

Wolfe, "Book of the New Sun"

The SF-Lovers list — 12 messages, 8 voices, 09 Aug 1992

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/sflovers/98>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

David Ben_Ami — 09 Aug 1992, 14:46

I've just finished reading Gene Wolfe's "Shadow of the Torturer". The book seemed very intriguing and interesting. The references to the past were very amusing (the Hut in the Jungle chapter was great but a bit obscure).

However, the "distant future in Urth" doesn't seem very futuristic if there weren't the few mentions of fliers and other planets. It seems like a Medieval world with fancy Guild system.

I failed to understand the role of many chapters (especially the very long and tiresome journey with Agia around the city. The part with the traveling actors was very strange too.

I guess it will be explained in the next books but still ...

What is the "New Sun", why is Earth called Urth (is it Earth?)?

Thanks for any info.

David Ben-Ami
s2780369 at Techst02.Technion.Ac.II
davidba at Carmel.Technion.Ac.II
davidba at Moav.Techniona.Ac.II

Donald Lindsay — 10 Aug 1992, 04:55 · follows David Ben_Ami

davidba at carmel.technion.ac.il (David Ben_Ami) writes:

However, the "distant future in Urth" doesn't seem very futuristic if there weren't the few mentions of fliers and other planets. It seems like a Medieval world with fancy Guild system.

I guess it will be explained in the next books but still ... What is the "New Sun", why is Earth called Urth (is it Earth?)?

An important point is that it isn't a series: it's one multivolume book plus a sequel. Also, the SF book club put out "The Castle Of The Otter", a collection of essays by Wolfe that explains a few things.

Big secret: watch for time travel. Specifically, keep your eyes out for cause-and-effect reversals: the plot becomes much tighter if you notice them. Wolfe doesn't hit you over the head with the clues, but you can deduce many things - for instance, the hero's parentage.

The language: all words *are* used correctly* if your idea of "correct" allows obsolete words and obsolete usages. There are no made-up words. Period.

As for high tech - the Urth has been through many cycles of high and low tech. The destriers, for

example, were created by DNA engineering, and survived the low-tech times since they don't need tech to reproduce. The basic tech idea is homage to Jack Vance: that the society has artifacts it does not know the history of, and that the occasional person does have access to history.

Don C. Lindsay
Carnegie Mellon Computer Science

Chris Waters — 10 Aug 1992, 08:59 · follows Donald Lindsay

lindsay+ at cs.cmu.edu (Donald Lindsay) writes:

The language: all words *are* used correctly if your idea of "correct" allows obsolete words and obsolete usages. There are no made-up words. Period.

Really? I have been unable to find any reference to the (marvelous) word ``logophage", which appears somewhere in *_Shadow_*. The meaning should be obvious to anyone who understands Greek roots, of course, but charming as this coinage is, I find it difficult (though not impossible) to believe that it is not original with Wolfe.

My impression was that there *were* made-up words, but that all such words (as above) were derived from common Greek or Latin roots, and presented in a way that made their meaning obvious from context. I seem to remember (though it's been several years) that there were quite a few words which I could not find even in the OED. However, I always found these words easy to understand - the obscure words that *did* give me trouble invariably *were* in the dictionary.

Chris Waters

Aaron Humphrey — 10 Aug 1992, 17:01 · follows Chris Waters

The language: all words *are* used correctly if your idea of "correct" allows obsolete words and obsolete usages. There are no made-up words. Period.

Really? I have been unable to find any reference to the (marvelous) word ``logophage", which appears somewhere in *_Shadow_*. The meaning should be obvious to anyone who understands Greek roots, of course, but charming as this coinage is, I find it difficult (though not impossible) to believe that it is not original with Wolfe.

I had assumed in Duncan's "Man of His Word" books that he had made up the word anthropophage, until I encountered it in some other context as referring to a childhood bogeyman. So don't be so sure...

My impression was that there *were* made-up words, but that all such words (as above) were derived from common Greek or Latin roots, and presented in a way that made their meaning obvious from context. I seem to remember (though it's been several years) that there were quite a few words which I could not find even in the OED. However, I always found these words easy to understand - the obscure words that *did* give me trouble invariably *were* in the dictionary.

The one word in the New Sun books (disclaimer:I've only read the first two) that gave me trouble was athame, which I'd also encountered in the game nethack and never found in any dictionary. (I didn't try the OED, however.) I found out from someone else that it's a magician's silvered dagger...

Aaron V. Humphrey
Canadian Network For Space Research
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Donald Lindsay — 11 Aug 1992, 03:51 · follows Aaron Humphrey

xtifr at netcom.com (Chris Waters) writes:

The language: all words *are used correctly* if your idea of "correct" allows obsolete words and obsolete usages. There are no made-up words. Period.

My impression was that there *were* made-up words, but that all such words (as above) were derived from common Greek or Latin roots, and presented in a way that made their meaning obvious from context.

Wolfe has stated that "all the words are real" and that "everything is just what it says it is". Loyal To The Group Of Seventeen is the only person not given a human name. There is, for example, a Dorcas in "The Great Muppet Caper" [the wife of John Cleese's character]. The monsters are named after monsters, although Wolfe admits that Borges may have made up the historical reference that Wolfe used for "Baldanders". The Heirodules have the names of minor Roman gods. Ascians are people without shadows [their enemies calling them that on the assumption that they are from the equatorial zone].

Urth is the eldest of the Norns, who represents the past.

Don C. Lindsay
Carnegie Mellon Computer Science

Steve Simmons — 11 Aug 1992, 15:36 · follows Donald Lindsay

The language: all words *are used correctly* if your idea of "correct" allows obsolete words and obsolete usages. There are no made-up words. Period.

