no?) The continents would have moved around a bit, no? The "true identity" of the Ascians is fairly obvious and I believe there is some mention that they are from the "continent to the north". South America being at some remove from "Ascia" it seems possible that the Gyll is not the Amazon. Also, I believe there is some mention of the fact that part of the Commonwealth consists of a "string of islands" which made me think the continent may be Australia with the Indonesian archipelagos being those islands. But, as I say, all this must be millions of years in the future, so who the hell knows. Or, is there some other source somewhere that makes all of this clear? I'm literally just pages from the end (after reading it for the first time) so I admit I know little about what info might exist "outside" the book itself.

Michael R Weholt

Kevin J. Maroney — 13 Dec 1996, 16:32 · follows Michael R Weholt

awnbree at panix.com (Michael R Weholt) wrote:

Regarding Jo's point about the Gyll being the Amazon. I thought as much myself, but then started thinking that we can't really say in that the story must take place millions of years in the future (else the sun wouldn't be in such bad shape, no?) The continents would have moved around a bit, no? The "true identity" of the Ascians is fairly obvious and I believe there is some mention that they are from the "continent to the north".

Ascia is not Asia. Really it isn't. "Ascian" means "those who cast no shadows", and is the Commonwealth's term for the people who live closer to the equator. It is clear that the Ascians are parodies/interpretations of the Chinese Communists*, but they are not on Asia.

Wolfe said specifically, perhaps in "Books in _The Book of the New Sun_", or perhaps somewhere in _Castle of the Otter_, that the Commonwealth is on South America, and that the Gyll is the Amazon, but an Amazon which now flows to the west.

*Whom, of course, Wolfe fought in the Korean War.

Kevin Maroney

Beth and Richard Treitel — 13 Dec 1996, 16:42 · follows Kevin J. Maroney

rrhmah at aol.com wrote:

Not everyone likes the same stuff, or responds to the same stuff. So maybe The Book of the New Sun isn't for you.

Yes, well, I've given Wolfe's *Old, Borrowed, and Blue Sun* books my best attempt at a fair chance, and found them almost as enjoyable as a cold in the head. If I had to choose between a world wherein Wolfe wrote generic books that appealed to anyone and everyone, and one wherein he wrote interesting and different books that appealed to people with specific tastes, I'd be glad we're in the latter; it simply happens that I don't have those specific tastes.

I also think they have more of a resemblance to fantasy than to ScF, but that's probably another question of personal preference.

Richard