

Re-reading, hoping for some discussion ;-)

The Urth list — 13 messages, 6 voices, 14 Aug 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4689>

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Jonathon McKitrick — 14 Aug 2006, 22:54

Hi all,

I was on the list some time ago, and now I'm re-reading BotNS, hoping to get 'Solar Labyrinth' in the mail soon.

So, for all you long-time hard-core fans, it will be the same questions you've heard before, but I'm hoping maybe someone with patience can help me sort this stuff out.

First of all, after just reading a couple of today's posts about Severian's lineage... is there any reason to believe Gene Wolfe had this stuff planned out to provide all these details deliberately, and that he will take the final explanation with him to his grave?

Jonathon McKitrick

My other computer is your Windows box.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 14 Aug 2006, 22:58 · in reply to Jonathon McKitrick

On 8/14/06, Jonathon McKitrick <jcm at freebsd-uk.eu.org> wrote:
First of all, after just reading a couple of today's posts about Severian's lineage... is there any reason to believe Gene Wolfe had this stuff planned out to provide all these details deliberately, and that he will take the final explanation with him to his grave?

I'm reasonably sure that Wolfe did not create this complex, beautiful work without a clear idea of what it all meant (I don't mean symbolically, at least not necessarily; I mean what was going on behind the scenes to cause the various mysterious goings-on). I'm fairly certain he knows who Severian's parents and grandparents were.

But ... I suspect that we readers sometimes spend a lot of ingenuity coming up with solutions to mysteries Wolfe never intended to be mysteries at all.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

b sharp — 15 Aug 2006, 11:21 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Jonathon McKitrick asks:

... is there any reason to believe Gene Wolfe had this stuff planned out to provide all these details >deliberately, and that he will take the final explanation with him to his grave?

At the end of Citadel, I think, Gene Wolfe makes some comment about BotNS being the culmination of seven years of writing, re-reading, re-writing. So I think there are surely intentional mysteries in there. In one interview, Gene Wolfe is asked about all the analyses and interpretations of BotNS and he answers saying something to the effect that he is surprised by the excessive attention to certain details he never considered important and to the scant attention paid to other details he considered very important.

We've seen that different people magnify different parts of the story, depending on the lens they use to view. Might be a Catholic or Marxist or (in my case) anthropological bias which makes some parts of the text stand out and other parts diminish. In reading Solar Labyrinth earlier this year, I wondered if Robert Borski might have a Jewish perspective (I don't know his religious persuasion).

Someone recently asked if Wolfe might have notes or journals which would be published after his death. Some felt that might happen but they would be as impenetrable as his already published work. I get the feeling he builds his stories on a solid, clear foundation then he obscures it, so his notes would solve many mysteries. But I don't think any notes will be released since Wolfe hopes his work has the enduring quality to last much longer than his lifetime.

In the past, people in here have wondered why BotNS hasn't become an enduring classic which penetrates the cultural consciousness at large, such as Lord of the Rings, or Dune or Jurassic Park. I think it is partly because, since the 80's and the availability of the VCR and movie rentals, all Science Fiction/Fantasy classics are expected to be made into movies. It would be sad to think Gene Wolfe's work would fade into obscurity in the future.

But I have mixed feelings about a BotNS movie. I'd like to see it, just because I love movies and I think current CGI technology could do it justice, visually. But a movie which didn't capture the tone and feeling of BotNS could actually hurt the popularity of the books, as I think the Dune movies have done.

-bsharp

Adrian Robert — 15 Aug 2006, 13:23 · in reply to b sharp

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Er, also the main character is a torturer? ;) Wandering around on his own account to boot. Not quite as family-friendly as hobbits, dwarves, and elves journeying merrily together to save the world.

I don't see much reason to mention Jurassic Park and Dune / LoTR in the same sentence. (Not wanting to start an argument -- they both have wide cultural appeal, just for very different reasons. ;)

Anyhow, it's an interesting question as to whether Wolfe's work will last. To do so it will not only have to stand out from other works of its time, but also continuously maintain some degree of readership. I think these are a lot harder these days than, say, 100 or even 50 years ago, if for no other reason than the sheer number of other works being competed against for reader's attention.

And I feel like his work kind of falls between the cracks of different audiences. Most sci fi readers that I know have not heard of Gene Wolfe. Same with most non-scifi readers. He's not mainstream sci fi and a bit difficult going if you're just looking for spaceships, laser guns, and/or AI. On the other hand people who read books for the characters and emotions are not necessarily going to even consider reading a sci fi work because they're conditioned to believe that genre focuses on ideas at the expense of narrative elegance and character development. I suspect a lot of Wolfe fans happen to enjoy both types of works, they make up the exception rather than the rule among readers. (I did manage to get a friend of mine to read *_There are Doors_* once, but despite a positive reaction she balked at *BotNS*.)

Anyhow, I guess I'd like to think Wolfe's work will last, but have trouble convincing myself it can.

Jonathon McKitrick — 15 Aug 2006, 14:15 · in reply to b sharp

On Tue, Aug 15, 2006 at 07:21:42AM -0400, b sharp wrote:

: out and other parts diminish. In reading *Solar Labyrinth* earlier this year,

Mine is on the way. Did you find it worth reading?

