

Book of the New Sun

The SF-Lovers list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 28 Jan 1997

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William H. Graham III — 28 Jan 1997, 21:37

I just re-read Wolfe's centerpiece for the third time in ten years, and I still don't know: What the hell happened at the Wall of Nessus? How did the characters get separated. All I know is that there were uhlans blocking the road, then commotion as the travelers apparently panicked and crushed themselves a la General Admission Who Concerts.

Does anyone have any other thoughts?

Any other questions (I'm dying to talk about this book again!)

Ross TenEyck — 28 Jan 1997, 22:48 · follows William H. Graham III

"William H. Graham III" <William.H.Graham at cdc.com> writes:

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I just finished the series. At least, I finished the main four, and I'm working on "Urth of the New Sun" now, after having started it when it came out and never finishing.

Anyway, it seemed to me that there was just some kind of traffic accident, insofar as anything that happens to Sevarian is an accident, and the road was very crowded, and, as you say, everyone got separated in the confusion.

Does anyone have any other thoughts?

I really like it, mostly... I think the fourth book is weak, though, and the third book isn't as good as the first two. The fourth book struck me as though Wolfe had largely run out of material, but had to wrap things up; so he just spent the first three-quarters of the book vamping.

The background kind of reminds me of Vance's Dying Earth books, not surprisingly, perhaps. Both have that sort of air of terminal decadence about them... what was the line from one of Vance's stories, "Earth festers rich as rotting fruit"?

Overall, a good read; although it helps to read it with a dictionary handy.

Ross TenEyck

William H. Graham III — 29 Jan 1997, 14:46 · follows Ross TenEyck

I've heard others say that they thought that the story petered out in the third and fourth books. I think some of this might be attributed, however, not to a decline in the quality of either the writing or the story, but rather the reader's desensitization by this time as he is no longer reeling from the queerness of the world into which he has been plunged.

Frank — 30 Jan 1997, 05:01 · follows William H. Graham III

teneyck at u.washington.edu (Ross TenEyck) wrote:

I think the fourth book is weak, though, and the third book isn't as good as the first two. The fourth book struck me as though Wolfe had largely run out of material, but had to wrap things up; so he just spent the first three-quarters of the book vamping.

You might be interested to know that Wolfe wrote the entire *Book of the New Sun* as one very long novel, rather than one volume at a time. Here's his description of what happened when he realized just how long the story he wanted to tell was:

"Very well, I'd write a trilogy.

"I did, finishing (the first draft) with a sigh of exhaustion that shook my soul. There remained one small problem. I had, as is customary, divided my trilogy into three books. And the third was nearly as long as the first two combined.

"... I now asked her [his agent] to ask him [the editor] what he thought of a trilogy with a very long third volume.

"She softened it, but I suspect his reply was unprintable....

"Unwilling to cut tens of thousands of words from an existing manuscript, and unsure of my ability to do it without wrecking the story, I suggested dividing that last, fat volume and producing a tetralogy instead of the commonplace trilogy."

[from "The Feast of Saint Catherine" in *Castle of the Otter*, which is currently available in the combined edition *Castle of Days*.]

So, you may not have enjoyed the last volume, but it wasn't because Wolfe was running out of material. The last volume is, I presume, exactly the way he wanted it.

For those interested in knowing some of what's *really* going on in *Book of the New Sun*, I recommend John Clute's essays on Wolfe in his collection *Strokes*. I enjoyed *Book of the New Sun* immensely, but when I read Clute, I realized there was far more to it that I had ever suspected.