

Discussion Book of the New Sun by Gene Wolfe

The SF-Lovers list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 17 May 1997

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Matthew Malthouse — 17 May 1997, 16:53

jmc at netcom.com (Jill M Charette) wrote:

I have started to read The Shadow of the Torturer for the second time and I am as lost as I was the first time I read this book. I bought the book originally because of praise I had read on this newsgroup and because I had read some of the essays about the books in Castle of Days. Upon reading Shadow and Claw, I wondered what people were talking about. These books are very well written, but hard to understand. It seems like these books are like onions with many fine layers of skin that you have to peel to get to the next one. I, however, can only peel the top few.

[...]

Some questions I have on the top of my head are:

What is going on when Severian goes to the Atrium of Time?

What is going on when Severian is in the Botanic Gardens, especially the jungle?

The Atrium of Time scenes appear to have at least two purposes. One is the forshadowing of events later in the quartet wich would be unfair to detail if you have not read them.

A second is the contrast between the various women Severian comes in contact. Valeria, a couple of the Pelerines and a woman Sev. meets much later are the only examples I can bring to mind of the 'gentry' or lesser nobility class. At the time the direct contrasts is with the Chatelaine Thecla.

Actually I've thought of a third idea, one of the pre-occupations of the books is the unimaginable ancientness of the Earth at the time the story takes place - the sun has faded, continental drift has changed the shape of the world etc. The Atrium, and its current condition, reinforce these themes.

Someone else has suggested that you might find it better to have read all four books, greater insight may be had then or on a subsequent re-read. Certainly the quartet forms a single entity and despite the symmetry attempted between the beginning and end of each volume there really isn't a place where the story can be broken off.

In my view 'The Book of the New Sun', being The Shadow of the Torturer, The Claw of the Conciliator, The Sword of the Lictor and The Citadel of the Autarch, is one of the best books in the genre that I have ever read. I was captivated by it at 18 and and a re-read every couple of years since hasn't dimmed my delight one whit.

Matthew

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