

Gene Wolfe: Book of the New Sun

The Usenet list — 26 messages, 17 voices, 27 Jan 1986

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/31>

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Kim Helliwell — 27 Jan 1986, 22:25

I've seen several kudos on this newsgroup for Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun, and they nearly always prompt the following train of thought in my mind:

What is it that you who love it (and read and re-read it avidly) see in it that I am missing? I've made it to the end of the second volume, the one which ends with the invitation to journey further with the protagonist, but does not blame the reader if he chooses not to--saying "it is no easy journey". Even up to that point it is no easy journey, so I've paused long to consider whether I want to go any further!

I must be missing some crucial point--is it something that will come clear if I go on, or would the net advise me to abandon it because, "if you have to ask, you ain't never going to know!"

If someone could explain in his own words what it is that Wolfe is trying to do with this work, it might help.

Michaelntz — 31 Jan 1986, 02:03 · in reply to Kim Helliwell

We are asked:

If someone could explain in his own words what it is that Wolfe is trying to do with this work, it might help.

hplabs!analog!kim

What Wolfe is trying to do is raise science fiction to a higher degree of literary value than has EVER EXISTED, beyond question. I have read a hell of a lot of SF and a hell of a lot more `serious' fiction than that (I'm an MA in literature/writing), and all I can tell you, though the Book Of The New Sun is too long and complex for your question to be answerable outside of an extended thesis (shit, I won't pretend I really understand the damn books - they defy that), is that if you are not blown away by now, at the end of the The Claw Of The Conciliator, if you are not shaking your head at Wolfe's awesome scope, his dazzling imagination, his miraculously skilled prose - well, man, go back to clowns like Heinlein and Asimov.

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

- Michael Krantz

"The text reveals the process of its own production."

David desJardins — 02 Feb 1986, 11:02 · in reply to Michaelntz

In article <3840005 at csd2.UUCP> krantz at csd2.UUCP (Michaelntz) writes:

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I haven't read the books, and for all I know they are God's gift to mankind, but however good the books are the above is the definition of bullshit. The writer presents the following as facts (not opinions):

- 1) These books have the most literary value of any SF ever written.
- 2) No one can even question this.
- 3) He has an MA in literature/writing but can't say why the books are good.
- 4) Nor does he understand the books; in fact they defy understanding.
- 5) If you didn't love the book you're an idiot.
- 6) Once again, Gene Wolfe is the best science fiction author ever.

I for one find this sort of garbage extremely offensive. Is anyone out there interested in answering the original question instead of lecturing the rest of us on our stupidity?

-- David desJardins

Paul Hahn — 03 Feb 1986, 03:21 · in reply to Kim Helliwell

In article <194 at analog.UUCP> kim at analog.UUCP (Kim Helliwell) writes:

What is it that you who love it (and read and re-read it avidly) see in it that I am missing? . . .

If someone could explain in his own words what it is that Wolfe is trying to do with this work, it might help.

I can't tell you what Wolfe is trying to do, but I can tell you what I, myself, enjoy about the work. (I've only read it twice, but plan to reread it many more times in the future.)

There are, basically, four things that really appeal to me about THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN:

- (1) The world. Wolfe has created a world in these books which has as much feeling of depth and reality as Middle-Earth or the Land or anything other created world of which I have read. In addition, Urth has its own unique flavor, a distinctiveness that is perhaps unsurpassed in my experience.
- (2) The storytelling. The beautiful, beautiful use of the English language in these books absolutely grips me, though I can understand that for some the difficulty of getting through it would negate its power. Matter of taste, I guess.
- (3) The people. As with the world they inhabit, Wolfe's characters are unusual and fascinating. To follow Severian in

his physical and spiritual (yech, I hate that word) journey is a joy.

(4) The challenge. Throughout most of the four volumes, as I marveled at the weird and wonderful images Wolfe showed me I was also thinking: What the blank is going on? To a certain degree THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN is a puzzle. It involves time in several ways, which creates a profound sense of disorientation and confusion sometimes, but comes clear (for the most part, anyway) at the end if one is paying attention. I will be the first to admit that I wasn't (I zipped through THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH during finals week), which was why many things which I should have gotten had to wait for my second reading. I am still far from a complete understanding of the book, and doubt that I shall ever attain one, but I intend to keep trying and savoring.

Does that help?

