

Pandora/Gene Wolfe

The SF-Lovers list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 07 Feb 1991

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cynthia teague — 07 Feb 1991, 01:31

I have just finished *Pandora by Holly Hollander* by Gene Wolfe. This is a mystery, not sf, but since I read it because I had seen his name here, I'm posting my comments to this list. It was an okay book, neither memorable nor unpleasant, which is the overall impression of him I've gotten from this list. What really threw me, though, is that the book is set in my home town. Wolfe has taken the town, made some transparent and funny-sounding name changes, and used it as is. For example, Barrington becomes Barton, which is surrounded by Barton Hills (the rich part of town) and South Barton (still fairly rural); their counterparts surround Barrington. A nearby town is called Palestine instead of Palatine. The Chicago & Northwestern railway (CNW) becomes the Chicago, Wisconsin and Northern (CWN). A store called Catchpenny is transformed into Snatchpenny. Lake County is renamed Pool County. A local newscaster named Walter Jacobson shows up as Ben Jacobs. And the scene of the crime, the Barton Antiques and Art Fair, really exists as the Barrington Art dFair, though it's much less elaborate and snooty than Wolfe describes it. The high school really is as big as he says, though. What bothers me is not that he used my home town, but that he was so unimaginative about it. Pool County, indeed! (And I'm pretty sure that the town he calls Dawn is really Halfday, a much more plausible name, though I haven't compared distances on the map.) Sara Peretsky's books make me nostalgic for my old neighborhood in Chicago (several blocks north of and somewhat seedier than hers), and Emma Bull makes Milwaukee vivid, even though I've never been there. But Wolfe seems to have taken a city plan and gone through it like a high school plagiarist, changing a name here and there to avoid coming up with something original. It really makes me wonder about the originality of his science fiction. Any comments?

R o d Johnson — 08 Feb 1991, 04:03 · follows cynthia teague

CTEAGUE at uvmvm.BITNET (cynthia teague) writes:

I have just finished *Pandora by Holly Hollander* by Gene Wolfe. This is a mystery, not sf, but since I read it because I had seen his name here, I'm posting my comments to this list. It was an okay book, neither memorable nor unpleasant, which is the overall impression of him I've gotten from this list.

I'm surprised that's the impression you've gotten from this {newsgroup|list}, but let me try to correct it a little bit. In my opinion, Wolfe at his best is one of the most memorable of SF authors; "his best" being "The Fifth Head of Cerberus", the Book of the New Sun tetralogy and its appendix "The Urth of the New Sun", and various stories, many collected in "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories." Wolfe is really sui generis; the fact that he's been dabbling in genre lately (and turning out fairly uninspired stuff, witness "Castlevue") shouldn't blind you to the considerable, and somewhat uncategorizable, virtues of his Really Good Stuff.

(By the way, "Castlevue" takes place somewhere around your hometown too. I imagine it as out past Aurora somewhere.)

Emma Bull makes Milwaukee vivid, even though I've never been there.

Neat trick, considering she writes about Minneapolis. :) Taking the War for the Oaks tour of Mpls is pretty fun; you should do it if you ever get the chance.

But Wolfe seems to have taken a city plan and gone through it like a high school plagiarist, changing a name here and there to avoid coming up with something original. It really makes me wonder about the originality of his science fiction. Any comments?

Wolfe is a tricky guy, and I think a restless one. He seems to go through phases of experimentation, which can produce failures, followed by masterpieces. Right now he seems to be putting out busy, chaotic, cryptic novels. Who knows what great work might follow from this? Several post-New Sun works have been failures, in my opinion - "There are Doors", "Castlevision", "Free Live Free" but, the successes are as original as anything you could ever wish for, believe me. Even if you *hate* "Soldier of the Mist", for instance, it's difficult to see it as being imitative of anything else in recent English fiction, I think. Don't give up on him, and *try* the New Sun books ("The Shadow of the Torturer" is where it starts).

