

Reply to Rick Heli about Gene Wolfe

The Usenet list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 10 Feb 1986

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/35>

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TuckerDH — 10 Feb 1986, 19:59

I have read The Shadow of the Torturer, (first volume of The Book of the New Sun), but in almost a year have yet to continue with the rest of the book. In general, I found the writing murky and the tale rather disconnected. I found that I learned very little of the political system, social classes, economic systems or even recent history. This failure of Wolfe's to adequately inform varies directly with my failure to be interested in his tale.

Perfectly understandable - what got me interested in the rest of the novel was his writing style, primarily. Your criticisms are all true, to a small extent, and it most definitely *is* a difficult book to follow, written in a deliberately dense and ponderous style that (as I have said before) forces the reader to slow down from the usual 1980's breakneck pace. I disagree that the writing is "murky" - this implies an involuntary lack of clarity that I do not think is in the work - certainly Wolfe obscures the truth and asks that the reader spend time puzzling things out for himself, sometimes crucially important things. But he does not do this idly, as William F. Buckley does when he speaks. Wolfe, above all, is communicating the act of dreaming (or at least that's my humble interpretation - stop laughing, Charlie...). Dreams are impenetrable, sometimes, even after we wake up and can realize what was going on in them - sometimes there is nothing that we recognize, nothing that we can understand. This would explain the disconnection of the work, which is also a large component of dreams - although I must add that the subsequent volumes explain the previous ones, while they themselves beg more explanation. The disconnectedness does mitigate, though, to a sort of not-so-free association. This could just be the result of reading all of them, that the reader grows used to the style and doesn't ask questions in the hope that they will be answered later.

As to your complaint that Wolfe did not inform well enough, you are asking of him the things that you would ask of a hack writer. Didn't you *feel* that you were in another world? Didn't you *feel* that you didn't know what was going on, just like Severian? Didn't you *feel* an incredible decay? The Book Of The New Sun wants you to ask questions and search for answers - it is not a pat sociology, or a future history. It is not dry and it is not going to give in to dryness of the sort that is so often necessary in novels which build worlds. At the heart, Urth is not the central point of reading this book - Severian is. What you will learn of Urth is what you can learn through Severian's eyes and wits, and if sometimes it leaves you hungry, well that's usually the way it is in real life, and in dreams. Wolfe does not need to give you the social rank of every character, to explain why his world works the way it does - to do so would be to cheat you of the rare experience of seeing such a complex, strange, and different place through someone else's eyes, a crowning achievement for any writer. Severian is not so wise or so observant either, and the murk that you complain about may just be the murk that comes as the beginning of self-awareness. This is not to say that as you progress through the novel things become "clearer", that Severian in some way "comes to his senses" - quite the contrary. But he does grow up, and he does see what is wrong and right with Urth, and he does learn the things we all learn as we grow older and a little wiser. It is *this* that is important, not how many legions the Autarch has, or how many people are on Vodalus' side, what their economic interrelations are, who pays the bills, etc. Leave that kind of thing to

Herbert and Heinlein (who do it quite well), and leave the dreams and the self-realization to Wolfe.

This seems to me to be particularly true in a story like this where 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. Agia and Agilus are insanely greedy, consider the bizarre excuses Agilus gives in the prison cell when he argues to be spared. The boatman is in a crazed state and Dorcas suffers from amnesia. The rationality of Dr. Talos, Baldanders and the stuttering man seem questionable to me as well.

I think you are projecting 20th Century notions of rationality and sanity onto characters who are very much not products of the 20th Century. This is a common fault, and most writers of science fiction do not really change their characters' personalities and faults and foibles to reflect the times that they live in - too many are merely 20th Century dudes in some other place and time, using starships like cars and teleportation like phones. Buck Rogers is an archetype for science fiction characters, almost the norm. Certainly *some* of the characters are insane; but they are not the ones that you think are. Wolfe pulls some interesting twists later on. Dorcas suffers from amnesia for a very good reason, which I won't spoil for those who are interested - her story is a very, very strange and fascinating one. But remember that Urth at this time is a world in turmoil, a world of duels and high emotions and melodramatic flourishes, and certainly not cool rationality. Read Hugo, Dickens, and Dostoevsky - their times were similar, and their characters were sometimes histrionic, ranting lunatics in the light of later, calmer times. Master Palaemon was not acting illogically nor was he acting without good motivation - if you reread the text leading up to this point, you will see that the Master is portrayed sort of like the gruff schoolmaster with the heart of gold underneath, and that while he wants to uphold the law that would condemn Severian, he spends considerable time trying to find a loophole to save his life. In this context, the Master is acting out of kindness, as a father-figure to a wayward son, not irrationally. Remember his speech about the loving relationship between torturer and "client"? He is not a man without emotion, for all that believing in such a relationship may seem insane to *us* - certainly such beliefs have been held before, and explained in novels (I am especially reminded of works about the French Revolution).