--pH

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* "My pen halts, though I do not. Reader, you will walk no

* more with me. It is time we both take up our lives."

*/

Jim Gardner — 03 Feb 1986, 18:20 · in reply to David desJardins

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

I haven't read the books, and for all I know they are God's gift to mankind, but however good the books are the above is the definition of bullshit. The writer presents the following as facts (not opinions):

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I for one find this sort of garbage extremely offensive. Is anyone out there interested in answering the original question instead of lecturing the rest of us on our stupidity?

-- David desJardins

Once in a long while, you read a book and the clouds part and the sun shines and your heart begins pumping and your eyes open and you suddenly realize that all your previous notions of what literature can do are feeble and limited. This is an awesome experience...and it's a pity that the word "awesome" has been so devalued in recent years, because "awe" is just as strong and surprising as it was millennia ago when the human race knew doodly-squat about anything. As Eastern (and Western) mystics have repeated down through the years, you can't explain "awe" rationally and you can't forcefeed it into someone who is not receptive to it. Nevertheless, some things/events/works of art are awe-inspiring and those who have felt their impact are changed by the experience.

High-falutin' words, and being a child of the cool cynical 70's and 80's, I would normally gag at the paragraph I just wrote. But I've read the Book of the New Sun, and I have to call a masterpiece a masterpiece. In my opinion, the Book of the New Sun is the greatest piece of literature ever produced by the English-speaking SF movement. I can think of nothing that approaches it. I can think of no other book that would move me to such a trite-sounding contentious statement.

So the obvious question is, "Why?" And it would be a lot easier for all concerned if the question had an obvious answer. It doesn't. Even worse, I know that any answer I can give is going to trivialize something that is deep and strong and wise. But here are a variety of attempts to say why the Book of the New Sun is awesome:

(1) It expands the limits of what SF can do. Not only is the story carried forward by strict narrative, but by philosophical digressions, a play, stories told by characters, dream sequences, flashbacks, offhand remarks, and so on. The structure is complex, and frankly, there are times when you don't know what the hell is going on (at least on first reading), but the result is much more satisfying than "First A happened, then B, then C." As a reader, you have to work and you have to think.

(2) It breaks SF cliches. This is a book with all the SF stock and trade turned inside out. Yes, there is space travel, but no one on earth cares about it much anymore. Yes, there is time travel (of a sort), but it is embodied in a very simple artifact and used for down-to-earth purposes. We have a robot in love with a woman, but feeling unworthy of her because he has been injured and repaired with human parts, so is not a "whole" being. The Frankenstein story is turned inside-out, none of the aliens behave the way you expect, the hero becomes Supreme leader of his commonwealth in a way that is nothing like any SF cliché, the great duel that caps the first volume is fought with flowers, and on and on.

(3) The book depicts a complete, very human society that is nothing like ours. This is often the goal of SF, but you don't realize how far short other books come until you read this one. Religion, culture, art, cuisine, modes of thought, are all fully envisioned and different. Simple example: by the time the book takes place, relativity and heliocentrism are firmly established in everyday life. Therefore, the sun never sets; earth's horizon rises to cover the sun. Wolfe never slips into 20th century thought.

(4) The book is rich with allusions, humour, and anything else you care to name. Things that immediately come to mind are twists on things we would recognize: the hero's attempt at interpreting a painting which is actually a photo of Armstrong on the moon; a funny/serious recap of the temptations of Christ inside the head of a mountain that has been carved to resemble a deceased tyrant who isn't quite dead enough; the classic fairy tale romance told entirely in what sound like quotations from Chairman Mao. Heaven knows how many of these I missed -- I'm told there are a lot of allusions to Borges' work, but I didn't catch them.

(5) The prose style is flawless. This doesn't matter to the general reader, but it fills the writer in me with envy. Sentences are seamless, varied, always easy to understand, never draw attention to themselves, until you actually look at what he is pulling off. Yes, he uses a vast number of unfamiliar words...but they are all nouns for objects/people/institutions that have no present-day counterparts. There is none of the Stephen R. Donaldson "use a \$10 word in some awkward way just to sound more important" nonsense.

Does this answer the question? Probably not -- if the point of the work could be summarized in a few paragraphs, I wouldn't be raving about the book being truly great. It's like trying to explain why cold juicy oranges are more satisfying than a Snickers bar; there's nothing wrong with Snickers, but oranges at the right time and place are blissful.

