

A Solar Labyrinth

The Urth list — 15 messages, 9 voices, 03 Jul 1998

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Robert Borski — 03 Jul 1998, 20:39

One of my all-time favorite short-shorts by Gene Wolfe is "A Solar Labyrinth." And yet no one I've ever shared the story with has ever been to figure it out, to solve the maze, if you will. So allow me my Daedalean intrepertation. (My apologies if this repeats anything similar said by others--I know the story has been discussed, but can't remember details.)

It's about tv, folks. The labyrinth consisting of light and dark is a television--maybe color, more likely an old black and white.

Observe how Gene Wolfe describes it in a typical living room.

It stands "on a manicured green lawn"--the carpet. The various "lamp posts from Vienna, Paris and London" are the set's tubes or its cathode ray imagizer. "The standing trunk of a dead tree" is a console, the wooden box containing the tv.

"The maze changes from hour to hour" (i.e., different programs begin and end) "and indeed from minute to minute." (the screen is alway changing).

The maze/tv is also a substitute for the real world. Hence the mention of "armchair adventurers" and "Gone, it might seem, are the great days of monsters, maidens and excitement." Tv has its own myths as well: the western, the sit-com, the hospital and cop shows.

Notice the mention of Diana, Tezcatlipaca and Quetzalcoatl, light-bringing entities. Compare this with Phosphor, the god of luminous dots, our 20th century equivalent. Note as well the ferver of interest in shows such as Seinfeld and the Superbowl--it's near religious. As is the tithe we frequently spend to enjoy it, what with vcrs, large screen sets, and satellite and cable technology fees.

Observe as well how television can entrap--the lost being at the heart of this maze is not an Athenian youth, but a couch potato. It is a "maze from which the explorer can walk free whenever he chooses. And yet it is said that most of them...do not." "Most adult guests do not escape until they are rescued by a passing cloud." (i.e., we turn off the set) "Some, indeed, refuse such rescue." (Anybody remember the days when networks didn't telecast 24/7? Does your tv have a sleeper function that will automatically turn it off in a certain amount of time? Anyone have a friend or acquaintance who doesn't own a tv?)

"The frowning figure of the Minotaur...a monster that haunts the shadows" is either loneliness or boredom or an impoverished imagination (notice how some children escape the labyrinth).

"Glasses help" to place you in the maze (especially if like Gene Wolfe you wear spectacles).

Mr. Smith is John Q. Public, the quintessential Nielsen family, whose interests determine maze

design/tv programming.

And the solitary child mentioned in the story's last sentence? It's the child for whom tv is both babysitter and sole companion, the one monster who will play with you when no one else will.

Jason Voegele — 04 Jul 1998, 14:43 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski wrote:

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It's about tv, folks.

This is an interesting interpretation, and you're right--no one I know has ever come up with anything like it. One question though: what do you suppose is the "sinister element" that Wolfe claims to have "kept so far in the background that few readers notice it at all"? (Introduction to STOREYS OF THE OLD HOTEL)

Jason Voegele

William H. Ansley — 05 Jul 1998, 01:53 · follows Jason Voegele

Robert Borski writes:

One of my all-time favorite short-shorts by Gene Wolfe is "A Solar Labyrinth." And yet no one I've ever shared the story with has ever been to figure it out, to solve the maze, if you will. So allow me my Daedalean interpretation. (My apologies if this repeats anything similar said by others--I know the story has been discussed, but can't remember details.)

It's about tv, folks. The labyrinth consisting of light and dark is a television--maybe color, more likely an old black and white.

Gee, Robert, I have disagreed with your interpretations of other Wolfe works but I really, really, REALLY disagree with this one.

Observe how Gene Wolfe describes it in a typical living room.

It stands "on a manicured green lawn"--the carpet.

This seems to be the whole of your evidence that Wolfe intend us to infer that area the maze occupies is like a living room; not exactly conclusive, I'd say. My living room, for one, doesn't have a carpet.

