

The Book of the New Sun vs. A Song of Ice and Fire

The Urth list — 27 messages, 11 voices, 01 Aug 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6280>

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Daniel Petersen — 01 Aug 2012, 09:56

<http://indigestmag.com/blog/?p=17070#.UBj7-01IS25>

I... highly recommend *The* *Book of the New Sun* if you're looking for a sci-fi/fantasy read to satisfy your appetite until the next book of Martin's *A* *Song of Ice and Fire* is released. Wolfe's work rates higher on the literary scale, but falls just short of Martin's where fully-realized characters are concerned. And where Martin's books are driven by action and intrigue, Wolfe's are driven by unraveling a complex narrative arc with incredibly tricky literary elements.

David Stockhoff — 01 Aug 2012, 12:36 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

On 8/1/2012 5:56 AM, Daniel Petersen wrote:

And where Martin's books are driven by action and intrigue, Wolfe's are driven by unraveling a complex narrative arc with incredibly tricky literary elements.

That's a fine observation in 25 words or fewer, although my initial impulse was to object to it as an oversimplification.

BNS has plenty of action and intrigue, but it is in a way a set piece. If there is a "game" in BNS it is between characters barely, if at all, on the stage. Severian appears to make decisions but even on the surface is overtly constrained in his choices in the same way any fairy tale hero is. This is one of the broad authorial winks Wolfe throws our way, and on catching it the reader begins to sense the many literary strata that hold Severian as fast as any fossil. From there, the reader eventually proceeds to full-blown detective mode.

But there is another way Wolfe handles action differently. Not only does Severian always surprise us, but he downplays his actions as though they come naturally to him---which of course they do, by definition. Raised in the Citadel as he was, action and intrigue are /literally /nothing to him. Where other narrators might directly remind us or boast of this background, Severian reminds us indirectly (e.g., how others perceive him) and by sudden, expert displays of violence. His utterly blase, matter-of-fact view of such things almost makes him Methuselan.

As for Martin's books---does anyone more familiar with them than I think there is anything /but /a surface level to them?

Daniel Petersen — 01 Aug 2012, 12:48 · in reply to David Stockhoff

Quick clarification for those dropping in: I, Daniel Otto Jack Petersen, DID NOT WRITE THAT REVIEW. I merely copied in its closing sentences.

Basically, I'm pleased as punch that Wolfe's New Sun is being thought of and engaged during and related to the Game of Thrones hype. I, of course, tend to think it sounds kind of hilariously absurd to say the Ice and Fire stuff excels New Sun in just about any way. Then again, I just

started reading Stephen King for the first time in my life recently (I tend to avoid mega-bestseller stuff) and whilst he does not have the literary merit of folks like Wolfe, I was utterly shocked to discover that his storytelling skill can be pretty freaking unbelievable and some of the characterisations are indeed pretty powerful - and he's really overall got a unique voice by which he kind of manages to hold his own in the literary scheme of things. I mention this because it made me wonder if Martin might have some of these qualities (I've never read any). I tend to doubt it for some reason. I'm open to it, but I suspect David's intuition that Martin's stuff is all surface with no depth is more likely.

-DOJP

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Antonin Scriabin — 01 Aug 2012, 12:55 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

I think that part of the reason ASOIAF gives off the impression of having such "fully-realized" characters is that the books are so darn long, and you spend a lot of time with them, in terms of pages. That said, though, the characters aren't always well-written, and in the latest book some of them do things and think things that don't really mesh with previous books. Martin definitely is a cut above a lot of the genre fantasy that has come out in the last 20 years, but he is no Wolfe.

Anyways, Wolfe seems to be getting more and more exposure, it seems. If you ever head to Reddit or Goodreads, for example, you will notice. Two years ago his name came up once in a blue moon, but now if someone asks for science fiction recommendations, or brings up a discussion of unreliable narrators, it isn't uncommon for a number of people to bring Wolfe and *New Sun* into the conversation. He is generally well-known and liked in a number of forums now, so these sorts of comparisons aren't uncommon.

