

Book of the New Sun -- Severian's mother

The SF-Lovers list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 26 Mar 1987

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obrien — 26 Mar 1987, 19:46

This is a specialty question for those folks who've read "The Book of the New Sun" with some degree of care.

Wolfe claims that he tied up all the loose ends. Wolfe is also known for incredible subtleties. Therefore, I'd like to know if anyone out there has any clues as to the real identity of Severian's mother.

Ouen claims that her name was Catherine, and that she ran away from a group of monials. Some time after her tryst with Ouen, the law took her away, presumably to the Matachin Tower, where the infant Severian was adopted into the Order.

The question is, can anyone match this up with any of the other characters in the book? Cyriaca, for instance? Or is it indeed true that this was some completely new person, never met or referred to by anyone else?

Mike O'Brien
obrien at aerospace.aero.org

Kevin Maroney — 28 Mar 1987, 01:08 · follows obrien

I feel fairly confident in stating that Catherine was not in any way connected with the other characters of the novel. Although with the bizarre folds in time, there's always the possibility that Catherine is Saint Katherine, the patron of the Order of Seekers of Truth and Penitence. But I'd have to see some real, textual evidence for this before I would accept it. Maybe there's something about her in

Castle of The Otter (or maybe one or the other Catherine will be mentioned in _The Urth of the New Sun_, which is due out in November from Tor).

Is there anyone else out there willing, as I am, to make the claim that this four-volume novel is the crowning achievement of S(peculative)F(iction)? I read these as they came out, and thought highly of them; but when I re-read them in one sitting earlier in the year, I (figuratively) saw God.

Kevin J. Maroney

Chris Jarocha-Ernst — 30 Mar 1987, 18:56 · follows Kevin Maroney

kjm at dg_rtp.UUCP (Kevin Maroney) writes:

I feel fairly confident in stating that Catherine was not in any way connected with the other characters of the novel. Although with the bizarre folds in time, there's always the possibility that Catherine is Saint Katherine, the patron of the Order of Seekers of Truth and Penitence.

Realize that this is coming from someone who's read the first 2 books only and so may be unfamiliar with later developments.

In the Christian Church, Saint Catherine of Alexandria was tortured to death (as were many saints, admittedly) on the wheel. I don't know what she's supposed to be the Patron Saint of, but it wouldn't be surprising if she were so honored by the Torturers.

Side notes: a Catherine('s) Wheel is also an acrobatic cartwheel and a type of fireworks. Some British pubs are named "The Cat and Wheel" after a corruption of "Catherine's Wheel". The point here is that this woman and her torture device are linked in popular culture, making her an even more likely candidate as Patron Saint of Torturers. (*And no flames about bad taste! Since when has the Church cared about bad taste? :-) *)

Chris Jarocha-Ernst

Allan Terry — 30 Mar 1987, 21:18 · follows Chris Jarocha-Ernst

Is there anyone else out there willing, as I am, to make the claim that this four-volume novel is the crowning achievement of S(peculative)F(iction)? I read these as they came out, and thought highly of them; but when I re-read them in one sitting earlier in the year, I (figuratively) saw God.

YES! YES! The Book of the New Sun is one of the best books I ever read. I hold this up to anybody else's favorite literature. I generally feel this way about most of Wolfe's work (ever read Peace?), but this is his best. This book has so much depth and texture that you could read it dozens of times and still be surprised.

How could anybody keep everything so knit together over four volumes and several years of writing them? Everything ties in with everything else. I love the way he gives an explanation of parts of his world the way science fiction writers do, but then gives different and contradictory explanations later. Nothing neat and tidy, more like life. I love the historical feel to his society far in our future. The terminology sounds roman, the journey sounds like a Midaevel pilgrimage, yet when people dig they find layer upon layer of prior civilizations. I love his passion for telling strange little stories (and the translated story of the Ascian is a marvel). Where else in SF have you seen an honest-to-God hagiography? I love his jokes, like the Frankenstein turnabout. Or Severian's guild: the Seekers for Truth and Penitence, commonly known as the Torturers. But mostly I just like the writing. It takes a master to bring a reader to the logical acceptance of Volodius' alzebo feast or to bring the reader to appreciate that Severian is an excellent carnifex, one who is part of a rich tradition and who honestly plies his craft. I can't recommend it more highly. Besides, the cover of the first book is sure fire to get you a seat by yourself on a crowded Muni bus.

My question back is did anybody else feel a jar in Severian's attitude about women? He has a certain detachment for people and for his own body--I suppose necessary in his line of work, or for somebody en route to "higher things". I can also understand that women were not part of his upbringing. Still, he seems too casual about Dorcas and her feelings. Why is he so hung up on Agila (sp?) considering her feelings back? He screws around but his heart does not seem to be in it. I have not quite figured out what Wolfe was doing with this part of Severian's character.

Allan