The various "lamp posts from Vienna, Paris and London" are the set's tubes or its cathode ray imagizer. "The standing trunk of a dead tree" is a console, the wooden box containing the tv.

This is inconsistent. The dead tree trunk functions just like the lamp posts, to cast its shadow to make up part of the maze, so to say that the lamp posts symbolize the 'works' of the tv and the tree trunk symbolizes its container, the console, is so arbitrary as to be nonsensical.

"The maze changes from hour to hour" (i.e., different programs begin and end) "and indeed from minute to minute." (the screen is always changing).

This could apply to almost ANY image we see not just a tv screen, in fact an analogy could be made between this shifting maze and just about any process that experiences or produces change. If Wolfe really intended to symbolize tv here, why didn't he work in some clever reference to the fractions of a second occupied by the "cathode rays" in scanning the screen.

The maze/tv is also a substitute for the real world. Hence the mention of "armchair adventurers" and "Gone, it might seem, are the great days of monsters, maidens and excitement." Tv has its own myths as well: the western, the sit-com, the hospital and cop shows.

Wolfe is talking about people solving a maze from an aerial photograph of the maze, rather than by actually walking the maze themselves here. In other words, he is contrasting interacting with a real object (such as the solar labyrinth) with dealing only with a convenient image (the photograph). This associates the maze with the real world and contrasts it with images of reality, such as tv.

Notice the mention of Diana, Tezcatlipaca and Quetzalcoatl, light-bringing entities. Compare this with Phosphor, the god of luminous dots, our 20th century equivalent. Note as well the fervor of interest in shows such as Seinfeld and the Superbowl--it's near religious. As is the tithe we frequently spend to enjoy it, what with vcrs, large screen sets, and satellite and cable technology fees.

This is a maze made up of *light* and shadow; it seems only natural to use statutes of light-bringing deities to cast shadows that make up part of the maze barriers. It's the kind of ironic wit that Wolfe often employs through his characters.

Your attempt to equate the inclusion of a few gods/goddesses that very few people worship these days (at least among tv viewers) in the maze with the admittedly almost religious frenzy with which many tv viewers treat the medium rings false.

Observe as well how television can entrap--the lost being at the heart of this maze is not an Athenian youth, but a couch potato. It is a "maze from which the explorer can walk free whenever he chooses. And yet it is said that most of them...do not." "Most adult guests do not escape until they are rescued by a passing cloud." (i.e., we turn off the set) "Some, indeed, refuse such rescue." (Anybody remember the days when networks didn't telecast 24/7? Does your tv have a sleeper function that will automatically turn it off in a certain amount of time? Anyone have a friend or acquaintance who doesn't own a tv?)

I certainly won't argue that tv can entrap, but the more apt and more often used parallel is with drugs and addiction. The oddity in the passages you quote is the qualification "adult". In my experience children are as likely to be entrapped by tv as adults, if not much more so. If you can come up with a convincing reason that this distinction should be made if Wolfe really means to symbolize tv by the solar labyrinth, then it would certainly help your case, but I don't believe you can.

"The frowning figure of the Minotaur...a monster that haunts the shadows" is either loneliness or boredom or an impoverished imagination (notice how some children escape the labyrinth).

Again, an inconsistency. Why should the Minotaur be associated only with the shadows of the maze and not its light if it is meant to symbolize the deleterious effects of television (symbolized, you say, by the whole maze, light and shadow alike)?

"Glasses help" to place you in the maze (especially if like Gene Wolfe you wear spectacles).

Glasses help you see, if you need them, whether you are watching tv or participating in any real activity such as walking a maze.

Mr. Smith is John Q. Public, the quintessential Nielsen family, whose interests determine maze design/tv programming.

Mr. Smith, being the maze's designer, seems quite un-Nielsen-like in his creativity and lack of passivity.

