

SOLDIER OF THE MIST by Gene Wolfe

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Donn Seeley — 07 Nov 1986, 06:13

In Patti Perret's THE FACES OF SCIENCE FICTION, Gene Wolfe's portrait shows a long row of books in the foreground with names like GREEK DIVINATION and THE GREEKS AND THE PERSIANS, including a prominent 4-volume edition of Herodotos. SOLDIER OF THE MIST (Tor 1986) is a fantasy which builds on all this raw material, taking place in 479 BC in Greece and Asia Minor. The story is interesting and exciting and the setting is packed with beautiful details and the plot is deeply entangled in delicate puzzles, but it's only the first book in a series and as such leaves you in quite a bit of suspense at the end.

The characters of MIST participate in the events surrounding the disastrous invasion of Greece by the empire of the Persian king Xerxes. The text of the novel is purportedly the record of a soldier of the Persian army who was gravely wounded in a great battle: a projectile of some sort penetrated his skull and injured his brain, leaving him with a form of anterograde amnesia (and more than a little retrograde amnesia as well). By evening his memories of morning are already fading, disappearing into the 'mist' which has swallowed his life. In order to survive, he has taken to writing a diary on a scroll whose title is READ THIS EACH DAY. With his past in tatters, the soldier has lost his ability to distinguish the mundane from the supernatural, and he records the activities of the gods about him just as matter-of-factly as he describes his lunch. The gods, it seems, are once again scheming against each other and the soldier is a pawn in their games. The soldier walks through the lives of the mortals he meets leaving behind consternation and wonder, and by the end of this first book we know that the soldier is being prepared for a crucial role in both planes.

As usual, Wolfe's prose is a joy to read and his characters are fascinating. I don't think this is as major a book as his SHADOW OF THE TORTURER, however. SHADOW was much more self-contained, using a plot which reached a distinct climax before the end of the volume. MIST is by its very nature a fragmented story, and it's hard to see more than the building blocks for a plot in it. Wolfe has assumed a very difficult task in presenting a protagonist who is incapable of any action which requires long-range planning... A minor problem is that I've forgotten much of my Greek mythology -- I found it difficult to keep track of the many gods who appear on the scene, sometimes employing different guises and different names (many of which are 'translated' into English forms which for me bear no hint of the original). The history gave me some trouble too; before the second volume comes out I'll have to dust off my old copy of Herodotos and try to get the historical setting straight. I won't mind the work, though: it's always been a rewarding labor to dig deep into Wolfe's stories.

Dig we must,