Rod Johnson

seth alan tissue — 08 Feb 1991, 08:57 · follows R o d Johnson

rjohnson at vela.acs.oakland.edu (R o d Johnson) writes:

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I agree about ~There Are Doors"... That was the dullest book I've ever read by him; such an interesting premise, too. The first half wasn't bad and then the book just spiralled around aimlessly after that. Haven't read "Castlevision" yet, nor "Soldier of the Mist". With that series, I'm waiting until Wolfe finishes writing all the books, so I can read them in order without long pauses in between. My first foray into SotM made it pretty clear that it was going to be at least as (delightfully!) difficult to assimilate as "The Book of the New Sun", which I could never have followed if I'd had to wait a year between books. Oh well.

Seth Tissue
University of Chicago
P.O. Box 5975

Shawn L. Baird — 09 Feb 1991, 08:44 · follows seth alan tissue

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I have to say that I liked There Are Doors, although I wouldn't count it as one of my favorites. I haven't read Castlevision yet.

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Soldier of the Mist is an excellent book, one of my favorite Gene Wolfe novels. I didn't find Soldier of Arete as pleasurable, unfortunately. As far as short stories go, you can't beat The Death of Doctor Island and Other Stories and Other Stories or his rather new anthology Endangered Species. Just a few years ago, or so, the *Weird Tales* magazine was restarted with the first issue being about half dedicated to Gene Wolfe. It had some very good stories. I must say that I feel that one of the prerequisites for being a Gene Wolfe fan is being able to take a sort of surreal outlook on life and, in fact, one has to wonder sometimes if these stories aren't associated with hallucinogens or some such. Sometimes, I almost feel like I'm full of hallucinogens because it all gets so weird.

Shawn L. Baird
17650 SE Cason Rd.

Dan Tilque — 10 Feb 1991, 00:27 · follows Shawn L. Baird

tisu at quads.uchicago.edu (seth alan tissue) writes:

[...] "Soldier of the Mist". With that series, I'm waiting until Wolfe finishes writing all the books, so I can read them in order without long pauses in between. My first foray into SotM made it pretty clear that it was going to be at least as (delightfully!) difficult to assimilate as "The Book of the New Sun", which I could never have followed if I'd had to wait a year between books. Oh well.

Based on a number of internal references (both in the prefaces and in the text), I do not expect anymore "Soldier of" books. Unfortunately, I can't say why without giving some pretty serious spoilers, and since you haven't read the books yet, I'm sure you don't want them.

As for waiting for all the books, that's a good idea. After reading Soldier of Arete, I felt the need to go back and reread Mist again and then reread Arete immediately after. I also felt like I should be taking notes - I kept forgetting everything from more than a chapter or two before.

Dan Tilque

seth alan tissue — 12 Feb 1991, 03:17 · follows Dan Tilque

bairds at eecs.cs.pdx.edu (Shawn L. Baird) writes:

Soldier of the Mist is an excellent book, one of my favorite Gene Wolfe novels. I didn't find Soldier of Arete as pleasurable, unfortunately. As far as short stories go, you can't beat The Death of Doctor Island and Other Stories and Other Stories or his rather new anthology Endangered Species.

I FINALLY found a copy of TDoDlaOS after literally years of looking. Dug it up in a used bookstore. I think it went out of print due to the demise of Pocket's SF line in the early eighties. I

enjoyed Endangered Species quite a bit, although I don't think any of Wolfe's stories match any of his novels. This is probably just a personal preference I have for novels in almost all cases. If I thought about for a while I might be able to argue that his talents are more suited to novel-length work.

I must say that I feel that one of the prerequisites for being a Gene Wolfe fan is being able to take a sort of surreal outlook on life and, in fact, one has to wonder sometimes if these stories aren't associated with hallucinogens or some such. Sometimes, I almost feel like I'm full of hallucinogens because it all gets so weird.

I strongly doubt that Wolfe takes drugs. From what I've read I've gotten the impression that he's straight as can be; Korean war veteran and editor of a plant engineering magazine. (Then again, at least one prospective Supreme Court justice smoked pot in the sixties.)

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