And the solitary child mentioned in the story's last sentence? It's the child for whom tv is both babysitter and sole companion, the one monster who will play with you when no one else will.

This last paragraph seems just SO wrong headed to me that it is the real reason I decided to refute your whole analysis. First of all, the child is playing with Mr. Smith, so is he also supposed to represent tv as well as the maze? Again, when has anyone seen a group of children watching tv lose interest one by one and drift away until only one poor pathetic soul continues to watch? Certainly it happens, but with tv it's the exception while with the maze it's the rule.

Solving the solar labyrinth is **difficult**, it takes **mental effort**; this is why most of the kids give up. Whereas the essence of tv is its effortlessness; it offers no challenge, you don't have to think at all.

The one point I will concede to your analysis is that it does immediately explain Wolfe's mysterious comments about the sinister aspects of the story that are so far in the background that most people don't notice them. You state as much in the exchange below.

Jason Voegele wrote:

This is an interesting interpretation, and you're right--no one I know has ever come up with anything like it. One question though: what do you suppose is the "sinister element" that Wolfe claims to have "kept so far in the background that few readers notice it at all"? (Introduction to STOREYS OF THE OLD HOTEL)

Robert Borski replied:

I thought it was pretty much how tv insidiously takes over some people's lives; i.e., we become so enchanted by the maze, we're reluctant to leave and thus will always be vicarious "armchair adventurers" rather than actual participants in life. I find this notion scary, anyway.

I can't explain what Wolfe means by this, but I can't accept your explanation as I'm sure I've made all too plain. One thing I did notice on rereading "A Solar Labyrinth" to prepare this response is that when Mr. Smith and the solitary child are "playing in the sunshine" at the end of the story it is approaching noon, at which time the maze will be insoluble. Why the maze should be insoluble when the shadows are shortest I don't know, but the child will be trapped and perhaps the Minotaur can pounce at this point. I have always associated Mr. Smith with the Minotaur, although I can give no textual evidence for this.

In *The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (CD-ROM) John Clute and Peter Nicholls state quite baldly "'A Solar Labyrinth' (1983) was a metafiction about the entire Book [of the New Sun]." Does anyone know if their thinking on this point derived from any support Wolfe might have given this idea?

William Ansley

mary whalen — 05 Jul 1998, 00:29 · follows William H. Ansley

This is Sean Whalen (prion).

When I saw the debate about A Solar Labyrinth, I reread it, keeping the previous discussions in mind. It seems to be about books (or fantasy books), rather than television.

At the beginning, the narrator says that few mazes are now built, and those that are are built of cheap and unoriginal material. This seems to be a comment on the quality and number of enjoyable (or SF/F) books.

The things that the maze is built of are the elements of the setting, plot, etc. The shadows that the people must traverse and that change with the sunlight represent the story of the book as it is read. Successfully completing the maze means you have understood the message.

When adults get stuck in the maze, it means that they cannot understand the message of the story. Children, if they get stuck, know that they can just walk away and come back to it to try again (they can stop reading and read it again, no one can know everything about a story upon first reading it).

Since children with glasses are often perceived as bookworms, etc., there is the passage that says, "glasses help."

The man called Mr. Smith is the author.

Every detail here may not be exactly correct, but this was my general impression. Anyone have a more detailed analysis?

prion

Jason Voegele — 05 Jul 1998, 08:51 · follows mary whalen

William Ansley wrote:

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RE: "A Solar Labyrinth" as New Sun metafiction--well the one obvious point supporting this is the title, since TBOTNS is indeed a labyrinth for the mind, relating of course the sun. This metafiction idea also ties in well with prion's theory concerning this story (i.e. that it's about fantasy novels).

Jason Voegele

Peter Westlake — 06 Jul 1998, 09:51 · follows Jason Voegele

At 14:43 1998-07-04 -0400, Jason wrote:

Robert Borski wrote:

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The Minotaur hides in the shadows. But at noon, there are no shadows.

