

Gene Wolfe: Book of the New Sun

The SF-Lovers list — 12 messages, 10 voices, 27 Jan 1986

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/51>

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.

Kim Helliwell — 27 Jan 1986, 22:25

I've seen several kudos on this newsgroup for Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun, and they nearly always prompt the following train of thought in my mind:

What is it that you who love it (and read and re-read it avidly) see in it that I am missing? I've made it to the end of the second volume, the one which ends with the invitation to journey further with the protagonist, but does not blame the reader if he chooses not to--saying "it is no easy journey". Even up to that point it is no easy journey, so I've paused long to consider whether I want to go any further!

I must be missing some crucial point--is it something that will come clear if I go on, or would the net advise me to abandon it because, "if you have to ask, you ain't never going to know!"

If someone could explain in his own words what it is that Wolfe is trying to do with this work, it might help.

Michaelntz — 31 Jan 1986, 02:03 · follows Kim Helliwell

We are asked:

If someone could explain in his own words what it is that Wolfe is trying to do with this work, it might help.
hplabs!analog!kim

What Wolfe is trying to do is raise science fiction to a higher degree of literary value than has EVER EXISTED, beyond question. I have read a hell of a lot of SF and a hell of a lot more `serious' fiction than that (I'm an MA in literature/writing), and all I can tell you, though the Book Of The New Sun is too long and complex for your question to be answerable outside of an extended thesis (shit, I won't pretend I really understand the damn books - they defy that), is that if you are not blown away by now, at the end of the The_Claw_Of_The_Conciliator, if you are not shaking your head at Wolfe's awesome scope, his dazzling imagination, his miraculously skilled prose - well, man, go back to clowns like Heinlein and Asimov.

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

Michael Krantz

ISM780!jimb — 04 Feb 1986, 15:32 · follows Michaelntz

I will straddle the fence (and probably incur anatomical difficulties as a result). The first two quotes above I agree with, though I do not associate myself with some of the snotty tone in the sections I deleted.

As to the third quote, while I find it arguable, it *is* arguable, e.g., can't be dismissed out of

hand. The Book of the New Sun is not for plot readers. Wolfe's use of plot is almost completely centered on progressive revelation and illumination of character, that kernel of all good fiction.

TBOTNS is one definition by example of tour de force. He is using SF convention and imagery combined with classical literary technique to portray the life, conflicts, and character development of a fascinating individual in a fascinating world.

TBOTNS is written with and to a different sensibility than most SF, and like all literature, you must accept it on its own terms if it is going to "work" for you. If you don't, or for whatever reason can't, such is life. Remember, concerning matters of taste, there is no disputing. (An aphorism that antedates my birth by a good couple of millenia.)

Jim Brunet
ihnp4/ima/ism780B
hao/ico/ism780B

Tim Maroney — 05 Feb 1986, 07:59 · follows ISM780!jimb

The Book of the New Sun is in some ways a difficult work. If you don't like it, then by all means read something you will like better. However, since the question was why others like it...

First, ignore the person who said the world is unique. Wrong. Jack Vance used it frequently, though Wolfe's variation incorporates some Cordwainer Smith as well (you know, when he says "Atomic Age" and it

really sounds like "Bronze Age"). Nonetheless, it is fascinating to modern people to explore a perspective from which we are not only relegated to a historical junkpile, but completely forgotten and proven to have no significance whatsoever in the overall history of the world.

The prose is stunningly crafted. That in itself is not enough to make a book enjoyable -- see William Gibson, who people will get sick of long before 1988. Nonetheless, at this level it is the best science fiction ever: it almost attains the stature of an epic poem.

Related to the quality of the prose is the quality of the imagery, which is peculiarly evocative. All the grains and colors of a Wolfe scene leap out with all the attributes of a vivid three-dimensional perception remembered from childhood. This is done without long, tedious description or focusing on surface features.

The plots are what really make the series. For some reason I have yet to figure out, the characters and events really get into my brain and reconfigure it into an Escher lithograph. Their raw potency defies description or summary. If these are not moving you, I don't know what to tell you. Do they seem arbitrary? Pointless? Then you and I have different worlds, or at least different ways of reading.

I hope this helps. Try to read the Book as if it were an epic poem in blank verse, and you may come to appreciate it more.

Tim Maroney

ISM780!jimb — 06 Feb 1986, 15:12 · follows Tim Maroney

Thought I'd jump back in again. Jim Gardner's response (jagardner @ watmath) is excellent. I wish *I* had written it and I second practically everything he said -- didn't see anything I wouldn't wholeheartedly agree with on one read/think. Thanks, Jim.

Jim Brunet
ihnp4/ima/ism780B
hao/ico/ism780B

Tim Maroney — 14 Feb 1986, 18:33 · follows ISM780!jimb

patcl at hammer.UUCP (Pat Clancy) writes:

I read Shadow of the Torturer and thought it was horrible.

I'll second that! This was an outstandingly bad novel. Yet it seems that every year or so the Wulf-cultists must issue forth onto the net to demonstrate why there's such a large and uncritical market for so much bad SF.

This "cult" happens to include more than half of the SFWA, the Science Fiction Writers of America, as evidenced by the Nebula selections. I would hardly call the SFWA uncritical, or large for that matter. Perhaps the writers know something you don't? (There, we're even insult for insult.)

Tim Maroney, Electronic Village Idiot

Steven K. Zoltan Brust — 27 Feb 1986, 20:56 · follows Tim Maroney

Okay, I'm finally moved to take up this gauntlet. Whatever else has happened, the original query ("What d'you guys see in this, anyway?") was quite reasonable and deserves to be answered.

