

Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun

The Usenet list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 14 Nov 1984

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/24>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Chris Henrich — 14 Nov 1984, 19:09

[]

Ian Kaplan writes:

In these books Wolfe has woven an incredibly complex plot whose central point I hoped would be revealed in the last book. For me at least, this did not happen and the books remain enigmatic. In the last few pages of the last New Sun book, "The Citadel of the Autarch", the new Autarch, whose previous career we have followed, states that he is leaving the Book of the New Sun behind on earth and going to meet the extra-terrestrials. While on this flight he will rewrite the book a second time. Since he has perfect memory, he can reproduce the book exactly. He says that if you don't understand the book, read it a second time, just as he is writing it a second time.

I found that repeated readings of these books were needed, not only to refresh my memory of them (they came out at intervals of 8 to 12 months) but also to understand them at all. Wolfe apparently wants the reader to work hard (as witness his use of obscure words, not explained), and in many places a "throw-away line" clarifies something that appeared hundreds of pages back, or even in a previous volume.

What does it all mean?

I don't know that it *has* to mean anything. If a book engages the reader's attention and gives enjoyment, then it is satisfactory. If it survives several attentive rereadings, and still gives enjoyment, it is excellent. I think *The New Sun* qualifies. One reservation: Severian's promotion to the position of Autarch seems unmotivated; i.e. it does not make sense in the context of the book. (Even the characters in the book seem to feel their world is pretty weird.) This is a defect, and is not repaired by having the previous Autarch suggest that indeed it was unmotivated. But maybe, the next time around, I'll see why Severian was the obvious choice, and this was the obvious thing to happen to him.

Regards,
Chris

Donn Seeley — 23 Nov 1984, 13:27 · in reply to Chris Henrich

I've been out of town and just recently managed to get caught up with everything -- otherwise I would have attended to this earlier. (Perhaps not coincidentally, my trip was to recover my library from storage, including THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN!) Beware: some spoilers may lurk in the following discussion...

In the last chapter of THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH, Severian says:

Have I told you all I promised? I am aware that at various places in my narrative I have pledged that this or that should be made clear in the knitting up of the story. I remember them

all, I am sure, but then I remember so much else. Before you assume that I have cheated you, read again, as I will write again.

Wolfe is something of a fan of detective fiction (as you might guess from his story 'The Rubber Bend'), and the last several chapters consist of the summation which the great detective always makes at the end of the story. Of course Wolfe doesn't want to spoil the fun of finding the answers, so he answers things obliquely, and you have to read carefully to guess at what particular puzzle is being explained.

I don't like to spoil the fun either, but I will mention some points to direct your re-reading that stem from things I've noticed or read elsewhere.

+ Easy one: Can you draw Severian's family tree? There are a number of red herrings which appear in the course of the books but the answer to this is fairly clear by the end of CITADEL.

+ What is the connection between the gold coin which Vodalus gave to Severian, and Dr. Talos? What relates it to the Sun and to the old mausoleum in the necropolis of the Citadel? Bonus question, unrelated: What was the original function of the Citadel?

+ What generates the apparitions of Master Malrubius and the dog, Triskele? This should be easy to answer, perhaps more so because of the recent Asimov novel. (There does seem to be a curious parallel between Asimov's universe and Wolfe's...)

+ What really happened in the climactic event of THE CLAW OF THE CONCILIATOR? I don't believe this is stated directly but it is relatively straightforward to guess.

+ What is the basis of the Urthian religion? Analogies with at least two of our religions come to mind.

+ Who is the Conciliator? What is Severian's connection to him, and to the New Sun? Who is responsible for this connection?

+ Finally, why is a rose's thorn as efficacious as the Claw? If you understand this, you understand the core of the books.

You have 30 minutes. Put your pencil down to indicate when you have finished. Start now.

There are lots of fun things to look for besides plot events, of course. One is tracing the origins of the stories and legends which the people of Urth tell. Another is catching references to Jorge Luis Borges' works; two places to look are the story of Domnina's encounter with Father Inire, and 'The Tale of the Student and His Son'. (There are others, too...) Another is looking for little clevernesses -- for example, what book in the set of four which Severian fetches for Thecla does he NOT describe? (I wouldn't have noticed this if Wolfe hadn't mentioned it in an article.) If you fancy this sort of thing, it helps to have a copy of THE CASTLE OF THE OTTER and to read 'The Books in THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN' in PLAN[E]T ENGINEERING (which also has a map of the continent on which Nessus is located).

Wolfe started working on THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN in 1975 and the last volume wasn't published until 1983. Think of all the effort that went into it -- it shouldn't be surprising that Wolfe wants the reader to do some work too.

If all else fails, you can see if the answers are in THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN when it comes out,

mcdonald — 24 Nov 1984, 17:12 · in reply to Chris Henrich

that not enough was made clear. According to Wolfe, the manuscript is about 200 pages through the second draft and has been waiting for several months for him to finish other obligations.

Mc