Will everyone like the Book of the New Sun? Of course not. Some people are looking for different things in their reading material. Will everyone understand the Book of the New Sun? Not a chance. Which I think is a bonus. Anything I can understand completely at first sight is nowhere near the heights to which humans can aspire, right? The world is complex, art is not immediately transparent (although it may seem very simple), and any work that really tries to bite off a piece of immortality is going to have depths that only unfold with thought and time. Literature that fully engages the capacity of an adult mind is not something you can assimilate in quick skimming. (IMPORTANT NOTE: I am not saying that a book has to be inaccessible to be good; I don't like books that keep me in a constant state of confusion. I am saying that something I can wring totally dry on first reading could well be an enjoyable book, but dammit, we're grown-ups now, and a mature writer spending months or years producing a piece of literature can put more resonances/tricks/delights/ironies into a story than I can pull out in a few hours of page turning. There are heights. There are books that yield new pleasures and revelations every time you read them. Those show what writing can accomplish.)

Is anyone out there persuaded? If I were someone who hadn't read the books, I would be extremely skeptical of what I have just written. But I hope some people are curious enough that they will go to their local libraries (it's free!) and get the first volume (The Shadow of the Torturer) to see what it's like. Note that this is not a series, but one book in four volumes, and you'll be lost if you don't read them in order.

For those who have started the book and see no point in continuing, so it goes. Some people can look at the Grand Canyon and feel awestruck, while others wonder why they drove all the way to Arizona to see a big hole in the ground. If the Book of the New Sun does nothing for you, life's too short to waste your time slogging through tens of thousands of words in the hope that it will all suddenly make sense. Look elsewhere for inspiration.

But it inspired me. A lot.

Jim Gardner, University of Waterloo

wfi — 03 Feb 1986, 22:34 · in reply to Michaelntz

In article <3840005 at csd2.UUCP> krantz at csd2.UUCP (Michaelntz) writes:

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

I'd also like to recommend (again) to net.sf-lovers readers the excellent "Fifth Head Of Cerberus."

I think Wolfe's being the "best SF novelist ever" is debatable (probably endlessly :-). Although Stanislaw Lem's books are uneven in quality, at his best I think he's a match for Wolfe. Based, of course, on the translations that are available of his work. Try the "Cyberiad" or "Solaris," "Memoirs Found In A Bathtub" or "The Futurological Congress". Or his stranger works like "A Perfect Vacuum."

-- Cheers, Bill Ingogly

Mark — 03 Feb 1986, 23:18 · in reply to David desJardins

I haven't read the books, and for all I know they are God's gift to mankind, but however good the books are the above is the definition of bullshit. The writer presents the following as facts (not opinions):

- 1) These books have the most literary value of any SF ever written.
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- 5) If you didn't love the book you're an idiot.
- 6) Once again, Gene Wolfe is the best science fiction author ever.

I for one find this sort of garbage extremely offensive. Is anyone out there interested in answering the original question instead of lecturing the rest of us on our stupidity?

-- David desJardins

I'm another one of those people to whom Gene Wolf is like unto a god, but I have to agree with Mr. desJardins on some of his points. Others are a little less cut and dried.

Points 1) and 2) are by definition absurd, or at least unsupportable. There's been an awful lot of SF written, and a significant portion of that has had literary aspirations. All of Delaney's work, a lot of Ellison (although no one should tell him that), Tanith Lee's stories, the ones by LeGuin, all of those were stories written as something other than hack work. So were most of those by almost any other "name" author of the past 20 years. And don't forget the small-time authors whose work, though well crafted, might have slipped by us. Literary value isn't something that can be quantized. Which brings me to point 3).

All I can say about point 3) is to go out and read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. The book won't tell you why Gene Wolf is god, but it might help people understand why I can't tell you either. There are novels that are well crafted, that flow easily, that have good dialogue and interesting plot, i.e. technically flawless books that simply aren't as good as The Book of the New Sun. Green Eyes by Lucius Sheperd comes to mind. That book was a first novel, and blew me away, but it still didn't have the impact that the Wolf's novels have had. There are things I could point to in his books and say "Look, a perfectly crafted section", indicating the allusions, the rythmm of the words, the play on the readers point of view versus the narators, and still you'd be missing the Quality of the piece. In that area of art, nothing really has a name, only a presence that either takes the viewer into a new state of being, or does not. Which brings me to my next point.

