

GENE WOLFE'S BOOK OF DAYS by Gene Wolfe

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GENE WOLFE'S BOOK OF DAYS by Gene Wolfe

Arrow, 1985, ISBN 0-09-939230-5, L2.25.

A book review by Evelyn C. Leeper

You're probably asking why I'm bothering to review a seven-year-old book now, especially in a British edition. Well, first of all, some people who are reading this may actually live in Britain, but also, if I managed to find this, you might too.

Clearly I'm going to recommend this book (else why would I be reviewing it?). It's an intriguing idea - eighteen stories, each for a particular holiday. Though this edition is British, there was an American edition in 1981, which would explain the choice of some purely American holidays: Lincoln's Birthday, Arbor Day, Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, ... It's odd, in fact, that Independence Day is missing - I wonder if it was in the original edition and omitted in this one. And the Memorial Day story is about World War II, not the Civil War. I should explain to the majority of United States readers as well as those elsewhere that Arbor Day is a holiday celebrating trees (no, not by cutting them down, like at Christmas, but by planting them). It's very popular in the Midwest, especially in the schools - I can remember every year in school in Illinois buying a small sapling for a nickel (if I recall correctly - certainly no more than a dime) and taking it home to plant it in the yard. Two or three of the five actually survived until we moved - they may still be there. However, it could be that the Midwest borrowed it from Israel. (Gene Wolfe lives in either Illinois or Indiana, so that would explain his use of Arbor Day.)

Now that I have finished the Midwest cultural lesson, I can return to the book at hand. What makes this collection even more unusual is that Wolfe did not start out to write a story for each holiday. The copyright dates indicate that they were written over a span of several years, but this merely underscores the importance holidays have in our lives. Even when the holiday is not mentioned in the story, it is the same underlying motivation for both. Wolfe's stories would be good even without the holiday theme, but it serves to focus our attention on the fact that holidays were not just invented by greeting card companies (well, not all holidays anyway) and that they have a meaning and, to the extent they show us that meaning, a purpose. And this is what makes this collection worth seeking out.

Evelyn C. Leeper