

Gene Wolfe: Book of the New Sun (Spoilers possible)

The SF-Lovers list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 09 Feb 1986

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Rick — 09 Feb 1986, 03:40

I have read The Shadow of the Torturer, (first volume of The Book of the New Sun), but in almost a year have yet to continue with the rest of the book. In general, I found the writing murky and the tale rather disconnected. I found that I learned very little of the political system, social classes, economic systems or even recent history. This failure of Wolfe's to adequately inform varies directly with my failure to be interested in his tale.

This seems to me to be particularly true in a story like this where so many of the characters seem to be insane and therefore take actions that appear illogical: Master Palaemon gives an extremely valuable sword to a man who never seemed to interest him and who ought to be sentenced to death. Agia and Agilus are insanely greedy, consider the bizarre excuses Agilus gives in the prison cell when he argues to be spared. The boatman is in a crazed state and Dorcas suffers from amnesia. The rationality of Dr. Talos, Baldanders and the stuttering man seem questionable to me as well.

I understand that Wolfe wrote this book while employed at another job and typically wrote during the early morning hours, shortly after having awakened. This probably accounts for the dreamlike nature of the work, which many people seem to admire highly. I am less than enthusiastic about it; on the other hand, only reading the first book is probably tantamount to turning off Beethoven's 5th symphony in the middle of the second movement in terms of being fair to the author's complete message... But on the first hand, the author has the responsibility to make the first story accessible enough that the others will be read... In time, I may re-read the first book and give it another chance...

One thing that intrigues me is the theory that Severian has lived this life before and that all the events depicted have been experienced by Severian not once, but twice. Anyone have any thoughts or theories on this? What made someone think of this rather unique thought in the first place? What evidence is there for it?

rick heli

Michaelntz — 17 Mar 1986, 16:06 · follows Rick

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.

Heiny.henr — 24 Mar 1986, 15:42 · follows Michaelntz

"This was an outstandingly bad novel. ...every year or so the Wulf[sic]-cultists must issue forth ... to demonstrate why there's such a large ... market for so much bad SF."

And every year the people who didn't like the books come out and insult those who do. This happens with just about every author: Wolfe, Moorcock, Heinlein & Laumer are the ones who come to mind as recent examples.

It seems like every conversation on SFL degenerates to "I liked this book." - "I didn't, so there." - "Oh, yeah? Well, I did." - "I didn't, nyah nyah nyah." - "Did." - "Didn't" - "Did." - "Didn't" - "DidDidDidDid." - "Didn'tDidn'tDidn'tDidn't".... No participant in this part of the conversation bothers to tell us WHY they did or didn't like it. It's as if their opinion was an invariable fact, culmination of some mathematical proof (which is intuitively obvious and left as an exercise to the student).

Without an explanation of why a book is so flawed or so wonderful or so average, any messages such as the one quoted above are as meaningful as "Reagan Sucks" graffiti. Messages that simply parrot an opinion stated in another have even less meaning [why do you agree? Is it fashionable? Do you feel guilty if you say no? Are your reasons similar, or was it for some other cause?].

Another thing to recall is that SFL (like most similar lists) can be divided into two groups: The Permanents (people with a steady, long term access, such as myself - I've been reading it for some years now) and The Transients (people who may have access only briefly or intermittently, such as students, part time employees, consultants, etc). What may be old hat to the Permanents could be brand new to the Transients (witness the regular recurrence of discussions such as Music in SF, Dune, Star Trek Inconsistencies, and the Book of the New Sun) [there's thesis material for someone in here...]. It would be nice if the Permanents could let the Transients have their say without ridiculing them: "Oh THAT - that was said in V2#47. It's OLD stuff." Surely you have occasionally said something that has been said before - it would be nice if the Transients had the same privilege.

It comes down to this: If you aren't willing to tell us why you feel the way you do and you aren't willing to let others speak without insulting them, then your message is only slightly more meaningful than random bits.

Chris Heiny

PS This was not directed solely to the author of the message above that message was simply a stellar example of the problem.