SBear.

Michael Straight — 06 Jul 1998, 09:42 · follows Peter Westlake

On Sun, 5 Jul 1998, Sean Whalen wrote:

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This is my favorite reading of the story to date. So if mazes in general are SF/F, then the Solar Labyrinth is Wolfe's Book of the New Sun. Making Mr. Smith into Wolfe himself. But what do you suppose the Minotaur corresponds to? And what of the famous "sinister element"?

On Mon, 6 Jul 1998, Peter Westlake offered:

The Minotaur hides in the shadows. But at noon, there are no shadows.

Oooh! That lit a bulb in my head, although it may be a dim one. The "at noon there are no shadows" has an eschatological ring to my ear.

Whereas now some things are veiled in shadows, when the New Sun fully appears, we shall see clearly, be set free from the labyrinth, and the secrets hidden in the shadows will be exposed for all to see. Or evil hidden in the shadows will be exposed and wither in the light.

Only problem is that I don't see how this fits with the theory that the maze is Wolfe's Book of the New Sun. Surely Wolfe doesn't imagine we're awaiting the Day of Resurrection in order to finally learn Hethor's true identity?

-Rostrum

Mark Millman — 06 Jul 1998, 10:39 · follows Michael Straight

Robert Borski wrote:

I thought it was pretty much how tv insidiously takes over some people's lives; i.e., we become

so enchanted by the maze, we're reluctant to leave and thus will always be vicarious "armchair adventurers" rather than actual participants in life. I find this notion scary, anyway.

to which William Ansley replied:

I can't explain what Wolfe means by this, but I can't accept your explanation as I'm sure I've made all too plain. One thing I did notice on rereading "A Solar Labyrinth" to prepare this response is that when Mr. Smith and the solitary child are "playing in the sunshine" at the end of the story it is approaching noon, at which time the maze will be insoluble. Why the maze should be insoluble when the shadows are shortest I don't know, but the child will be trapped and perhaps the Minotaur can pounce at this point. I have always associated Mr. Smith with the Minotaur, although I can give no textual evidence for this.

and Peter Westlake (Spectacled Bear) added:

The Minotaur hides in the shadows.
But at noon, there are no shadows.

The maze may be insoluble at noon because, in the ideal (i.e., equatorial) situation at least, the maze disappears at noon. If its not there, it can't be solved.

And the maze hides the the solvers from the Minotaur just as much as it hides the Minotaur from the solvers. When the maze disappears, not only is the Minotaur revealed, but he is also unconstrained by stealth or walls.

Mark Millman

Jim Jordan — 06 Jul 1998, 21:59 · follows Mark Millman

Nutria here. My take on "A Solar Labyrinth" is, as you can guess, that it is about religion. Mark virtually makes the point for me.

A "smith" is a maker; He is God.

Mazes precede human existence -- first sentence of the story. I suspect Wolfe might suggest that the Trinity Himself is the ur-labyrinth.

All kinds of religious symbols mark the labyrinth:

lampposts - shed light, truth.

pillar-box - a mailbox, for the Word, for prayer, communication.

fountains - for baptism, the Spirit.

yawl - ship - the church.

dead tree with roses - the rose-decorated cross.

The shadows cast by these objects - what they reveal as symbols - create the maze through which human beings are to travel: human biographies. The shadows are the ink of God.

The Sun constantly changes the labyrinth: People have to be in touch with God in order to walk the maze and not get trapped. But they have to be constantly and fully in touch with God, and only one "child" has ever been.

You can walk out at any time -- if you don't want salvation. Free will.

Most people don't leave, because most people are, one way or another, religious.

Mr. Smith brings the favored guest -- calling and election by God, the point at which God alerts a person to the need for salvation.

Sometimes Smith walks with his guest, sometimes he leaves the guest to explore. Sometime God is near us, sometimes He seems to leave us alone.

