

# 'New Sun – Old SF?'

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 28 Dec 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5525>

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Gwern Branwen — 28 Dec 2009, 23:38

An old but interesting posting: <http://iansales.com/2008/09/21/new-sun-old-sf/>

"I should add that I didn't like The Book of the New Sun because it's a classic. I still think it's a very good book. But. One of its defining characteristics is its use of archaic, obsolete and arcane words for various objects and concepts, the conceit being that Wolfe is "translating" the manuscript and uses such words because Severian does. So there are no swords mentioned in The Book of the New Sun, there are hangers and falchions and spadroons (among others). The fauna includes merychip, hesperorn and arctother. Ships are caiques or feluccas or xebecs. While this does give a feeling of exoticism and great antiquity to the story, it also felt in many places intrusive. But perhaps that was because some of the vocabulary was not obscure to me. I know what a dhow is (well, I did live in the Middle East). I know what cuir boli is (I spent my teen years playing Dungeons & Dragons). The words felt obfuscatory rather than clever.

There's also an uncomfortable thread of misogyny running throughout the four books. Severian is a torturer, which immediately calls his morality into question. But almost all of his victims are women. When he eventually arrives at Baldander's laboratory, he writes,

? I saw what remained of a young woman who might have been a sister of Pia's lying beneath a shimmering bell jat. Her abdomen had been opened with a sharp blade and certain of her viscera removed and positioned around her body? Her eyes opened as I passed?

Later, he adds,

?I was acutely conscious, as I spoke, of the eviscerated woman mumbling beneath her glass somewhere behind me, a thing that would not have bothered the torturer Severian in the least.

This, we are meant to realise, means Severian has grown, become a more moral person. Yes, Severian is a product of his (invented) world, and must be true to it if the fiction is to have any rigour. But that shouldn't prevent a reader questioning the writer's artistic decisions when creating that world."

gwern