: But I have mixed feelings about a *BotNS* movie. I'd like to see it, just : because I love movies and I think current CGI technology could do it

Now we can degrade the list into polls on who should play Severian, et al. :-)

: justice, visually. But a movie which didn't capture the tone and feeling of : *BotNS* could actually hurt the popularity of the books, as I think the *Dune* : movies have done.

I was excited when the SciFi channel *Dune* came out, but I have mixed feelings about it. Much better, in some ways, than the movie, but still empty in many other ways. Not sure if I want to rent/buy *'Children of Dune'* out of curiosity or not. I never did get around to reading the book.

Jonathon McKitrick

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HHR — 17 Aug 2006, 14:16 · in reply to Adrian Robert

In my admittedly limited experience trying to persuade friends into reading *New Sun*, I've had no success. One friend read around 3 pages and seemed to think that the whole main character as a torturer story was a gimmick, and couldn't accept statements near the beginning of the book such as the one about women not being allowed in the guild because they could be too cruel.

It's a real shame, because all three people I've got to start reading *New Sun* (and given copies of *Shadow* and *Claw* to), I know are the type who would love the unsurpassed mysteries and adventure. I've always thought it was just a matter of getting people to just have the patience and open-mindedness to get past the first few chapters.

Other times I've wondered if it could be that we who have read (multiple times) and loved every bit of TBotNS are somehow just obsessive freaks for thinking so highly of it. But to be honest I can't accept that. I'm cautious not to come across as a crazy fanatic, and I know you can never please everyone and that there will always be large proportions of the public who have no interest in a given style, but I do know that the Wolfe's New Sun is not anywhere near being given its due regard.

As Bsharp suggested, I agree a lot of this is down to the complete lack of TV/cinema presence Wolfe has received. Even though the endless detail and wealth in minor characters and subplots (and lack of a simple and obvious primary plot!) make it practically impossible for true justice to be done even in a trilogy of 3 hour epics such as. Still I think if the atmosphere of Urth was captured by a highly talented director (and great soundtrack and CGI teams!), and even if a great deal of the book was cut out, the result could be amazing.

The problem is there is so little awareness to spark interest in making a cinema adaption. All we can do is our little part... put in a good word wherever and whenever we can. I recently was looking up Wolf related terms and characters on Wikipedia and it struck me that good Wikipedia representation would be a great help to the cause. I've just made my attempt on Erebus... Abaia is up next :-)

On 15 Aug 2006, at 14:23, Adrian Robert wrote:

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Bob Miller — 18 Aug 2006, 02:55 · in reply to b sharp

While I personally love BOTNS, word used carefully, there are many who do not like it at all. I well remember trying to loan the SotT to three different people at work. The politeness of the response varied, but it was about the same in all three instances, "Why am I reading about these people thinking about robbing a graveyard and I don't think I like any of them?" My own

opinion? Until I read the Wizard Knight, I thought it was the best book I've read by a living author. Godspeed

Jonathon McKittrick asks:

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-bsharp

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 18 Aug 2006, 05:13 · in reply to Bob Miller

On 8/17/06, Bob Miller <bob_bageera at hotmail.com> wrote:
My own opinion? Until I read the Wizard Knight, I thought it was the best book I've read by a living author.

Hooray! Someone who agrees with me about TWK!

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

Jonathon McKitrick — 18 Aug 2006, 12:31 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Thu, Aug 17, 2006 at 10:13:05PM -0700, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

: On 8/17/06, Bob Miller <bob_bageera at hotmail.com> wrote:

: > My own opinion? Until I read the Wizard Knight, I thought it was the best : > book I've read by a living author. : : Hooray! Someone who agrees with me about TWK!

Wow! So you guys think TWK is even better, eh? That's quite a compliment.

I wouldn't rule it out, but I've never been very interested in fantasy. It took me quite a while to give BotNS a chance, since it wasn't 'obviously' SF.

Jonathon McKitrick

My other computer is your Windows box.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Aug 2006, 15:31 · in reply to Jonathon McKitrick

Wow! So you guys think TWK is even better, eh? That's quite a compliment.

I'll have to be a bit cautious about this: I found it far more _engaging_ than any of the Solar books (though Long Sun came close). I was privileged to review THE KNIGHT for the NYRSF, and had trouble actually _writing_ the review, because I didn't want to stop reading and rereading the book -- the first time that had happened to me in over thirty years, since I first read LORD OF THE RINGS in sixth grade.

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Jonathon McKitrick — 18 Aug 2006, 16:07 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Fri, Aug 18, 2006 at 08:31:27AM -0700, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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Is it a true 'magic' book, sci-fi in disguise, or neither?

Jonathon McKitrick

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 18 Aug 2006, 18:38 · in reply to Jonathon McKitrick

Oh, it's fantasy all right. If you're just plain allergic to fantasy, skip it. If you like the very best (like LotR), grab it NOW.

On 8/18/06, Jonathon McKitrick <jcm at freebsd-uk.eu.org> wrote:

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Bob Miller — 20 Aug 2006, 09:35 · in reply to Jonathon McKitrick

Yes, I'm rereading a fair amount of Kipling now and when I've run this race I'm going to reread Eye of Cat and the WK again. I feel sure that my opinion of WK will only get stronger as my opinion of Eugene Sue continues to ever get weaker.

: > My own opinion? Until I read the Wizard Knight, I thought it was the best : > book I've read by a living author. : : Hooray! Someone who agrees with me about TWK!

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