Agia, you have correctly indicated, *is* insane, at least on the subject of money and Severian. Insane people often make great characters, especially ones who are sane except on a few points - many of Shakespeare's most memorable characters (Lear, Richard III, MacBeth, Hamlet, Iago) were somewhat insane, by modern definition. They are just difficult to follow, and they do not do things by accepted literary manners. They explode conventions in some works, they confront, they confuse, and they stay vivid. As for Dr. Talos and Baldanders, well... their portion of the story is fantastic. They are not insane, or at least not insane in any way you would recognize as insane. I can't say anymore.

...having awakened. This probably accounts for the dreamlike nature of the work, which many people seem to admire highly. I am less than enthusiastic about it; on the other hand, only reading the first book is probably tantamount to turning off Beethoven's 5th symphony in the middle of the second movement in terms of being fair to the author's complete message... But on the first hand, the author has the responsibility to make the first story accessible enough that the others will be read... In time, I may re-read the first book and give it another chance...

Well, I am one of those who admire this dreamlike quality, and I grant you it isn't everyone's cup of tea. I am not so sure that if you didn't feel captivated by "The Shadow Of The Torturer"

that it would be worth your time to read the other three volumes - in other words, Wolfe isn't telling you any lies - this is the way the rest of the novel will continue, with the same feel and the same complications that you find, so don't think that he made the first work more inaccessible than the others. By this yardstick, they're all somewhat inaccessible ("*SOMEwhat*?!!" I hear Charlie scream).

As to the author's responsibility - booshwah. Authors don't have any responsibility. That's why they're authors and not insurance salesmem or high school teachers. If you look at the history of authors in the western world, you will see that it is a history of irresponsibility, a history of little white lies and some damn big ones, of alcoholism and drug abuse, of suicide, murder, and compulsive gambling, a history of backbiting and sniping at their fellow authors with a vitriol suited for lighting houses on fire. Generally speaking, as soon as an author starts thinking about "responsibility" toward his audience, he's already ceased writing anything very good, or at least ceased writing the kinds of things that got him his audience in the first place (hacks are excluded here, as they are thinking about responsibility from the start). The only thing an author is responsible for is to type neatly, get his pages in order, to avoid misspelling and bad grammar, and to return calls from his agent. And a lot of them don't even do that.

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?

There is a profound sense of *deja vu* running through the book. Severian himself, repeatedly, refers to this feeling of having been through this before - not all of the book, but some portions that strike him with that feeling. He indicates in his narrative that the act of writing this down is jogging his memory even as he writes, so that he is bound to feel that he is repeating himself (which is essentially what a first-person narrative is). Also, remember that Severian has a photographic, or a holographic memory - he forgets nothing. With such a gift or a curse, it is impossible to avoid the resonance of previous acts and emotions and sensations with those of the present. A past that we may know nothing about, incidentally. As to the significance of this, there could be many things - it allows Wolfe to flesh out each scene in aching detail that a normal narrative might skip over, as his main character remembers everything. But I think it goes beyond this, as many first-person narrative novels often act as if the narrator remembers everything (When's the last time a narrator said "I'm not too sure about this..." or "I don't really remember..."?). Wolfe wants to get us inside the head of a man who remembers everything, but who isn't exactly the smartest guy running around Urth with a badass sword. It's a fascinating juxtaposition - we always assume that those with perfect memories are intelligent, just because they can remember everything. Severian is like a bird, flooded by so much sensory input that his ability to think is sometimes clouded by his ability to remember, to sense. He's almost a walking tape recorder, without the appearance of volition. And don't you often feel that way in dreams? That everything reeks of your past, that you have done all this before, and better, but that now you have no control, you are just acting out your part in your little play? Generally in dreams what people remember is how they feel, how they sense - such as they common dream of running around naked in a public place, looking for your clothes. Perhaps that is the purpose of Severian's sense of *deja vu* - and it complements the the reader's own sense of *deja vu*, such as in a previously mentioned vignette where Severian tries to describe a picture of Armstrong walking on the moon, or a story told later that is a strange reworking of the Theseus myth.

Given your questions, and your underlying interest in the sanity and motives of the characters, whose names you still remember after a year, perhaps your memory and your curiosity are trying to tell you something. Another read of "The Shadow Of The Torturer" might help you decide about The Book Of The New Sun once and for all. If you have any questions, ask Jim

Gardner - he knows it better than I.

Davis Tucker

Charlie Martin — 12 Feb 1986, 13:03 · in reply to TuckerDH

Ghod, Davis, give us a break !

At least an occasional *paragraph* break. Us old folks have trouble reading those multiscreen paragraph-like blocks.

And I don't scream -- I can't: I'm a double-bass.