In number 5) the original author is paraphrased such that he comes across as saying all non-Wolf-worshippers are stupid. I wouldn't have read it quite that harshly, believing there to have been more enthusiasm than spite behind the words. If Wolf's work hits you, it generally hits you hard. If not, it's stuff that's a chore to wade through. I've tried to indoctrinate two girlfriends to the Order, with no success. I still like them both (well, one of them) fine. I wasn't trying to increase their intelligence. I was trying to give them something great and good. There are snobs, even in SF. One of them may be sitting beside you right now, but realize that all enthusiasts are also elitists. Bear with the mania of thy neighbor.

Point 4). "Understanding" a book is one thing to work for. For most people it comes easy with most books, and Wolf's books have a perfectly understandable plot line (until the end when things get hairy, but if you've gotten that far you won't mind). There are other things to work for as well. Finding all the nuances in the books to be found, that's something no one will ever do. I think that's what the original poster had in mind when he said that about understanding the books. I think someone once defined art as that which is always new. Who can understand something that is forever new to them? Who would want to?

As to who's the best SF author ever, that remains to be seen, doesn't it?

Mark!

jimb — 04 Feb 1986, 15:32 · in reply to Kim Helliwell

...the Book Of The New Sun is too long and complex for your question to be answerable outside of an extended thesis (shit, I won't pretend I really understand the damn books - they defy that)...

...Wolfe's awesome scope, his dazzling imagination, his miraculously skilled prose...

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

- Michael Krantz

I will straddle the fence (and probably incur anatomical difficulties as a result). The first two quotes above I agree with, though I do not associate myself with some of the snotty tone in the sections I deleted.

As to the third quote, while I find it arguable, it *is* arguable, e.g., can't be dismissed out of hand. The Book of the New Sun is not for plot readers. Wolfe's use of plot is almost completely centered on progressive revelation and illumination of character, that kernel of all good fiction.

TBOTNS is one definition by example of tour de force. He is using SF convention and imagery combined with classical literary technique to portray the life, conflicts, and character development of a fascinating individual in a fascinating world.

TBOTNS is written with and to a different sensibility than most SF, and like all literature, you must accept it on its own terms if it is going to "work" for you. If you don't, or for whatever reason can't, such is life. Remember, concerning matters of taste, there is no disputing. (An aphorism that antedates my birth by a good couple of millenia.)

-- from the musings of Jim Brunet

ihnp4/ima/ism780B
hao/ico/ism780B

"In any large scale endeavor that has worked to the benefit of mankind, there has been pain and sacrifice and loss. We stand now at one of the pivotal points in history. We can say "no" to the unknown mysteries of space, turn our backs, and announce our decline as a civilization. Or we can look at the stars, express our grief at the loss of CHALLENGER and its crew, and then honor their lives by saying, 'We shall continue.'"

Tim Maroney — 05 Feb 1986, 07:59 · in reply to Paul Hahn

The Book of the New Sun is in some ways a difficult work. If you don't like it, then by all means read something you will like better. However, since the question was why others like it...

First, ignore the person who said the world is unique. Wrong. Jack Vance used it frequently, though Wolfe's variation incorporates some Cordwainer Smith as well (you know, when he says "Atomic Age" and it *really* sounds like "Bronze Age"). Nonetheless, it is fascinating to modern people to explore a perspective from which we are not only relegated to a historical junkpile, but completely forgotten and proven to have no significance whatsoever in the overall history of the world.

The prose is stunningly crafted. That in itself is not enough to make a book enjoyable -- see William Gibson, who people will get sick of long before 1988. Nonetheless, at this level it is the best science fiction ever: it almost attains the stature of an epic poem.

Related to the quality of the prose is the quality of the imagery, which is peculiarly evocative. All the grains and colors of a Wolfe scene leap out with all the attributes of a vivid three-dimensional perception remembered from childhood. This is done without long, tedious description or focusing on surface features.

The plots are what really make the series. For some reason I have yet to figure out, the characters and events really get into my brain and reconfigure it into an Escher lithograph. Their raw potency defies description or summary. If these are not moving you, I don't know what to tell you. Do they seem arbitrary? Pointless? Then you and I have different worlds, or at least different ways of reading.

