

Review: On Blue's Waters by Gene Wolfe

The SF-Lovers list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 25 Oct 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/152>

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.

Aaron M. Renn — 25 Oct 1999, 17:30

On Blue's Waters by Gene Wolfe

Review Copyright (c) 1999 Aaron M. Renn

Conclusion: Recommended

Under the heading "Simply embarrassing that more people don't read Wolfe", an amazon.com reviewer wrote:

<BLOCKQUOTE>

I looked at my local Barnes and Noble. I drove to a Borders which was over 30 minutes away, betting that Borders would be better than B&N (typically, it is). I called the two local sci-fi specialty shops to see if they had it. None of the above had the new Wolfe book. It is terribly embarrassing. ... What is going on? Is Wolfe too literate for people? </BLOCKQUOTE>

When I mentioned on the net that I was reading On Blue's Waters as my first Wolfe novel, I was told, "this is **not** the Gene Wolfe book to start with" because "It is the fifth volume in a seven-volume series, and quite a lot of the emotional and intellectual interest of _OBW_ depends on prior knowledge of the characters and situations as depicted in _The Book of the Long Sun_." A couple messages later we discover "Gah, why is _Lake of the Long Sun_ out of print?"

Well, there you go.

As it turned out, things weren't nearly so bad as I had been told and you can safely read this without having to have read The Book of the Long Sun first, though I'm sure that would help. One of the blurbs on the cover called Wolfe a "modern-day Homer". That's probably a good choice for the cover of this novel, because it is indeed a bit Homeric. On Blue's Waters is a rough parallel to The Odyssey. The Protagonist Horn finds himself sailing the seas on a quest to bring back the legendary personage of Silk to be the leader of the humans on the newly settled world Blue. Along the way he runs into various magical creatures on islands and such, as well as other interesting creatures, both human and not. Silk was apparently the topic of the previous Book of the Long Sun and references to events in that series abound. However, because this book is basically the retelling of a legend, albeit by one of the participants, the idea that there is a lot of "common knowledge" that we don't know completely isn't out of line. Indeed, I found that it added a certain something to the book, especially since Wolfe is careful to backfill all the material we really need to know. I just considered the events in Book of the Long Sun a type of hazy and heroic Elder Days and that worked well for me.

As I said, this story is the retelling of a legend. Horn, who had previously chronicled Silk's story as the Book of the Long Sun, already spread widely throughout Blue (the Illiad?), now sets out to tell his own tale. Since he's writing after his adventures, we know he survives them, and in a sort of foreshadowing technique Wolfe drops numerous glimpses of what will happen

throughout the text. As with not knowing what happened in the previous four books, this actually improved rather than degraded the story as I would have thought. It's clear that Wolfe knows a whole heckuva lot more about writing than I do.

This book is literate without being highbrow, intelligent without being boring, and is a generally solid read. Based on comments from Wolfe fans, I was expecting mucho density, but instead I found something that was very readable while still displaying a great deal of craft.

The main problem I had with it was the relative lack of any type of epic importance to the quest to go with the writing style. This quest to find Silk and various other things is presented as important to the future of the planet, but I wasn't convinced. Nor was the planet itself a particularly interesting place of discovery as you might expect from a straight-ahead colonization story. Actually, I pretty much was of the opinion that Blue would be better off getting put out of its misery, since the whole place was moderately depressing, IMO.

Wolfe is from Barrington, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago that is just about the last place I would expect a serious writer to live. While I said suburb of Chicago, Barrington is really a suburb of Schaumburg, the major edge city of the northwest 'burbs. It's a very upscale town, but is very disconnected from the city and generally lacking in the same sort of character as other similarly upscale areas. For example, the North Shore is made up of older railroad suburbs full of stately Victorian era homes and people who make regular train trips into the city to see the opera and such. Barrington is full of mostly newer homes, having just enough of a cutesy downtown to make people feel like they've got more culture than the surrounding towns. And full of people who are much more likely to stay in the 'burbs than visit the city. The kind of people who told my one friend that they would never live in a "used house" when he bought his 100 year old home in Elmhurst.

I kept trying to find some way that my concept of living in Barrington would be reflected in Wolfe's novel, but I didn't. Maybe you will. And incidentally, if you hate seemingly pointless asides like that one, you'll despise this novel. Wolfe is always going off on tangents.