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_____**_____

David Stockhoff — 01 Aug 2012, 12:59 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

Agree on King. /Pet Sematary /gets dumped on a lot, but it has some truly great passages and scenes that turn your bowels to water. That baby . . . no one else would take it that far!

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Marc Aramini — 01 Aug 2012, 14:30 · in reply to David Stockhoff

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????

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Well, there are no profound truths/mysteries about the nature of reality, but Martin does several things subtly, including the family tree of some characters. The "out of character" bastard son of the most upright guy in the books, Ned Stark, is hinted at actually being his sister's son in some passages, who ran off with a guy from the old dynasty who was killed by a usurper years before the action of the book starts. So that bastard is probably a legit heir but nobody suspects it and he is just shunted around to the northern wall, and the noble Stark fellow lets his wife kind of hate his "bastard son".

Also, some of the sexuality is just kind of hinted at in the books, like Renly and his wife never consummating and a close hero-worship kind of relationship with his head knight, but in the tv show that turns into a straight up gay sex scene with his knight.

He's not Wolfe but the first three books are good reads for something that is popular (how condescending does that sound? Shakespeare is and was popular, but public taste has gotten a bit more susceptible to criticism the last few centuries).

So ... hidden family trees, hints about relationships - that is a bit like Wolfe. Deep thoughts, theosophical musings, arcane vocabulary, multiple meanings to names - nah, not quite on Wolfe's level.

Jeff Wilson — 01 Aug 2012, 17:45 · in reply to David Stockhoff

On 8/1/2012 7:36 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:

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Martin has some literary chops, but I am more familiar with his earlier short stories, like the Hugo and Neb winning "Sandkings" :

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/36218355/1979-Sandkings>

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at clueland.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
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nate jarvis — 01 Aug 2012, 18:15 · in reply to Marc Aramini

The main issue I see with discussing how much is "hidden" in ASOIAF is that the series isn't finished yet. Marc mentions the "fan theory" about one character's (Jon Snow) parentage. Martin has said he will reveal who that character's parents are by series' end. Much of the discussion, like with most in-progress series, seems to be focused on what will happen in future books.

The big difference I see between the two is that Wolfe leaves so much out, allowing readers to

almost complete the storytelling process via their interpretations and theories. ASOIAF rewards close reading in a different way, though similar in that it hinges on "throwaway" lines or details. Many of the minor characters seem to have their own arcs and motives and what-have-you, which a casual reader (focusing on the major characters) won't notice. The westeros forum isn't what it was five years ago, but there's still good stuff (between the what-will-happen-next posts) to that effect.

Martin, like Wolfe, is also a master of dialogue voice.

Nate.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Aug 2012, 18:19 · in reply to nate jarvis

I'll also speak out in favor of Martin -- he wrote what I consider to be THE best rock'n'roll novel of all time, THE ARMAGEDDON RAG. The ASOIAF books, to my mind, are brutally honest depictions of the kind of society that generic fantasy readers & writers like to, well, fantasize about.

The Society for Creative Anachronism likes to say that it recreates "the middle ages as they should have been." Martin describes a medieval fantasy world as it really would have been.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Ryan Dunn — 01 Aug 2012, 18:36 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

A Song of Ice and Fire is a series I have read in full, and love for reasons entirely separate from Wolfe's. I think I love GRRM's work for its overt narrative slickness. I felt in the first couple of novels that each chapter was written as its own mini story, and while Martin jokes that he was writing something that could never be filmed as a reaction to his case of Hollywooditis, the book was and is a cinematic experience made for the small screen.

Where ASoIaF has more in common with Wheel of Time (IMO!) or some other big fantasy tome, I think Wolfe's work strikes a different anvil all together. There is an air of importance to the prose and world building that separates it. There is depth and meaning pining to be discovered and unearthed. There is another story (or two, or three) not even written on the page, but inferred through deduction and immersion. All of this comes naturally to Mr. Wolfe, so it never feels showy off in a Meryl Streep sort of way (Read: "Look at me, I am the best actress ever to grace the presence of the silver screen, watch me act, in all of my greatness, and take notes!"). Gag.