I hope this helps. Try to read the Book as if it were an epic poem in blank verse, and you may come to appreciate it more.

Tim Maroney

David C. Albrecht — 05 Feb 1986, 13:37 · in reply to Michaelntz

if you are not shaking your head at Wolfe's awesome scope, his dazzling imagination, his miraculously skilled prose - well, man, go back to clowns like Heinlein and Asimov.

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

Insert raspberry here. I realize that many people believe that these books are the greatest thing since sliced bread and I wish them all happiness in their beliefs. Me, I guess I will stick with clowns :-). I read Shadow of the Torturer and thought it was horrible. After reading all the praise for the books I gave them another chance and read the entire Book of the New Sun set. I wasn't particularly fascinated. To me the characters were not particularly interesting. The books were a series of disconnected vignettes that I found neither particularly interesting nor imaginative. I didn't feel much purpose or direction anywhere. No thanks. We went through the whole discussion of the subjectiveness of writing in this group to the point of exhaustion. In your opinion Gene Wolfe is the finest writer in the genre, fine. In my opinion he is not even close to the best I would much rather read 'clowns' like Zelazny, McKillip, Blish, Biggle, Silverberg, Eddings, Card, Fiest, even some Asimov or Heinlen.

David Albrecht

Charlie Martin — 06 Feb 1986, 13:24 · in reply to Jim Gardner

To: mcnc!decvax!bellcore!ulysses!burl!clyde!watmath!jagardner Subject: Re: Gene Wolfe: Book of the New Sun Newsgroups: net.sf-lovers Organization: Duke University, Durham NC Cc: Bcc:

In article <1090 at watmath.UUCP> you write:

...so it goes. Some people can look at the Grand Canyon and feel awestruck, while others wonder why they drove all the way to Arizona to see a big hole in the ground.

And some of us went to the Grand Canyon and found that the old, wind-warped timberline pines were far more beautiful, even if the Grand Canyon is pretty impressive.

I haven't read "Book of the New Sun" because some of the rest of Wolfe's writing put me off rather badly, and I've only so many hours in the day. So maybe I'll try it -- Shadow etc is around here someplace. But Desjardins has a good point about the posting to which he responded -- the general tone **was** "anybody who doesn't think that Gene Wolfe is Ghod's gift to SF is a schmuck." And I think he was justly offended. Your posting, while more complete and a far better description of the book(s), **still** comes across (in my humble opinion [Davis, stop giggling!]) as "if you don't have a religious experience reading Book of the New Sun, there may be something seriously wrong with your upbringing."

So cut those of us who prefer a style more like Hemingway a little slack, okay?

jimb — 06 Feb 1986, 15:12 · in reply to Kim Helliwell

Thought I'd jump back in again. Jim Gardner's response (jagardner @ watmath) is excellent. I wish **I** had written it and I second practically everything he said -- didn't see anything I wouldn't wholeheartedly agree with on one read/think. Thanks, Jim.

-- from the musings of Jim Brunet

ihnp4/ima/ism780B
hao/ico/ism780B

"In any large scale endeavor that has worked to the benefit of mankind, there has been pain and sacrifice and loss. We stand now at one of the pivotal points in history. We can say "no" to the unknown mysteries of space, turn our backs, and announce our decline as a civilization. Or we can look at the stars, express our grief at the loss of CHALLENGER and its crew, and then honor their lives by saying, 'We shall continue.'"

Ned Danieleley — 06 Feb 1986, 15:56 · in reply to David C. Albrecht

In article <651 at edison.UUCP> dca at edison.UUCP (David C. Albrecht) writes:

if you are not shaking your head at Wolfe's awesome scope, his dazzling imagination, his miraculously skilled prose - well, man, go back to clowns like Heinlein and Asimov.

Gene Wolfe is, quite simply, the best novelist ever to write in the science fiction genre. His prose, his ideas - all of it. The best. Hands down.

Insert raspberry here...

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. .
.

.... In my opinion he is not even close to the best I would much rather read 'clowns' like Zelazny, McKillip, Blish, Biggle, Silverberg, Eddings, Card, Fiest, even some Asimov or Heinlen.

David Albrecht

I second David's opinion. I got through the books, but I'm not sure why.

Ned Danieleley

Guy M. Smith — 06 Feb 1986, 18:40 · in reply to Jim Gardner

In article <1090 at watmath.UUCP>, jagardner at watmath.UUCP (Jim Gardner) writes:

I can think of nothing that approaches it. I can think of no other book that would move me to such a trite-sounding contentious statement.

