

Two new books by Gene Wolfe

The SF-Lovers list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Nov 1987

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/71>

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Donn Seeley — 27 Nov 1987, 11:49

THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN. Gene Wolfe. Tor: NYC. 372 pp. hc., c1987. EMPIRES OF FOLIAGE AND FLOWER. Gene Wolfe. Cheap Street: Route 2, Box 293, New Castle VA 24127. 80 pp. hc. signed slipcased, c1987.

I finally got to meet Gene Wolfe this summer at Readercon. It was a curious experience -- Wolfe looks, talks and acts so completely unlike what you might expect from his writing that at first glance you might imagine the real Wolfe to be a Salinger-style hermit and that this man has stolen his name and reputation. There's a lot of Texas in his deep drawl; his face seems very bland and middle-American, except for his eyes. Nothing to suggest the florid Gothic manner of THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS or the NEW SUN books... In person I found him amiable and intimidating at the same time -- he doesn't mind chatting with fans and enjoys telling anecdotes, but I also got the feeling that there were thoughts passing through his mind that didn't show on the surface. It's occurred to me since then that much of Wolfe's writing is concerned with deceptive appearances: Dr. Marsch's green eyes, the magical gem borne by the executioner, the rebel Wat. Wolfe is so good at these tricks that I'd almost suspect him of being responsible for the subsequent Philip K Dick mass illusion complete with fire alarm... but that's another story.

So now I have all my NEW SUN hardcovers signed except one. Just my luck -- a couple months after I drag a shopping bag full of signed books back from Boston, a new one comes out. Yes, it's THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN, a full-blown sequel to THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN. I was one of those few readers who thought he was satisfied with the wrap-up in THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH, in which Severian claims to have told all he knows, and if you didn't understand, you must have missed something. Thus in my view a sequel to NEW SUN would be an inevitable anticlimax, since its subject matter is (literally) foreordained. On the other hand (there's always another hand when you need one), I've always had a warm feeling for the characters in NEW SUN and as long as sequel disease isn't setting in, I'm quite willing to say hello to them again.

How does Wolfe avoid sequelitis? THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN throws you off balance right at the opening page, because Severian is no longer on Urth. At the end of CITADEL, Severian is starting his reign as Autarch; URTH skips this entire period in his life and tosses you adrift in space and time, as Severian is on his way to the universe of Yesod to make his case for Urth before the court. The voyage isn't as straightforward as you might think -- the agents of Abaia have one last desperate chance to stop the New Sun, by killing Severian on board the ship... Wolfe never pauses long enough to let you get your bearings, and by the end of the book it's clear that calling the book a sequel can be very misleading. We do get to meet some familiar characters, albeit very quickly -- another surprise entrance before Valeria, some more banter with Typhon and Piaton, a curious encounter with a grown-up Eata, the first visit of Famulimus, Barbatous and Ossipago; and we do meet some folks we never saw in the earlier books but heard about, like the Autarch Ymar, and the Conciliator; but it's the new characters who steal the show. I think I'll let Severian introduce them himself, rather than spoil some of the surprises for you, but it's fair to say that the new characters are just as memorable as the old, if not more

so... (Of course everything is equally memorable to Severian!)

When I started reading URTH, I was afraid that Wolfe's explanations might spoil THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN for me. After all, I had spent no small amount of time and effort erecting an edifice of imaginary playing cards and I had every reason to expect that Wolfe might take a playful puff at it. As it turned out, it wasn't so much that Wolfe knocked my theories down as that he made the data much more complicated. The broader hints about the metaphysics of Urth and its universe and its meta-universe are enticing and still incomplete. The religious implications are also puzzling; people are going to ask about Wolfe as they did about Tolkien: how can Wolfe, as a Christian, fit his work into an orthodox Christian framework? I'm not sure it's supposed to fit (and I'm ill equipped to speculate, as a non-Christian), but it's a curious problem, especially when you consider the difficulties of accommodating technology in Heaven. In any case I now have the very strong feeling that I need to re-read the entire work from back to front, as Famulimus would see it, in order to capture all the (new) implications...

'... In ancient days, in a land far off, there stood two empires, divided by mountains. One dressed its soldiers in yellow, the other in green. For a hundred generations they struggled. I see that the man with you knows the tale.'

'And after a hundred generations,' I said, 'an eremite came along them and counseled the emperor of the yellow army to dress his men in green, and the master of the green army that he should clothe it in yellow. But the battle continued as before. In my sabretache, I have a book called THE WONDERS OF URTH AND SKY, and the story is told there.'

'That is the wisest of all the books of men,' the Cumaeen said.

...

Cheap Street has taken this tale and made a charming little book out of it. It has a flowered Japanese paper jacket, yellow endpapers and green pages (or is that green endpapers and yellow pages?), text printed in several colors, and a number of lovely illustrations by Judy King-Rieniets. The catch is that it's a highly limited edition. I think I finally realized that I'm not a collector when I received this book. It's really a gorgeous item and I don't mind having paid for it, but I felt guilty about letting my fingers touch the pages, and in turn I feel mildly annoyed that I let myself be intimidated. I'm a reader at heart; a book to me is the words, not the investment. Still, EMPIRES is a lovely example of the publishing art at its best (even in this edition, which is NOT the fancy one), and I enjoy looking at it.

Oh, you were curious about the contents too? It's a novelette that tells two stories at once, Severian's story about the warring empires and a story about a little girl who is taken to see these empires by the wizard Thyme. (Yes, there's a wizard Sage too -- if puns make you ill, you'd better avoid Wolfe.) It's not all told in a dry fairy-tale manner; there's dialogue and action and characters who step off the page. It's a fun little piece and I hope it gets published in a magazine so that more than two hundred readers get to enjoy it. One thing is bothering the hell out of me, though -- I swear that I know where the yellow and green empires fable comes from, but I can't place it. Ambrose Bierce comes to mind as the author, but that could just be a result of the style of the fable. Does anyone out there have a clue?