

Gene Wolfe (Was: Re: Mercedes Lackey)

The SF-Lovers list — 11 messages, 9 voices, 27 Mar 1992

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Doug Merritt — 27 Mar 1992, 17:20

science fiction and fantasy. Oh, for a few score more Gene Wolfes!]

Someone actually wants _more_ Gene Wolfes?!? What a painful thought!

Reading his Torturer stuff was one of the most painful things I've ever done. There was no point, very little plot, and way too much foreshadowing.

It's true that there wasn't a lot of plot by usual standards, and at first I found this disappointing, too. But as I went on I discovered that the "miscellaneous random background elements" (I'm quoting what I might have called them after 30 pages of the first book) were actually the whole point.

It's a mood piece, it's about the psychology of a very odd man, by way of contrast it's about the psychology of the common man, it's a thoughtful work about ethics and mores (a torturer as hero??? Even Donaldson used an anti-hero for what little point he had to make in book 1), and there are a lot of parts that are brilliantly written in terms of style and visual evocativeness. It's also interesting in an exotic-world tour guide sense, but that's more minor, although again very well done in spots. And last but not least, vast pieces of it add up to a dark but moderately ineffable comment about the last days of the world.

There were also some spots where I found it a bit slow paced even so, but given the rest, I decided that he was probably doing that on purpose in order to maintain the rhythm and pace (they were noticeably regular) in precisely the intended way.

Now, if you're in the mood for bang-'em-up adventure (which I sometimes am, I don't mean that as a flame), then this is going to be a dreary and dull set of books.

If you take them on their own merits, you can discover that Wolfe has created something so different that it's pretty much in a class by itself. It's not quite like anything ever done before.

And whether you happen to like it or not, that deserves high praise.

(Some people liked Urth of the New Sun best, but I thought he fell apart on that one, sort of throwing in all the exciting adventure and answers to unanswerable questions that he'd left out of the early ones. I don't mind such things if they're done well, or sometimes if they're the whole point, but they seemed weak by comparison with his previous approach.)

This is not to say I want to see people imitate this series. I probably wouldn't like the results. I'm sure I wouldn't have liked the original series if anyone but Wolfe had done it. It wasn't what he did, but *how* he did it that was great.

It *is* possible to say, "He did a great job at doing it, but that sort of thing just isn't to my tastes," you know. Saying that it's "dreck" just exposes that you don't pay attention to those aspects of books that you don't personally care for no matter how well done they may be,

surely the very definition of provincialism.

Or to be more charitable, I could assume you're simply taking a Humpty-Dumpty stance in meaning "dreck" to say "I *really* didn't like it."

It was a collection of images which went from unusual to completely whacked-out. Why anyone would seek out more of this dreck is completely beyond me.

As usual it's important to separate personal taste from questions of craftsmanship. I can see why a lot of people wouldn't care for it, but that doesn't mean that it's "dreck". (Yiddish for "shit", btw... it's a rather harsh put-down).

Doug Merritt

Mike Rogers — 27 Mar 1992, 19:48 · follows Doug Merritt

gac2 at midway.uchicago.edu wrote:

Someone actually wants _more_ Gene Wolfes?!? What a painful thought! Reading his Torturer stuff was one of the most painful things I've ever done. There was no point, very little plot, and way too much foreshadowing. It was a collection of images which went from unusual to completely whacked-out. Why anyone would seek out more of this dreck is completely beyond me.

I think that the first line being "it is possible that I already had some presentiment of my future" is a dead giveaway as regards foreshadowing.

For me, the series didn't really gel until I'd read The Urth of the New Sun. Sure, once I finished TBotNS I knew I'd read *something* special, but I am such an inattentive reader that I'd have had to reread them a couple of times to pick up on the self-referential bits. But TUoftNS just *blew* me away. That solar sail! Wow!

Whatever turns you on.

Mike Rogers
Box 6, Regent Hse
TCD,EIRE
mike at maths.tcd.ie

K R Maxson — 27 Mar 1992, 19:58 · follows Mike Rogers

gac2 at ellis.uchicago.edu (Geoffrey A. Coulter) writes:

Someone actually wants _more_ Gene Wolfes?!? What a painful thought! Reading his Torturer stuff was one of the most painful things I've ever done. There was no point, very little plot, and way too much foreshadowing. It was a collection of images which went from unusual to completely whacked-out. Why anyone would seek out more of this dreck is completely beyond me.