Ditto for me. In terms of a fully realized alternate world, the only book that I know of that is in the same class as the New Sun is Lord of the Rings. I wouldn't attempt to try to compare the two directly as the authors were trying to do such different things. Someone else may be braver. As for Wolfe, anyone who can make a sympathetic character out of a torturer has got to be good.

Barbara Jernigan — 07 Feb 1986, 22:58 · in reply to Mark

Finding all the nuances in the books to be found, that's something no one will ever do. I think that's what the original poster had in mind when he said that about understanding the books. I think someone once defined art as that which is always new. Who can understand something that is forever new to them? Who would want to?

If it makes the reader feel any better, sometimes authors are in the same boat. To quote Jung:

The secret of creativeness, like that of the freedom of the will, is a transcendental problem which the psychologist cannot answer but can only describe. . . . Art is a kind of innate drive that seizes a human being and makes him its instrument. The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. . . . As K. G. Carus says: "Strange are the ways by which genius is announced, for what distinguishes so supremely endowed a being is

that, for all the freedom of his life and the clarity of his thought, he is everywhere hemmed round and prevailed upon by the Unconscious, the mysterious god within him; so that ideas flow to him -- he knows not whence; his is driven to work and to create -- he knows not to what end; and is mastered by an impulse for constant growth and development -- he knows not whither."

In my own work, I have found myself unconsciously foreshadowing later events -- and was aware of the foreshadowing only within the second and third passes. Is strange, remaining inexplicable (but pretty neat). When the writer says, "The book wrote itself," he/she is not lying or belittling his/her craft. The ideas, hard as they are, are not the hardest part. The *hard* part is turning the idea into something readable. But I digress.

As to who's the best SF author ever, that remains to be seen, doesn't it?
Mark!

"Best." Do I know that word? ;-)

Barb

David C. Albrecht — 10 Feb 1986, 14:10 · in reply to Jim Gardner

Once in a long while, you read a book and the clouds part and the sun shines and your heart begins pumping and your eyes open and you suddenly realize that all your previous notions of what literature can do are feeble and limited.... (lots more)

Though as I stated before I was not impressed by the Book of the New Sun, I was impressed by this review. It was obvious the author was very taken by these books and to some degree he even managed to get across why. Certainly it came light years closer to making me want to get down the books and look at them than the original response. Variety of taste can, do, and hopefully always will exist. Discussions of what really struck you as profound or meaningful in a book might make others see those things for themselves. Impugning someone because they don't think or feel exactly like you do usually just pisses them off (I know it does me). Thank you for an intelligent, well thought response to this query it at least gave me more insight into what makes a number of people so ecstatic about these books.

David Albrecht

Jim Gardner — 11 Feb 1986, 22:59 · in reply to Jim Gardner

[...]

I'm not sure I want to become known as the resident Book of the New Sun fanatic, so I'm hesitant to expand on my previous posting. However, a few points:

I took great pains to avoid saying anything patronizing to people who didn't like the book. Heaven knows, I've had people tell me, "This book changed my life" and found that when I read it, I hated it. I also took great pains not to say that Gene Wolfe is the greatest living SF writer. I don't like statements like that. "Greatness" is made up of more things than writing one great book.

For the people who were quick to write me and inform me

that my attitude is full of shit, all I can say is "Not everything that SOUNDS like bullshit IS bullshit"

And some answers to questions.

In article <168 at ucdavis.UUCP> cccrick at deneb.UUCP writes:

So many of the characters seem to be insane and therefore take actions that appear illogical: Master Palaemon gives an extremely valuable sword to a man who never seemed to interest him and who ought to be sentenced to death.

If you trust an author, you say that irrational actions are hints to something else. In particular (SPOILER, SPOILER, SPOILER): Master Palaemon notes that one other torturer fouled up and was banished for a time from the guild. In Citadel of the Autarch, it becomes clear that the person in question was Palaemon himself and that he went through many of the same places and experiences that Severian did. (Severian notes early on that Palaemon is a complicated man attempting to seem simple.) In fact, the odds are good that Palaemon picked up the sword in his travels in the outside world. With this in mind, the gift makes a great deal more sense.

The rationality of Dr. Talos, Baldanders and the stuttering

man seem questionable to me as well.

