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Gwern Branwen — 17 Feb 2014, 16:45

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/features/books/ct-prj-0216-science-fiction-roundup-20140214,0,2803037.story>

Gary K Wolfe:

When the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame presented its first Henry Blake Fuller Award for lifetime contributions to literature to Gene Wolfe a couple of years ago, he was already regarded by many as the finest living science fiction writer. Wolfe may have since left the Chicago area for Peoria, but he remains one of Illinois' literary treasures, and as he nears his 83rd birthday he continues to produce startlingly original and complex fiction.

This latest example, narrated by a travel journalist setting out to write the first guide to an almost inaccessible Eastern European country, will remind some readers of Kafka and others of classic horror fiction: There's an abandoned house that may hide the corpse of a witch, a ruined castle, a shadowy figure in black, and plenty of hints that we're in the territory of Vlad the Impaler, the inspiration for Dracula. But there's also an inexplicable bureaucracy that arrests the writer and places him in the care of a local couple, telling him that if he escapes they will be killed. And on top of that is a nod to a famous Robert Heinlein science fiction story and a pair of American expatriates with their own bizarre secrets.

If all this sounds like it could barely hold together, it's actually a tribute to Wolfe's narrative virtuosity, since the story never stops being compelling, even as it piles puzzles upon mysteries. Wolfe is well known for his deft use of unreliable narrators, and the travel writer Grafton is one of the most interesting of all, since his own narrative voice is anything but sophisticated. As with all of Wolfe's most devious novels, the clues are all there, the narrative adds up, and in the end there's a surprising but powerful lesson about the ways we give up our freedoms.

gwern

<http://www.gwern.net>