Gene Wolfe is perhaps the best science fiction / fantasy author writing today. Although I enjoyed his Torturer series, I do not think it showcases his talents as well as There Are Doors, The Death of Doctor Island, or many of the short stories reprinted in Endangered Species.

There are several things about Wolfe's writing that makes me enjoy it a lot more than Lackey's.

There is no kitsch or melodrama in Wolfe's prose. His writing is spare, concise, and it grabs you

with the ideas it presents rather than trying to enmesh you in purple language. There is no color for the sake of color, no passages of filler description in sad and misguided emulation of JRRT or Peake.

Wolfe does not explain, as a narrator, how each of his characters are feeling at any given moment, and why they feel that way, and then explain to the reader how just and correct those feelings are and that if you don't empathize with them you are a shallow, callous, and uneducated reader. Rather, he sketches a genuine picture and allows his readers to explore it for themselves, trusting that their intelligence and humanity will allow them to interpret it.

Wolfe's writing is fabular; it resonates with culturally rich images, and addresses aspects of life that are, I hope, important to the vast majority of thinking beings. He does not generally write adventure stories, although there is adventure in them; he does not write with the goal of applying some personal moral perception to your forehead with a sledgehammer, as SOME authors do; his stories attempt to share strange and almost indescribable personal discoveries about life, to speak about things that are difficult if not impossible to describe with the overly concrete symbols of language, things that must be explored at a higher level of abstraction.

Not only that, but his stories are a lot of fun. Gripping and suspenseful in a way that "evil invasions by evil guys from way up north" just never turn out to be. Wolfe writes from a history and context that is, by and large, REAL, and hence his stories are vastly more engaging, moving, and meaningful than stories that are based in a cartoonish fantasyworld.

Wolfe has written several books that could keep good company with something like *The Crying of Lot 49* or *Magnetic Field(s)*. I know he is not terribly popular - despite making a bid for mainstream sf/f audiences with his *Torturer* series - and that is really unfortunate. I think that most of his books should be sold as fiction although there isn't that great a market for good fiction these days, either.

Oh, well.

Just to address more specifically what was said about the *Torturer* series: no point, little plot, too much foreshadowing. Now, I cannot deny that you may have seen no point and little plot. Presumably, you could see a point to the *Herald-Mage* books? The *Torturer* series is about a quest for rebirth, a search through decay for life. I suppose since it isn't about bad guys from up north, some people might have a hard time figuring out that there is, in fact, a plot. I guess it might be difficult for certain people to recognize a plot in *The Bear*, or *The Baron in the Trees*, or *Anthills of the Savanna*.

I know Gene Wolfe doesn't appeal to a lot of people because he is not easy to understand; he doesn't hold his readers by the hand, and forces them to actually think for themselves. Some people think this is a weakness - you can acid-test them by asking them if they liked Lem's *The Investigation*. And I agree that there are boundaries which some writers wander across, after which they are more engaged in literary masturbation than in meaningful communication (*Gravity's Rainbow* comes to mind, although a lot of people disagree with me). But I haven't read a story by Wolfe yet that came close to that boundary just as I haven't read a story by Mercedes Lackey that wasn't careful to tell you exactly what your reaction should be to everything that she was writing.

David Eppstein — 27 Mar 1992, 21:41 · follows K R Maxson

maxson at cerl.uiuc.edu (K R Maxson) writes:

Not only that, but his stories are a lot of fun. Gripping and suspenseful in a way that "evil invasions by evil guys from way up north" just never turn out to be. [...] Just to address more specifically what was said about the Torturer series: Now, I cannot deny that you may have seen little plot.

I have seen this assertion several times now, and I am tired of letting it pass. There is enormous quantities of plot in the Torturer series. Including "boy from nowhere grows up to be emperor", "evil invasion from up north", and various other standard subplots. You just don't notice it because there's so much else going on. Like the claim of no foreshadowing, the supposed lack of plot is easily refuted. Those people not liking Wolfe must be doing so for some other reason than the reasons they are claiming.