Really? I have been unable to find any reference to the (marvelous) word ``logophage'', which appears somewhere in _Shadow_. The meaning should be obvious to anyone who understands Greek roots, of course, but charming as this coinage is, I find it difficult (though not impossible) to believe that it is not original with Wolfe.

A small distinction - Wolfe in an interview said that he did not make up any of the words. This is quite different from claiming they're all `real' words. I believe that a number of nouns and names are taken from reasonably well-known works by other authors. *Those* authors may well have made them up. "Logophage" does not appear in the slightly- out-of-date copy of the OED I have access to, but I seem to remember it from Fritz Leiber's "The Pale Brown Thing."

A trip through the OED looking up Wolfe words and names is always interesting and often rewarding. For, example, take the 3-legged dog "Triskele." No surprise that its primary meaning is a 3-legged brazier. But about fourth down in the list (thank you, OED) is "symbol of the Sun." Fascinating foreshadowing when you consider Severian may have raised him from the dead.

Robert Firth — 11 Aug 1992, 15:46 · follows Steve Simmons

lindsay+ at cs.cmu.edu (Donald Lindsay) writes:

Urth is the eldest of the Norns, who represents the past.

No, that's a fairly late mistake by the Icelandic commentators. In medieval times, the Norns were supposed to be three in number: Werd, Werdanda and Skuld. The last two names can (at a stretch) connote the present and the future, but the association of Werd with the past is a scholarly deduction with no etymological or historical support.

Originally, Werd was the sole Norn; she later became three in imitation of the classical Parcae.

On the meaning - the spelling varies, but the closest to the original form of the name is Old Norse 'urdr', Icelandic 'urd', Old English 'wyrd', modern 'weird'. The root meaning, therefore, is "fate". Wolfe's spelling (as so often with his recondite words) is eccentric; it seems to be based on the analogy 'Erd' => 'Earth' :: 'Urd' => 'Urth'. I find that implausible.

Robert Firth

Steve Simmons — 11 Aug 1992, 15:48 · follows Robert Firth

lindsay+ at cs.cmu.edu (Donald Lindsay) writes:

davidba at carmel.technion.ac.il (David Ben_Ami) writes:

I guess it will be explained in the next books but still ... What is the "New Sun", why is Earth called Urth (is it Earth?)?

An important point is that it isn't a series: it's one multivolume book plus a sequel. Also, the SF book club put out "The Castle Of The Otter", a collection of essays by Wolfe that explains a few things.

Getting it all out:

Originally there were four volumes which comprised "The Book Of The New Sun":

The Shadow of the Torturer
The Claw of the Conciliator
The Sword of the Lictor
The Citadel of the Autarch

These were followed by the essay collection "The Castle of the Otter."

Its title came from an error in LOCUS where they got the title of the last book wrong. Later, there was a sequel of sorts called "The Urth of the New Sun."

"Castle" was published in only two editions I know of. Zeisling Brothers published a good quality limited first edition of 520 copies of which 100 were signed (I have one, signed, so phhhhhh! :-)) Later it was sold to the SF Book club in one of their typical quality printings.

"Castle" lists slightly different titles, not giving the "The" for "Sword" or "Citadel".

Steve Simmons — 11 Aug 1992, 15:52 · follows Steve Simmons

lindsay+ at cs.cmu.edu (Donald Lindsay) writes:

The language: all words *are used correctly* if your idea of "correct" allows obsolete words and obsolete usages. There are no made-up words. Period.

One cautionary note - when the characters translate a phrase or name for you, do *not* take their words for it. My latin is extremely rusty, but I spotted several cases where there were distinct and meaningful differences.

One that has always stuck in my head is "Terminus Est." Severian is told (and believes) that it means "the dividing line", presumably between life and death (or at least, head and shoulders). A more accurate translation would be "this is the end." A small but distinct difference.

Bill Garrett — 11 Aug 1992, 19:24 · follows Steve Simmons

Castle of the Otter will be reprinted along with Gene Wolfe's Book of Days, and various uncollected non-fiction in the omnibus "Castle of Days" due out from TOR around Christmas.

Bill Garrett
University of Rochester

P W Stephenson — 12 Aug 1992, 09:23 · follows Bill Garrett

lindsay+ at cs.cmu.edu (Donald Lindsay) writes:

Borges may have made up the historical reference that Wolfe used for "Baldanders".

I seem to discover something new about this book every day (and it's half a dozen years since I first read it). The reference to Borges brought back something I've been wondering about for a long time: namely that all the action takes place in the southern hemisphere (unless Wolfe intends that it should get colder towards the equator, which might fit in with the theme of paradox; I can't remember how strong the evidence is.) I have assumed, dangerously, that the Commonwealth is (some major part of) South America; perhaps this is just because the Ascians, to the north, made me think of ASCII, which made me think of... (etc.). Anyway, could this (purported) setting be an homage to the type of fiction deriving from Borges? Just wondered.

Oh yes... while I'm on the subject, the only direct quotation I've ever seen (there is reference after reference after reference, of course) from another work is from Marlowe's Faustus (roughly, ``Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed...''; it occurs just before the meeting with the undine, I think.) Are there others? Does the singling out of this example mean something? (Of course it does, unlike `singling' which looks weird. I'm starting to blabber. I liked `an homage', though.)

Peter Stephenson
Dept. of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics
University of Liverpool, U.K.
+44 51 794 3784 or 3791
pws at s-a.amtp.liv.ac.uk
PWS at UKACRL.BITNET

Steve Simmons — 12 Aug 1992, 11:41 · follows P W Stephenson

Urth is the eldest of the Norns, who represents the past.

No, that's a fairly late mistake by the Icelandic commentators.

But it's the definition used by Wolfe. Or so he says in "Castle of the Otter."