It is sad that I can't answer it.

I will, however, describe my experience with the books. Okay. I picked up SHADOW OF THE TORTURER and read about a third of it, discovered that it hadn't grabbed me, and stopped reading it. For the next year, I kept hearing from friends I respected how much they were enjoying the books. In particular, I was hearing from those who enjoyed the sounds of words, that is, the work of those who are aware of the beauty of the language.

Well, okay, I like that stuff, too. That's why I'm a Zelazny nut, and why I like Orson Scott Card, Jane Yolen, Patricia McKillip, etc. etc.

So I decided to give the books another try, this time forcing myself to read slowly and carefully. It worked for me, and I am now very glad that I did. For those who enjoy the sound of English well wrought, these books will tickle that. For those who enjoy a good story, it really is here, it just takes a while to realize it. The book is screamingly funny, without ever falling out of its conceit (including a multi-page comparison of the art of torturing to the art of writing; I almost hurt myself laughing.) The book had me close to tears at times, yet was never a tragedy. The part of me that likes to play with ideas just as ideas was tickled all the way through, but never quite in ways I expected. On my next few readings, when I start looking for "What is really going on here; what is the author saying?" there is enough meat that I don't go away hungry.

Okay? This certainly won't convince anyone who didn't like it that he ought to, but maybe this will help whoever asked the initial question to understand why some of us enjoy the books.

skzb

Charley Wingate — 06 Mar 1986, 14:37 · follows Steven K. Zoltan Brust

I've found that I really like Wolfe's short stories. Shortly after the BotNS came out, I picked up Gene Wolfe's Book of Days, which I enjoyed immensely. I could never get into the BotNS, though, for a couple of reasons. When I got Free Live Free a few months ago, I had hoped that things would be different. Alas, I have temporarily given up it, about halfway through.

Wolfe's style always seems to get to me after a few hundred pages. I can take it in small doses, but the prospect of page after page of it stretching out before me always makes me faintly queasy.

Free Live Free manages to overcome this by a certain lightness which is more like his short stories. The BotNS, though, moves along with the ponderous grace of the Vehicle Transporter pulling away from the VAB. Also, the odd word trick doesn't work for me. Since it's such a high-wire act, one slip ruins it, and when I ran across "palaquin" used in the wrong context, the spell was broken. Not caring for the subject matter all that much anyway, I've never seriously attempted to pick it up again.

It's certainly true that Wolfe requires rather deliberate and careful reading. That's partly why I haven't finished Free Live Free; things have gotten in the way and I haven't had the time to devote to it.

C. Wingate

Randy Murray — 07 Mar 1986, 19:42 · follows Charley Wingate

I've really been shocked at all the net-talk about how difficult it is to read Wolfe's work. His novel and short stories have been absolutely spellbinding to me. It seems as if a number of you claim to understand fiction (let alone science fiction), yet haven't learned to willingly suspend your disbelief.

While recently reading one of his short stories "The eyeflash miracles" I had one of those revelations that makes you want to abuse innocent and uncaring bystanders. Wolfe understands that the reader is blind. The reader can never truly see anything, no matter how detailed or complex the description. The writer can only delude his audience into believing they see and understand. Wolfe can be painfully truthful in his fiction. The reader must not fix images in his mind and rely on them as stable.

I can't believe that Wolfe is causing such a stir because he uses difficult language. The work in BotNS comes in not fighting the author. Let him take you where he wants to go. And if you think you were confused with BotNS, you should try one of his earlier novels, Peace.

You can get lost in Wolfe's work. Why not sit in the dark and let Gene tell you a story.

By the way, I was just introduced to the net.

I love it.

So let's hear from y'all.

rti-sel!wfi — 10 Mar 1986, 23:25 · follows Randy Murray

mangoe at umcp-cs.UUCP (Charley Wingate) writes:

I've found that I really like Wolfe's short stories. Shortly after the BotNS came out, I picked up Gene Wolfe's Book of Days, which I enjoyed immensely.

Then you should check out another collection of his stories, "The Island Of Dr. Death And Other Stories And Other Stories," in my opinion a collection that's superior to the "Book Of Days."

Cheers, Bill Ingogly

Matt Verner — 18 Mar 1986, 03:35 · follows rti-sel!wfi

mangoe at umcp-cs.UUCP (Charley Wingate) writes:

I've found that I really like Wolfe's short stories. Shortly after the BotNS came out, I picked up _Gene Wolfe's Book of Days_, which I enjoyed immensely. ...

Then you should check out another collection of his stories, "The Island Of Dr. Death And Other Stories And Other Stories," in my opinion a collection that's superior to the "Book Of Days."

Cheers, Bill Ingogly

Could someone please tell me how I can aquire these obscure books?

I am constantly reading about this or that book from Gene Wolfe and] when I go around the local book stores in Indy they invariably don't have anything but books that appeal to hormone-drenched teenagers that thought the novelization of 'Star Wars' should have won a Hugo.

Is there a mailing list or catalog I can subscribe to? Yes, I am already a suscriber to the SF Book Club. Passable at best.

Drop me a line, if you have any info!

P. O. Box 1008

ccvaxa!wombat — 19 Mar 1986, 03:45 · follows Matt Verner

Gene Wolfe himself will sell you signed editions by mail. An old Science Fiction Chronicle laying around here lists his *Books of Days* for \$16 (hardback, first edition, signed) from Gene Wolfe, POB 69, Barrington, IL 60010. If you can find an issue of SFC or Locus they have lots of advertising from mail-order firms.

Wombat