Dr.Talos and Baldanders are indeed interesting characters, and both somewhat more than human. Many mysteries about them are solved in Sword of the Lictor.

One thing that intrigues me is the theory that Severian has lived this life before and that all the events depicted have been experienced by Severian not once, but twice. Anyone have any thoughts or theories on this? What made someone think of this rather unique thought in the first place? What evidence is there for it?

Severian himself claims this to be true in Citadel of the Autarch. At the risk of bringing things down to SF cliches, you can look at it this way (SPOILER, SPOILER, SPOILER): all possible futures exist and people from those futures can return to their pasts. In fact, Severian meets at least two time-travellers, from mutually exclusive futures. They can both visit Severian's time, because their pasts are solid and Severian is part of their past. However, neither time line is necessarily the one that Severian will experience.

In some other timeline, there was another Severian who experienced similar things to the real Severian. The various Powers who know what happens on various time lines interceded at various points in Severian's life to put him back on the pattern of events experienced by the first Severian...until things flew too far apart for them to be held together. The first Severian went along his own time line and became Autarch, just as the narrating Severian did; remember that the first Severian experienced most of what the narrator did. The first Severian later became a time traveller and went back into his own past. This was also "our" Severian's past, so some of the things that the first Severian did eventually affected "our" Severian.

Naturally, there are contradictions inherent in this view of time travel, but every version of time travel has apparent contradictions, and no one would ever accuse the Book of the New Sun of being "hard" science fiction.

So there...a few answers to puzzling questions. They're there if you're inclined to search for them.

Jim Gardner, University of Waterloo

Pat Clancy — 12 Feb 1986, 07:08 · in reply to David C. Albrecht

Insert raspberry here...

I read Shadow of the Torturer and thought it was horrible.

I'll second that! This was an outstandingly bad novel. Yet it seems that every year or so the Wulf-cultists must issue forth onto the net to demonstrate why there's such a large and uncritical market for so much bad SF.

wfi — 13 Feb 1986, 18:37 · in reply to Pat Clancy

In article <1808 at hammer.UUCP> patcl at hammer.UUCP (Pat Clancy) writes:

I'll second that! This was an outstandingly bad novel.

Yet it seems that every year or so the Wulf-cultists must issue forth onto the net to demonstrate why there's such a large and uncritical market for so much bad SF.

Horses__t. The "Wulf" cultists are simply people who appreciate a particular work and are attempting to share their reasons for appreciating it with the other readers of this group. What the h_ll ELSE is this group supposed to be about???

If you DON'T like a discussion, use your 'N' key to skip over the articles pertaining to the discussion. I personally don't give a hoot about the interminable Star Drek/Star Bores discussions, so I skip over them. I certainly don't enter a discussion I have no obvious interest in to tell the people involved they're "uncritical" or "cultists" for caring about a topic.

If you think the Book of the New Sun was an "outstandingly bad novel" or think the comments that have been made praising it are incorrect, please defend your position. You are claiming here that those of us who admire Wolfe's achievement are uncritical cultists (your words). I can turn around and say that those who dismiss Wolfe are insensitive clot-brains. WHAT THE H_LL DOES THIS KIND OF PERSONAL ATTACK PROVE?

Net.sf-lovers SHOULD represent a diversity of opinion and present its readers with viewpoints and opinions. That's why I read net.sf-lovers: to learn why people like/dislike the books I read, and maybe to learn about books I'm not familiar with. I DON'T read net.sf-lovers to hear name-calling and ten-word informationless dismissals of works many people feel have extended the genre. If you can't say something with a measurable information content, don't say anything at all.

-- Cheers, Bill Ingogly

Tim Maroney — 14 Feb 1986, 18:33 · in reply to Pat Clancy

In article <1808 at hammer.UUCP> patcl at hammer.UUCP (Pat Clancy) writes:

Insert raspberry here...

I read Shadow of the Torturer and thought it was horrible.

I'll second that! This was an outstandingly bad novel.

Yet it seems that every year or so the Wulf-cultists must issue forth onto the net to demonstrate why there's such a large and uncritical market for so much bad SF.

This "cult" happens to include more than half of the SFWA, the Science Fiction Writers of America, as evidenced by the Nebula selections. I would hardly call the SFWA uncritical, or large for that matter. Perhaps the writers know something you don't? (There, we're even insult for insult.)

