

Gene Wolfe

The Usenet list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 14 Feb 1986

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/36>

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Charlie Martin — 14 Feb 1986, 20:14

As some of you may have noticed, I've been careful not to say anything about Gene Wolfe's writing in the couple of notes I've posted under this general heading. This is for the reasonable reason that I simply haven't read anything much of GW's writing. Specifically, I tried Peace some time ago after having met Wolfe at a con and liked him personally.

And I didn't like Peace at all. I tried a couple other things. Didn't like them much either. So I simply figured that I didn't like his style (as I don't like Herman Melville's) not because Wolfe can't write, but simply because for one reason or another it didn't strike the required chord in me.

And I wasn't going to respond in particular to Davis's note to Rick Heli. Not because I had trouble reading it -- contrary to what I may have suggested in the little "paragraphs" note I posted -- but because I agreed almost completely with it. I tell you, my argumentative nature is really confused when I go agreeing with my best debating opponents.

But it happens that someone lent my wife a copy of Shadow of the Torturer recently, and she has been reading it for the last week or so. And sitting at the other end of the couch saying things like "Gee, can he write." Spontaneously, while reading the book.

Well, that piqued my interest. So I took the book when she wasn't looking, and read the first ten or so pages. (If you must know, I stopped there because she came back from the kitchen and grabbed it from my hands, saying something to the effect of "**I'm* not finished with it yet!*")

I wanted to drop this in because I found it just as compelling as Davis apparently did. After a few years of trying hard to learn to write, I find that I am more conscious than I used to be of the mechanics of writing: this makes it harder for me to become engrossed in a story in the first pages. SotT did this in a matter of a couple of paragraphs -- grabbed me, dragged me into the other world through a 6x9 inch page. And at 6'2" and 220 lbs, this is no small trick in itself.

And I didn't find it all that inaccessible, honest. It is a bit different style, but then I didn't like Double Star when I first read it -- it was too different from what I had learned to expect. It just takes some adjustment. But it's nothing compared to Stephen Donaldson, who picks out words for nice sound and then uses them in ways that show he didn't understand them at all. That's hard to accept -- this is simply hard to read.

* * *

But I did want to respond a little bit in terms of an "author's responsibility." Those of you who seem to believe that net.sf-lovers is not a forum for writing about writing (science fiction and fantasy) should n-key here.

I do think the author has a couple of responsibilities: the first one is to turn in a text which can

be interpreted as a series of words with some kind of sense. I'm making this as loose as possible to include people like the Surrealist and Dadaist poets, James Joyce and William S Burroughs. Whether or not the text produces an imaginary experience of another reality (oh, all right, a vivid dream) may matter to it *as fiction* -- at least in my mind -- but whether or not you accept that idea in terms of fiction, I think it is at least necessary to communicate some intelligence in the technical sense, some intimation that there is a non-randomness to the selection of words. But turning in something in a new language, with a new script, and without something to lead one into the new language, is out of bounds. (And it won't sell very well, either.)

((One of the wonderful things about human language processing is that we can have that sensation from certain kinds of limited randomness, like that produced by poetry-writing programs -- we go out and make up meaning subconsciously if we don't track what's going on.))

The other responsibility of a fiction or fictive writer is to his/her *characters*. You are responsible to them to tell their story as they tell it to you, and to understand them as they are. Then you write it down. It's that easy. (Hah!)

But Davis is right about a "responsibility" to one's readers: booshwah. If you don't like it, you don't have to read it. But I (and all writers) have a higher responsibility than to anyone who simply reads it.

(Oh, by the way -- about "you don't have to read it." I would make one exception: once something of mine gets published, *that* you have to read! Even you, Davis. Hell, I'll throw in an adjective, just for you.)

wfi — 14 Feb 1986, 22:25 · in reply to Charlie Martin

In article <6915 at duke.UUCP> crm at duke.UUCP (Charlie Martin) writes:

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In a sense, the act of turning in a text which is constructed so it can't be interpreted as a series of words is itself making a kind of sense. A year or two ago the New York Times Book Review had a review of a book by a European called "The [something] Codex," which consisted of a series of woodcuts with accompanying 'texts.' The 'texts' were not in any known language or character set, and the example shown was VERY disturbing as were the descriptions of the other illustrations and texts in the book. The effect the author/artist seemed to be striving for was the discovery of a mysterious Codex from an unknown civilization whose illustrations tell something of the civilization's history/arts/sciences/magics. But the texts were of course undecipherable. I felt looking at the illustration and accompanying text something akin to what I felt the first time I examined Max Ernst's "La Semaine de Bonte," disorientation and recognition at the same time. So I suppose something that doesn't make sense on one level can make a sort of meta-sense on another ... if THAT makes any sense. :-)

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This was something I felt when reading Russell Hoban's "Riddley Walker." I thought he was making us work very hard to get at a rather run-of-the-mill SF story without giving us something unusual in return (I don't mind working if the reward matches the effort, I guess).

-- Cheers, Bill Ingogly