Smith explains that He set up the pre-Christian gods, such as Diana. All is under His control, including the feathered SERPENT Quetzalcoatl.

NOBODY makes it through the maze, except for one solitary child, Jesus. Sinful man tries, but fails. Only this Child can draw Arthur's sword from the stone.

As Mark points out, when history reaches its pre-determined end, the antichrist Minotaur will be revealed and will have his brief hour. That is the sinister element, I take it.

I might add that Wolfe really likes this story, and there is an audiotope of him reading it. When asked about the stories he likes, Wolfe usually mentions his religious allegories.

Jim Jordan

Marc Coleman — 07 Jul 1998, 08:20 · follows Jim Jordan

I reread it last night and I like your take. Is anybody else a big fan of "On The Train"? "the telephone poles reel like drunks" marc

At 09:59 PM 7/6/98 -0500, you wrote:

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Michael Straight — 07 Jul 1998, 11:17 · follows Marc Coleman

On Mon, 6 Jul 1998, Jim Jordan wrote:

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[...]

NOBODY makes it through the maze, except for one solitary child, Jesus. Sinful man tries, but fails. Only this Child can draw Arthur's sword from the stone.

[more comparisons snipped]

My problem with this analysis is that, if "A Solar Labyrinth" is an attempt to capture something of the Christian life in a story, then I don't think it's a very good story.

Mazes are puzzles. Something to be solved with the intellect. The Christian life is not something to be "solved." It's not about the intellect but about moral character and having the humility to accept grace. I think the equation of mazes with tricky stories fits much better.

I also don't think the most interesting part of your comparison, the "solitary child," is supported by the text. I don't have it in front of me, but it seems to be twisting the sense to insist that the

occasional solitary child who sticks with the maze is meant to always be the same child. And does it say that the child actually solves the maze? I got the sense of several solitary children over time, each of whom experience something, possibly sinister, possibly involving Mr. Smith and/or the Minotaur, after everyone else has gone.

My main objection is one that I'm having trouble putting into words. When I read the comparison someone else made that mazes=stories and the solar labyrinth=BotNS, I said to myself, "Ah! How clever of Wolfe. Reading his stories *is* like navigating a maze, and few manage to find their way!" But I don't get that sense from your interpretation. I don't see what clever or interesting thing the story has to say about the Christian life. And I usually like the religious elements in Wolfe's stories.

-Rostrum

Peter Westlake — 07 Jul 1998, 15:27 · follows Michael Straight

At 11:17 1998-07-07 -0400, Rostrum wrote:

...

I also don't think the most interesting part of your comparison, the "solitary child," is supported by the text. I don't have it in front of me, but it seems to be twisting the sense to insist that the occasional solitary child who sticks with the maze is meant to always be the same child. And does it say that the child actually solves the maze? I got the sense of several solitary children over time, each of whom experience something, possibly sinister, possibly involving Mr. Smith and/or the Minotaur, after everyone else has gone.

Somewhere on the Web there used to be an interview where someone asked Wolfe about this, and he confirmed your sense. That's where I got the idea of the Minotaur no longer being hidden in the shadows. I searched for the page before posting, but it seems to have disappeared.

SBear.

Jim Jordan — 07 Jul 1998, 15:53 · follows Peter Westlake

At 11:17 AM 7/7/98 -0400, you wrote:

My problem with this analysis is that, if "A Solar Labyrinth" is an attempt to capture something of the Christian life in a story, then I don't think it's a very good story.

I don't know if it is the "Christian life" per se, but the human life. But in terms of the Christian life, the unsolvable maze is EXACTLY what Solomon describes in Ecclesiastes as life "under the sun." In fact, now that I think of it, I'll bet you anything that Ecclesiastes inspired this story.

Mazes are puzzles. Something to be solved with the intellect. The Christian life is not something to be "solved." It's not about the intellect but about moral character and having the humility to accept grace. I think the equation of mazes with tricky stories fits much better.