I know Martin comes from a similar school of writers as Wolfe, from a similar time, and that he has written some more high-minded stuff in the short story and standalone novel space, but when you speak Gene's name, you are talking about Borge and Chesterton and Dickens and Melville, and Joyce.

With George (at least with ASoIaF) you are saying, he's a much better version of Jordan, and Goodkind, and so on.

My two cents.

...ryan

On Aug 1, 2012, at 2:19 PM, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Antonin Scriabin — 01 Aug 2012, 18:43 · in reply to Ryan Dunn

I forgot to add that George R. R. Martin happens to be a big fan of *The Book of the New Sun,* and this blurb of his appears on the Fantasy Masterworks publication of *Shadow and Claw *:

"The books are chests full of wonders; full of images like jewels, of words a reader can get drunk on, of people and incidents that will linger long in memory. For years and years to come, I think, we'll see inferior imitations of Wolfe's masterpiece decked out with the phrase "'In the tradition of Wolfe", for that is the tribute all great originals are inevitably paid."

On Wed, Aug 1, 2012 at 2:36 PM, Ryan Dunn <ryan at liftingfaces.com> wrote:

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 01 Aug 2012, 21:04 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

Watching the series, I keep mentally trying to place the technology at around 1200 to 1400 AD. But then I remember that the Wall has been there for 8000 years, yet the Starks never invaded the Holy Land to learn the proper arts of siege warfare from the Arabs. So I just have to make myself stop analyzing it.

From: Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danllo at gmail.com>
To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>
Sent: Wednesday, August 1, 2012 2:19 PM
Subject: Re: (urth) The Book of the New Sun vs. A Song of Ice and Fire

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

nate jarvis — 01 Aug 2012, 21:43 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

Everyone SAYS the wall is 8000 years old. There's a bit in one of the books where Sam talks about historical claims nor adding up. Actually, that same scene might be in two of the books.

The Romans had decent siege technology that would have predated the Arab-Chinese technology; isn't Martin's wall a fantasied up version of Hadrian's Wall?

Nate

On Wed, Aug 1, 2012 at 11:04 PM, DAVID STOCKHOFF <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:
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Jeff Wilson — 01 Aug 2012, 23:35 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

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Sort of:

<http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/07/08/game-of-thrones-author-george-r-r-martin-spills-the-secrets-of-a-dance-with-dragons/>

"You once said that fantasy needs to reflect reality. Can you explain what you meant by that?"

Well, I think all fiction needs to reflect reality. Fiction is lies, we're writing about people who never existed and events that never happened when we write fiction, whether its science fiction or fantasy or western mystery stories or so-called literary stories. All those things are essentially untrue. But it has to have a truth at the core of it. You're still writing about people, you're writing about the human condition. I often quote Faulkner, who said in his speech after winning the Nobel Prize that 'the human heart in conflict with itself' is the only thing worth writing about. And I've always agreed with that. It's true no matter what genre you're writing in, even if there are dragons in it or it's about a private detective or a western gunslinger, it's still ultimately about the human heart in conflict with itself or it's not worth reading."

Apparently, the history and other fantastic parts are implausibly grandeurous intentionally because they exist only to serve the realistic characters and plot.

Jeff Wilson - [jwilson at clueland.com](mailto:jwilson@clueland.com)

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

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That's probably the best way you can go about it, given GRRM's statement quoted in my other post. The character detail is realistic, the setting detail is subject to benign neglect.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at clueland.com
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
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James B. Jordan — 02 Aug 2012, 00:32 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

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To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>
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Well, but without the Church and Christianity. So it's not actually medieval at all.

JBJordan

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Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

nate jarvis — 02 Aug 2012, 01:13 · in reply to James B. Jordan

Well, but without the Church and Christianity. So it's not actually medieval at all. </JBJordan>

I assume you mean the society for creative anachronism? There are religions in ASOIAF. There's one that seems to have a lot of the "high church" (RC or CoE) pomp and ceremony of Christianity, in which worshippers pray to one of a small pantheon for intercession (similar to the gods from Bujold's Chalion books) and another that seems to be modelled on Zoroastrianism and incorporates the millenarianism of medieval Christianity--right down to the return/rebirth of a historical/mythical savior.