Tim Maroney, Electronic Village Idiot

ph — 15 Feb 1986, 16:29 · in reply to Pat Clancy

In article <1808 at hammer.UUCP> patcl at hammer.UUCP (Pat Clancy) writes:

I read Shadow of the Torturer and thought it was horrible.

I'll second that! This was an outstandingly bad novel.

Yet it seems that every year or so the Wulf-cultists must issue forth onto the net to demonstrate why there's such a large and uncritical market for so much bad SF.

Oh, for [insert favorite messiah here]'s sake! A little tolerance, PLEASE?!? Whatever your opinion of WOLFE's work (or anyone else's for that matter), it's not that difficult (or doesn't have to be) to understand and admit that someone else's may well be different. I like THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN. I fully realize that the reasons for which I like it may not apply to you. If they don't, I may question you about it, and ask you to explain your position, but I will do my damndest NOT to abuse you about it. Can you do me the same courtesy?

--pH

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* "And what if I attempt to convince you otherwise?"

* "You cannot convince us of anything, Socrates, if we refuse

* to listen."

*/

Charlie Martin — 17 Feb 1986, 05:20 · in reply to Tim Maroney

In article <527 at hoptoad.uucp> tim at hoptoad.UUCP (Tim Maroney) writes:

This "cult" happens to include more than half of the SFWA, the Science Fiction Writers of America, as evidenced by the Nebula selections. I would hardly call the SFWA uncritical, or large for that matter. Perhaps the writers know something you don't? (There, we're even insult for insult.)

Tim Maroney, Electronic Village Idiot

{sun,ptsfa,ihnp4,well,yomama,frog}!hoptoad!tim

And also even, fallacy for fallacy. This one is called "appeal to authority."

--- and how are you liking the bay area?

Ben Lotto — 20 Feb 1986, 01:35 · in reply to Tim Maroney

I shot Gene Wolfe yesterday.

-Ben

Charlie Martin — 21 Feb 1986, 15:57 · in reply to Ben Lotto

In article <11932 at ucbvax.BERKELEY.EDU> lotto at brahms.UUCP (Ben Lotto) writes:

I shot Gene Wolfe yesterday.

-Ben

But WITH WHAT? You've gotta be more specific!

Ben Lotto — 24 Feb 1986, 19:24 · in reply to Michaelntz

I shot Gene Wolfe yesterday.

-Ben

But WITH WHAT? You've gotta be more specific!

Charlie Martin
(...mcnc!duke!crm)

I wadded up a printout of all the articles that have been posted calling him the greatest thing since Willie Mays and the Spawn of the Devil, and then I catapulted it on top of him.

Steven K. Zoltan Brust — 27 Feb 1986, 20:56 · in reply to Charlie Martin

*** You are not able to teleport at will ***

Okay, I'm finally moved to take up this gauntlet. Whatever else has happened, the original query ("What d'you guys see in this, anyway?") was quite reasonable and deserves to be answered.

It is sad that I can't answer it.

I will, however, describe my experience with the books. Okay.

I picked up SHADOW OF THE TORTURER and read about a third of it, discovered that it hadn't grabbed me, and stopped reading it. For the next year, I kept hearing from friends I respected how much they were enjoying the books. In particular, I was hearing from those who enjoyed the sounds of words, that is, the work of those who are aware of the beauty of the language.

Well, okay, I like that stuff, too. That's why I'm a Zelazny nut, and why I like Orson Scott Card, Jane Yolen, Patricia McKillip, etc. etc.

So I decided to give the books another try, this time forcing myself to read slowly and carefully. It worked for me, and I am now very glad that I did. For those who enjoy the sound of English well wrought, these books will tickle that. For those who enjoy a good story, it really is here, it just takes a while to realize it. The book is screamingly funny, without ever falling out of its conceit (including a multi-page comparison of the art of torturing to the art of writing; I almost hurt myself laughing.) The book had me close to tears at times, yet was never a tragedy. The part of me that likes to play with ideas just as ideas was tickled all the way through, but never quite in ways I expected. On my next few readings, when I start looking for "What is really going on here; what is the author saying?" there is enough meat that I don't go away hungry.

Okay? This certainly won't convince anyone who didn't like it that he ought to, but maybe this will help whoever asked the initial question to understand why some of us enjoy the books.

skzb