Well, it could be both, and probably is. Recall how Wolfe is "God" in "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story." And while I cannot recall any other titles, I'm pretty sure that the Author // God motif is found in other Wolfe stories as well. Thus, I'd suggest that "A Solar Labyrinth" can be interpreted either way.

But consider: If Severian is walking a maze, he is certainly going through maturation and conversion in his life. If "Solar Lab" is to be tied to the Severian Cycle, then it IS about the

course of life, in one way.

I also don't think the most interesting part of your comparison, the "solitary child," is supported by the text. I don't have it in front of me, but it seems to be twisting the sense to insist that the occasional solitary child who sticks with the maze is meant to always be the same child. And does it say that the child actually solves the maze? I got the sense of several solitary children over time, each of whom experience something, possibly sinister, possibly involving Mr. Smith and/or the Minotaur, after everyone else has gone.

I agree that the text does not say that the child solves the maze, or that there has only ever been one child. I sense that from the feel of the story and its overall religious gestalt (if my interpretation is correct). It's a bit like Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." If someone wants to insist that the house in the village is not the church, that the owner of the woods is not God, and that the darkest evening of the year is not Christmas Eve, well one cannot PROVE him wrong -- but the poem's imagery certainly thrusts the sensitive reader in the direction of a religious interpretation. I guess that since the "history" of the labyrinth only runs from sunrise to noon, the fact that only one child is left indicates only one child in the whole history.

And, btw, I think equating the Minotaur with Mr. Smith is like saying that the Ruler in "Westwind" might be an evil character. It's just not what Wolfe does. In the Severian cycle, you've got both "angels" and "demons" operating, and they are not the same "people." The Minotaur interrupts Mr. Smith. He is the Entity that people must escape by exiting the maze, and Mr. Smith helps them as they walk to do so; or decide not to try; or decide to be rescued by the cloud.

Remember, we might equate King Minos with the Minotaur, but not Daedalus. Daedalus built the maze, but the Minotaur was Minos's idea. Smith is said to be Daedalus, not Minos.

But especially, since the shadow casting objects, which create the writing of God (the ink of God) are all religious objects or symbols -- particularly the religious symbols Wolfe himself employs -- it seems to me that a religious interpretation cannot be avoided.

Does this help any? What do you think? I'm open to suggestion, but the more I think about it, the more sense my interpretation makes to me -- which just means I need to get out more, I suppose!

Jim Jordan

Michael Straight — 07 Jul 1998, 18:15 · follows Jim Jordan

I wrote:

Mazes are puzzles. Something to be solved with the intellect. The Christian life is not something to be "solved." It's not about the intellect but about moral character and having the humility to accept grace. I think the equation of mazes with tricky stories fits much better.

On Tue, 7 Jul 1998, Jim Jordan answered:

Well, it could be both, and probably is. Recall how Wolfe is "God" in "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story." And while I cannot recall any other titles, I'm pretty sure that the Author // God motif is found in other Wolfe stories as well. Thus, I'd suggest that "A Solar Labyrinth" can be interpreted either way.

But consider: If Severian is walking a maze, he is certainly going through maturation and conversion in his life. If "Solar Lab" is to be tied to the Severian Cycle, then it IS about the course of life, in one way.

I don't think "A Solar Labyrinth" is about the Severian Cycle, I think it's about *reading* the Severian Cycle. It's about figuring out a puzzle. But I don't think "the course of life" is very much like figuring out puzzles.

I agree that the text does not say that the child solves the maze, or that there has only ever been one child. I sense that from the feel of the story and its overall religious gestalt (if my interpretation is correct).

[comparison to Frost's poem snipped]

I just don't get that same sense, but then I never noticed the religious themes you see in "Stopping By the Woods" (and which, now that you point them out, seem like a plausible reading of the poem).