If you were to specifically and explicitly use the Catholic Church in a high fantasy cum faux history story, where the history, places, etc. are all different... maybe that could work, but people bring their feelings about the RC to the story, whereas abstracting what you feel are the essentials of the medieval church (prayers for intercession or millenarian doomsday prophecies) and then introducing a different-but-similar institution that keeps those essentials in place removes some of the prejudices and associations people might have about a real world institution.

Nate.

Jerry Friedman — 02 Aug 2012, 01:43 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

From: Jeff Wilson <jwilson at clueland.com>
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Well, I think all fiction needs to reflect reality. Fiction is lies, we're writing about people who never existed and events that never happened when we write fiction, whether its science fiction or fantasy or western mystery stories or so-called literary stories. All those things are essentially untrue. But it has to have a truth at the core of it. You're still writing about people, you're writing about the human condition. I often quote Faulkner, who said in his speech after winning the Nobel Prize that 'the human heart in conflict with itself' is the only thing worth writing about. And I've always agreed with that. It's true no matter what genre you're writing in, even if there are dragons in it or it's about a private detective or a western gunslinger, it's still ultimately about the human heart in conflict with itself or it's not worth reading."

Apparently, the history and other fantastic parts are implausibly grandeurous intentionally because they exist only to serve the realistic characters and plot.

I don't see in that quotation that he says why the series has fantastic parts, much less what their "only" purpose is. ?I also don't think "a truth at the core of it" is necessarily the same as "realistic characters and?plot."

Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman — 02 Aug 2012, 01:48 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

From: Jerry Friedman <jerry_friedman at yahoo.com>

From: Jeff Wilson <jwilson at clueland.com>

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with
that. It's true no matter what genre you're writing in, even if there are
dragons in it or it's about a private detective or a western gunslinger,
it's
still ultimately about the human heart in conflict with itself or it's not
worth reading."

Apparently, the history and other fantastic parts are implausibly
grandeurous
intentionally because they exist only to serve the realistic characters and
plot.

I don't see in that quotation that he says why the series has fantastic
parts, much less what their "only" purpose is. ?I also don't think
"a truth at the core of it" is necessarily the same as "realistic
characters and?plot."

Even "reflect reality" isn't necessarily the same as "realistic characters and plot", I'd say,
especially not the "plot" part, though it's closer than the phrase I mentioned above. ?Sorry I
didn't notice that before.

Jerry Friedman

David Stockhoff — 02 Aug 2012, 01:52 · in reply to James B. Jordan

On 8/1/2012 8:32 PM, James B. Jordan wrote:

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <danllo at gmail.com>
To: The Urth Mailing List <urth at lists.urth.net>
Sent: Wednesday, August 1, 2012 2:19 PM
Subject: Re: (urth) The Book of the New Sun vs. A Song of Ice and
Fire

I'll also speak out in favor of Martin -- he wrote what I consider to
be THE best rock'n'roll novel of all time, THE ARMAGEDDON RAG. The
ASOIAF books, to my mind, are brutally honest depictions of the kind
of society that generic fantasy readers & writers like to, well,
fantasize about.

The Society for Creative Anachronism likes to say that it recreates
"the middle ages as they should have been." Martin describes a
medieval fantasy world as it really would have been.

Well, but without the Church and Christianity. So it's not actually
medieval at all.

JBJordan

That's a good point---Westeros is plainly far more pagan than our world. I'd guess that there are reflections of elements of myths that went into Christianity (Osiris' rebirth and so on), but no Christ. He seems to try to keep it vague, and yet offers a remarkable amount of detail.

António Pedro Marques — 02 Aug 2012, 02:10 · in reply to James B. Jordan

No dia 02/08/2012, às 01:32, "James B. Jordan" <jbjordan4 at cox.net> escreveu:

Martin describes a
medieval fantasy world as it really would have been.

Well, but without the Church and Christianity. So it's not actually medieval at all.