David Eppstein
Info & Computer Science
UC Irvine

Geoffrey A. Coulter — 29 Mar 1992, 02:28 · follows David Eppstein

doug at netcom.com (Doug Merritt) writes:

It's a mood piece, it's about the psychology of a very odd man, by way of contrast it's about the psychology of the common man, it's a thoughtful work about ethics and mores (a torturer as hero??? Even Donaldson used an anti-hero for what little point he had to make in book 1), and there

Yes, but Donaldson was at least enjoyable. Indeed, so was Wolfe...at first. His premise held a lot of promise, but he crippled his efforts by making the series into a set of increasingly bizarre vignettes. When I started the series, I had a lot of hope for it, but as it progressed I came to feel that Wolfe felt he had to write of stranger and stranger scenes to hold the interest of the audience. This really turned me off.

There were also some spots where I found it a bit slow paced even so, but given the rest, I decided that he was probably doing that on purpose in order to maintain the rhythm and pace (they were noticeably regular) in precisely the intended way.

I don't question his intentions, but I personally didn't like the result.

Now, if you're in the mood for bang-'em-up adventure (which I sometimes am, I don't mean that as a flame), then this is going to be a dreary and dull set of books.

Ironically, I thought the books had too much 'bang-'em up adventure.' It distracted from the character development; much of it seemed gratuitous. Almost every conflict the aliens could have been done away with with little loss.

If you take them on their own merits, you can discover that Wolfe has created something so different that it's pretty much in a class by itself. It's not quite like anything ever done before.

I agree, and was a little surprised when I came across a comparison with Mercedes Lackey in the first post on this sub-thread. The two writers simply cannot be compared (No, I'm not saying one is better than the other, necessarily :-)).

This is not to say I want to see people imitate this series. I probably wouldn't like the results. I'm sure I wouldn't have liked the original series if anyone but Wolfe had done it. It wasn't what he did, but *how* he did it that was great.

It *is* possible to say, "He did a great job at doing it, but that sort of

thing just isn't to my tastes," you know. Saying that it's "dreck" just exposes that you don't pay attention to those aspects of books that you don't personally care for no matter how well done they may be, surely the very definition of provincialism.

It comes down to what a reader sees him as trying to do/doing. I'm not sure he did a great job because I think he let his ideas run away from him. As I said earlier, I liked his premise, but he seems to have lost control. Perhaps if he had used some of his subsequent ideas in _different_ works, I would not have felt I was reading a long series of non sequiters.

Or to be more charitable, I could assume you're simply taking a Humpty-Dumpty stance in meaning "dreck" to say "I *really* didn't like it."

Bingo.

It was a collection of images which went from unusual to completely whacked-out. Why anyone would seek out more of this dreck is completely beyond me.

As usual it's important to separate personal taste from questions of craftsmanship.

As I just said, however, I question the craftsmanship.

Geoffrey Coulter

Stephen Harker — 02 Apr 1992, 07:43 · follows Geoffrey A. Coulter

Someone actually wants _more_ Gene Wolfe?!? What a painful thought! Reading his Torturer stuff was one of the most painful things I've ever done. There was no point, very little plot, and way too much foreshadowing. It was a collection of images which went from unusual to completely whacked-out. Why anyone would seek out more of this dreck is completely beyond me.

[Quite a bit of stuff deleted]

Gene Wolfe is perhaps the best science fiction / fantasy author writing today. Although I enjoyed his Torturer series, I do not think it showcases his talents as well as There Are Doors, The Death of Doctor Island, or many of the short stories reprinted in Endangered Species.

There is no kitsch or melodrama in Wolfe's prose. His writing is spare, concise, and it grabs you with the ideas it presents rather than trying to enmesh you in purple language. There is no color for the sake of color, no passages of filler description in sad and misguided emulation of JRRT or Peake.

I find this opinion hard to believe. I have tried to read a number of books by Gene Wolfe at various times. He is one of very few "acclaimed" authors who I have found unreadable. I cannot believe that anyone would call his writing "spare". The only description that I can think that is vaguely appropriate is my old first form English teacher's worst comment "verbal diarrhea".

This certainly shows a massive difference in taste from the above comments.

Stephen Harker
Monash University

Toshi Takeuchi — 02 Apr 1992, 23:59 · follows Stephen Harker

The first time I read *Shadow of the Torturer*, I whipped through the book like I read most science fiction books and I thought the book sucked.

