

What The Book Of The New Sun Means To Me (In 25 Words Or More)

The Usenet list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 05 Feb 1986

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TuckerDH — 05 Feb 1986, 23:23

Well, I thought I'd stay out of it for awhile, but I can't resist any longer...

Gene Wolfe is demonstrably one of the finest (if not the finest) writers of fiction in the world today. He has a mastery of his genre that few others in many other fields ever even hope to acquire. Like Joyce, he can turn his conventions, our conventions, on their heads, and achieve a beautiful resonance that goes beyond mere head-turning. Every sentence he writes in *The Book Of The New Sun* drips with meaning, throbs with resonance of ideas and images gone before, or to come. Like Eco, he can make a novel of ideas and mood and atmosphere and history become a novel of actions and deeds and words and movement with a stroke of the pen or the turn of a page, without seeming disjointed, without (in many cases) the reader even being aware. Like Lem, he can take a set, mundane situation and make the reader see how much the perception of reality affects reality itself, to illuminate the distinction between what is real and what is perceived, to illuminate that there is sometimes a difference between them, that there sometimes is not.

The Book Of The New Sun is arguably science fiction's crowning achievement to date, in its scope, its innate understanding and subsequent casting-off of forms and accepted precepts. Certainly, it is difficult at times, and while science fiction readers have grown accustomed to their own special vocabulary and accepted the making-up of words to describe things for which there are no words ("Grok", "Slan", etc.), Wolfe, in a very simple and subtle manner, turns even this convention on its head with his use of archaic words, and Latin usage, words that have rung in other people's ears and have come out of other people's mouths (like "destrier" - a medieval term for a knight's horse). Science fiction readers don't generally like long, mellifluous sentences of this nature; we want Hemingway-esque, Heinlein-esque sentence structure. Gritty, to-the-point, advancing the story with every clause. We don't like Melville or Marquez, with their two-page sentences that are like mazes of apposition, predication, and subject-verb agreements a mile long. Wolfe, in turn, writes sentences that are paragraphs and paragraphs that are sentences, turning the long into the short and the short into the long. He brings back to modern literature the sheer joy of reading for reading's sake, something that the "good read" and the "great story" generally don't offer. Each page reveals something new, some surprise, some totally different way of looking at reality.

In the larger scale, beyond his minor triumphs of structure of clause, phrase, sentence and paragraph, Wolfe presents a world that evokes so many different things to so many different people that this one quality alone makes the book deserving of great praise. To some, Urth is medieval. To others, it is Egyptian, Byzantine, Roman, Foundation (Asimov), Future History (Heinlein). Urth reminds me of Jack Vance's deeply symbolic societies where form is more than function, of Smith's Instrumentality where what is best for Man is to remain ignorant and keep knowledge, true knowledge, in the hands and hearts of a select few, of Louis XIV's Versailles, of Eliza- bethan England, of Renaissance Italy, of Macbeth. And more, although the primary

accomplishment is that Urth is none of these things, that it is a construct of Wolfe's, as real and vivid (see, Charlie?) as 20th Century America. Urth is so strange, so wonderful, so alien, and yet the fundamental nature of human beings, the fundamental flaws of man, are still the same, and still worked out on a tapestry of incredible imagery and breathtaking scope.

Most definitely, *The Book Of The New Sun* is difficult to read, in places. We often tend to forget in this age of television and speed-reading courses that there can sometimes be merit in slowing the reader down, in forcing the act of reading to be noticed, in allowing a reader to take time to savor the individual moments and concepts of a single page. We read at a chapter's pace, and Wolfe forces us to read at a sentence's pace. This is uncomfortable, just as riding in a horse-and-buggy from Lancaster County to Philadelphia is uncomfortable - we can get there so much faster by car, or plane. But as many of us would admit, there is beauty and something extra in going by the landscape at ten miles an hour that we could never hope to experience at sixty. The same is true for books. *The Book Of The New Sun* is difficult to read because there is so much more in it that people are used to - page for page, Wolfe attacks more, cajoles more, surprises more, and accomplishes more than any modern writer.

What is *The Book Of The New Sun* about? I don't really know. I do know that it fascinated me more than any novel I have read, that it left me with a feeling of dislocation in this world that I have never experienced from a book, that feeling of having lived another life with which I have nothing in common, of having been someplace that I could never imagine being. We can all imagine spaceships now, and sandworms, and the infinity of space - it's part of science fiction history. But Wolfe has given us the infinity of the mind, the infinity of dreams layered over dreams, covered with time and dust, resting on a precarious foundation of shifting perception. There is a puzzle, there is a puzzle of puzzles, there is a morality play and a homonculus who is ruled by the giant he thinks he possesses (yet another twist among the thousands), there is an order of nuns who guard a jewel that is worthless and yet beyond price, there are cannibals and revolutionaries and palace intrigues, there is a good bit of film noir double-dealing and sleight-of-hand, reminiscent of "Body Heat" and "Double Jeopardy", there is loneliness and self-realization and swords and wizardry, demons of the desert and of the mind, time travel that is used for different purposes than anyone could ever imagine, backwardness and incredible sophistication of the intellect and the society, war and hatred and duels, myths from our present that are changed around to present the symbology of different times, often with the opposite moral than we would draw from them, there is death and rebirth, imperfection and strangeness, there is hope, there is confusion, there is decay and degradation. There are at least ten great novels in here, in different parts, and a multitude of great, truly great short stories cast off like litter by the side of the road. There is more in *The Book Of The New Sun* than any one person can understand, appreciate, or see in one reading, or in ten. Wolfe has managed to build so many layers on top of layers, like his necropolis, that it is an incredible literary archeological attempt to unearth them all. And like cutting through a pearl or an onion, no one layer is more important than the other, though some may be more central.

In the immortal words of Marty DiBergi "But hey - enough a my yakkin... Let's boogie!"

Davis Tucker

William Ingogly — 07 Feb 1986, 23:21 · in reply to TuckerDH

In article <53 at druri.UUCP> dht at druri.UUCP (TuckerDH) writes:

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In Gene Wolfe's "The Fifth Head Of Cerberus," there is a passage in which the son of the joyhouse owner (can't remember his name) recalls leaning out his bedroom window ringed with alien flowers to look out at the bay; as he does so, he observes a plume of water rising where a starship has fallen into the ocean's water. Above the city hangs the planet's companion, a world of watery meadows and legendary aborigines. I remember first reading this passage and reacting to it in the same way you describe your reaction to BotNS, Davis: recognition. A sense almost of deja vu, something I get rarely from SF (uh, oh: watch those flames, buddih!). Wolfe makes these worlds live for us, and by doing so brings us to new understandings of our own world through his universe's similarities to and differences from our own. His characters and landscapes truly have the feel of REALITY. Thanks, Gene. And thank you, Davis, for a beautiful description of your own appreciation of Wolfe's work.

-- Cheers, Bill Ingogly

Daniel G. Winkowski — 17 Feb 1986, 05:13 · in reply to TuckerDH

Wolfe succeeds where Delaney attempts to travel.

[=]

Today we live in the future,
Tomorrow we'll live for the moment,
But, pray we never live in the past.