Rather I'm afraid that medieval without church is like Apple without Jobs. It's not that it wouldn't be the same thing, it's that it wouldn't exist at all.

Jeff Wilson — 02 Aug 2012, 04:05 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

On 8/1/2012 8:43 PM, Jerry Friedman wrote:
From: Jeff Wilson <jwilson at clueland.com>

Apparently, the history and other fantastic parts are implausibly grandiose intentionally because they exist only to serve the realistic characters and plot.

I don't see in that quotation that he says why the series has fantastic parts, much less what their "only" purpose is. I also don't think "a truth at the core of it" is necessarily the same as "realistic characters and plot."

There's more at the link and in other publicity he's done about the books and show.

The characters need realistic personalities to reflect the concerns of those human hearts rather than be caricatures with no internal motivations: the antagonists aren't that way because they are EEEEEVIL, they antagonize because of differing loyalties, resentment, greed, etc.

But the other stuff, the lie parts like the fictional fantasy setting, *are* there for the human story's purposes, and you can say The Wall's been there for 8000 years for the same reason the story of the Burning Buddha has him being on fire for 72,000 years.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at clueland.com
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Jeff Wilson — 02 Aug 2012, 04:51 · in reply to nate jarvis

On 8/1/2012 8:13 PM, nate jarvis wrote:
Well, but without the Church and Christianity. So it's not actually medieval at all.
</JBJordan>

I assume you mean the society for creative anachronism?

There are a few religious personas, but they do not seem terribly popular. Also, I don't know of a kingdom or other outfit that grants religious rank.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at clueland.com
Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana
< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

James B. Jordan — 02 Aug 2012, 12:34 · in reply to nate jarvis

At 08:13 PM 8/1/2012, you wrote:

Well, but without the Church and Christianity. So it's not actually medieval at all.

</JBJordan>

I assume you mean the society for creative anachronism?

No. I meant Song of Ice and Fire.

James B. Jordan

Director, Biblical Horizons

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<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com>

Jeff Wilson — 03 Aug 2012, 11:33 · in reply to Marc Aramini

On 8/1/2012 9:30 AM, Marc Aramini wrote:

Well, there are no profound truths/mysteries about the nature of reality, but Martin does several things subtly, including the family tree of some characters. The "out of character" bastard son of the most upright guy in the books, Ned Stark, is hinted at actually being his sister's son in some passages, who ran off with a guy from the old dynasty who was killed by a usurper years before the action of the book starts. So that bastard is probably a legit heir but nobody suspects it and he is just shunted around to the northern wall, and the noble Stark fellow lets his wife kind of hate his "bastard son".

It's Catelyn's decision to blame the child. If Jon Snow truly is a get of the old dynasty, Ned saved his life and probably prevented a civil war given how vigorously all the other possible heirs were hunted down.

But I digress.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson@clueland.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

Jeff Wilson — 03 Aug 2012, 12:51 · in reply to nate jarvis

On 8/1/2012 4:43 PM, nate jarvis wrote:

Everyone SAYS the wall is 8000 years old. There's a bit in one of the books where Sam talks about historical claims not adding up. Actually, that same scene might be in two of the books.

The Romans had decent siege technology that would have predated the Arab-Chinese technology; isn't Martin's wall a fantasied up version of Hadrian's Wall?

Quite possibly. The HBO adaptation has intentionally assigned regional British accents (not always successfully) to characters based on their analagous places of origin, with Londoner near King's Landing and Scots for some wildlings in the mountains far to the north.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson@clueland.com

Computational Intelligence Laboratory - Texas A&M Texarkana

< <http://www.tamut.edu/CIL> >

David Stockhoff — 06 Aug 2012, 22:01 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

Great story. Thanks!

On 8/1/2012 1:45 PM, Jeff Wilson wrote:

On 8/1/2012 7:36 AM, David Stockhoff wrote:

As for Martin's books---does anyone more familiar with them than I think there is anything /but /a surface level to them?

Martin has some literary chops, but I am more familiar with his earlier short stories, like the Hugo and Neb winning "Sandkings" :

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/36218355/1979-Sandkings>