And, btw, I think equating the Minotaur with Mr. Smith is like saying that the Ruler in "Westwind" might be an evil character. It's just not what Wolfe does. In the Severian cycle, you've got both "angels" and "demons" operating, and they are not the same "people." The Minotaur interrupts Mr. Smith. He is the Entity that people must escape by exiting the maze, and Mr. Smith helps them as they walk to do so; or decide not to try; or decide to be rescued by the cloud.

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But especially, since the shadow casting objects, which create the writing of God (the ink of God) are all religious objects or symbols -- particularly the religious symbols Wolfe himself employs -- it seems to me that a religious interpretation cannot be avoided.

I agree that the "labyrinth=fiction" theory doesn't yet account for the Minotaur. But I disagree that Smith as author/creator of the maze is necessarily a benevolent character, even if he isn't equal to the Minotaur.

-Rostrum

William H. Ansley — 08 Jul 1998, 01:20 · follows Michael Straight

Earlier I (William Ansley) wrote (slightly edited from my original post:

In The Multimedia Encyclopedia of Science Fiction (CD-ROM) John Clute states quite baldly "'A Solar Labyrinth' (1983) was a metafiction about the entire Book [of the New Sun]." Does anyone know if their thinking on this point derived from any support Wolfe might have given this idea?

First I would like to say how much I appreciate the effort that Damien Broderick and Michael Andre-Driussi went to in attempting to find an answer to this question.

I certainly can see some evidence for the metafiction theory: the fountains, ship (yaw!) and dead tree covered with roses do seem to be, as Jim Jordan noted and as I had previously thought myself, strong links to TBotNS. In this reading (which certainly isn't mutually exclusive with the labyrinth as religion or the labyrinth as fiction/fantasy fiction readings) it seems to me the section on the children is strongly associated with the book of gold section of Shadow (ch. 6, p. 45, Orb ed.).

On the very first page of the first essay in The Castle of the Otter, "The Feast of Saint Catherine," (p. 211 of Castle of Days in which TCotO is included) Wolfe says:

In the first volume of *The Book of the New Sun*, the old librarian, Master Ultan, says, "Such a child eventually discovers, on some low but obscure shelf, *The Book of Gold*. You have never seen this book, and you will never see it, being past the age at which it is met."

[Wolfe continues the quotation for a few lines which I omit.]

And in the fourth volume, Severian muses. "Perhaps I have contrived for someone *The Book of Gold*."

In all modesty I think we have, Severian and I. Perhaps not for any great number of persons, but for a few. ...

Wolfe goes on to say that he has written *TCotO* because "the next best thing to *The Book of Gold* is a book about *The Book of Gold*."

He also strongly implies, if he does not state, that Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth* was *TBoG* for him. (For me, I suppose it would have to be Stanley G. Weinbaum's collection *A Martian Odyssey*. Certainly it is what made me a lifelong sf reader.)

So (wrenching myself back to the subject at hand) the children who like the maze in *ASL* are those for whom *TBotNS* is *TBoG*. This makes, to me at least, the ultimate image of *ASL*: "Mr. Smith and one solitary child still playing in the sunshine" quite charming. (But of course it ignores that pesky "sinister element." Then again, whose word do we have to go on that there really is a sinister element in *ASL*? Gene Wolfe's! Can we trust him? I say "No!" Or maybe the sinister element is that the kids will grow up to spend far too much time on the internet analyzing all of Gene Wolfe's stuff, especially *TBotNS*, to death and beyond.)

My main problem with this reading has always been this line in *ASL*: "I have heard that a certain wealthy citizen has not only designed and built a new maze, but has invented a new *kind* of maze, perhaps the first since the end of the Age of Myth." At first I thought, surely GW (since, in this reading, Smith is GW) doesn't think *TBotNS* is a new kind of sf novel. I know he doesn't suffer from false modesty, but really, that would be too much!

But the more I think about it, perhaps he does. And (especially after the time I have spent on this list) perhaps, if he does, he is right.

William Ansley