Well, *The Claw of the Conciliator* won the Nebula, so I thought all right I'll give the book another try.

The next time I read the book slowly and I LOVED it. His writing carried me away. His plot is so-so, but his writing is wonderful.

Read Gene Wolfe, but read slowly. (a suggestion to those who think he sucks.)

Toshi

Albatross — 03 Apr 1992, 16:47 · follows Toshi Takeuchi

Someone actually wants more Gene Wolfes?!? What a painful thought!

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I find this opinion hard to believe..."verbal diarrhea".

This certainly shows a massive difference in taste from the above comments.

Well, at least I think we can agree that Gene Wolfe's works are "arguably the best", with emphasis on "arguably".

An important point is that Wolfe adhere's to a style of writing similar to Sucharitkul, MacAvoy, or some of Tepper's earlier works: storytelling. Wolfe is first a storyteller, and second a science-fiction/fantasy writer. He is NOT a space-opera writer, adventure writer, or intrigue writer.

Since storytelling is probably the least-common structure for a science fiction novel, it will seem, well, alien to many science-fiction readers. Thus the sharply different opinions as to whether or not his writing is "good".

Since my tastes have always run to strong characterization and clear description, I enjoy Wolfe's works. However, I always keep in mind the distinction between his storytelling style and the style of most other science fiction authors. To do otherwise results in Wolfe being lumped in with Heinlein, Card or Brin, resulting in absurd comparisons.

Storytelling is storytelling, adventure is adventure. Each can contain elements of the other (each must, really), but to try to compare two clearly different styles makes no sense. Gene Wolfe his one of the best storytellers we have, behind only Richard Adams (IMHO). He does what he does very well.

You may simply not have a taste for that style.

Bob Alberti
Computer & Information Services
U of MN

Peter Cash — 03 Apr 1992, 20:31 · follows Albatross

phs172m at vaxc.cc.monash.edu.au (Stephen Harker) writes:

I find this opinion hard to believe. I have tried to read a number of books by Gene Wolfe at various times. He is one of very few "acclaimed" authors who I have found unreadable. I cannot believe that anyone would call his writing "spare". The only description that I can think that is vaguely appropriate is my old first form English teacher's worst comment "verbal diarrhea".

I've read a couple of his books - FREE LIVE FREE and SOLDIER OF THE MIST. I enjoyed both until the end. While the writing style didn't set me on fire, I thought the characters were interesting and well-drawn, and the plot moved along OK but, this guy just does not know how to end a book. There are lots of intriguing situations and tantalizing mysteries but, they all come to nothing in the end. FLF just falls apart the solution is totally unbelievable and trivial. SotM sets you up by making you care about the characters, then treats them shabbily (setting up for a sequel I'll never read).

No, I don't like Gene Wolfe either, and I won't read anything else by him.

Peter Cash

Peter Cash — 03 Apr 1992, 20:45 · follows Peter Cash

alberti at mudhoney.micro.umn.edu (Albatross) writes:

An important point is that Wolfe adhere's to a style of writing similar to Sucharitkul, MacAvoy, or some of Tepper's earlier works: storytelling. Wolfe is first a storyteller, and second a science-fiction/fantasy writer. He is NOT a space-opera writer, adventure writer, or intrigue writer.

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Storytelling is storytelling, adventure is adventure. Each can contain elements of the other (each must, really), but to try to compare two clearly different styles makes no sense. Gene Wolfe his one of the best storytellers we have, behind only Richard Adams (IMHO). He does what he does very well.

I find this hard to understand. I had always thought that the common thread that runs through all science fiction and fantasy writing is story-telling. Aren't these all stories? Isn't plot the decisive element in this whole genre? And how can you say that writing about "adventure" is not story-telling? I'm puzzled.

Peter Cash

Doug Merritt — 04 Apr 1992, 02:35 · follows Peter Cash

phs172m at vaxc.cc.monash.edu.au (Stephen Harker) writes:

I find this opinion hard to believe. I have tried to read a number of books by Gene Wolfe at various times. He is one of very few "acclaimed" authors who I have found unreadable.

I find **quite** a few recent acclaimed and award winning writers to be unreadable.

But I do like Wolfe. I think you're **both** right. There are times when his prose borders on the

purple, and other times when it is spare.

I really don't think he's always at either extreme.

Doug Merritt