

Gene Wolfe interview in Locus

The Usenet list — 11 messages, 8 voices, 30 May 1991

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Brian McElhinney — 30 May 1991, 23:33

The latest issue of Locus (6/91) has an interesting interview with Gene Wolfe. Some of the better tidbits:

"What I see is that evil has a place in every human being. I don't mean it holds that place by rights, but it's in occupation. The hero at some point is at least capable of acting badly, and the villain at least capable of acting well." [Pretty obvious from his novels, but I like the way he puts it]

The inspiration for the "Soldier" books came from an article about a certain type of brain injury that produces the kind of memory loss that Latro has. [Glad he stumbled upon that article!]

Wolfe frequently writes two books at the same time. During "The Book of the New Sun" he was also writing FREE LIVE FREE. [Talk about a contrast; my most and least favorites]

FREE LIVE FREE was an attempt to get away from "Severian, Severian, Severian" and create "one character that everyone likes, but what I actually seem to have done is give everybody one character to dislike."

"The one I like the best is THERE ARE DOORS. I wrote exactly the book that I wanted to write, and I think I was touching on things that have been very little touched on in general in fiction." [He goes on to mention "the Casper Hauser phenomenon -- the people that who appear and disappear tracelessly." Anyone know what he's talking about?]

On the difference between science fiction and and fantasy:

"Science fiction is stuff that the average reader feels is possible, and fantasy is stuff that the average reader feels is impossible. He doesn't really know what's possible any more than I do, or a nuclear physicist does. When we get out into speculative areas, we certainly do not know."

SPOILER warning. The best stuff was last, talking about his present work, "a large science fiction novel called NIGHT SIDE OF THE LONG SUN" and how the stories themselves set the length of his novels/series.

NIGHT SIDE OF THE LONG SUN is a generation ship novel. "What I was

really fascinated with was computer worship. It seemed to me that if we took the kind of reverence that people today have for the computer as an almighty thinking machine -- all of which I think is nonsense at this point -- suppose we put the computer in a sense in which it could do truly godlike things, and we gave it a personality, which need not even be conscious. We don't have to say the computer has a soul, whatever a soul is. We don't have to say it is self-conscious. We only need for it to act in that way. I ended up with the self-contained world, a hollowed-out asteroid, run by Mainframe, the big computer, with terminals scattered around various places. This was built by a future tyrant who took his personality and the personalities of his wife and his children and certain favorites of his, and put them into Mainframe. He set things up in such a way that he and his wife and the others are the gods of this generation ship. I'm dealing with that situation."

"It's now looking like it's going to be a trilogy or series. The original novel has just grown by leaps and bounds, out of all proportion. I hate it when people say, 'All that you write are these endless series.' I hate it mostly because it's not true. When I wrote SHADOW OF A TORTURER, it was originally intended as a novella. It grew to the point where it was a novel, and then by that time I really had my feet into it. Then I got definite -- it was going to be a trilogy. The problem was that I ended up with a third volume that was about twice as thick as the first two. So it became a tetralogy." His editor, David Hartwell, convinced him to add something about Severian going offworld and saving Earth. "So I ended up with this pentalogy in which the fifth volume was published by a different publisher."

"I like to write every story at the length at which it seems to me it should be told. PANDORA was almost a novella, and that's fine. Presumably, I will eventually hit something that requires 25 million words, and I will spend the rest of my life writing Chapter One."

So we have another major science fiction series coming from Wolfe. Best news I've heard in a long time!

Brian McElhinney "Defining the line where art becomes a subset of mce at tc.fluke.com entertainment is so intensely personal that I'm not at all sure what use it is to others. Rather like opinions about the nature of God, favorite sexual positions, and whether or not to have that piece of pecan pie after a bowl of Gumbo Creole." --Jeff Meyer

P W Stephenson — 31 May 1991, 13:45 · in reply to Brian McElhinney

mce at tc.fluke.COM (Brian McElhinney) writes:

[quoting interview with GW: lots of juicy titbits from the great man deleted]

"The one I like the best is THERE ARE DOORS. I wrote exactly the book that I wanted to write, and I think I was touching on things that have been very little touched on in general in fiction." [He

goes on to mention "the Casper Hauser phenomenon -- the people that who appear and disappear tracelessly." Anyone know what he's talking about?]

Casper [?Kaspar?] Hauser was a young man who appeared out of nowhere in Germany (Baden, I think) in the last century (or two); he couldn't remember who he was and could only say 'I want to be a cavalry officer like my father'; he died quite young. There's a theory he was some inconvenient illegitimate child of a noble or royal family. Is there anything Wolfe doesn't know?

By the way, the quotes from the interview (I suppose I'm going to have to buy the magazine now) don't mention my second favourite book, after B.o.t.N.S., which is 'Peace' --- even my mother thinks this is one of the best recent books she's read (and my mother is not heavily into SF, to say the least).

Finally, while we're at it, I've only seen the first of the 'Soldier' books in the U.K. --- though the second may have been around in hardback --- is (1) there a third anywhere (2) the second likely to arrive here in paperback shortly --- anyone know?

Peter

----- Peter Stephenson | pws at uk.ac.liv.amtp.s-a | DAMTP, Univ of Liverpool | PW5 at UK.AC.LIV | Arthur: Sounds ghastly. PO BOX 147, Liverpool | PWS@UKACRL (BITNET) | Marvin: It is. L69 3BX, UK | pws at uk.ac.ed.castle |

Doug Merritt — 02 Jun 1991, 01:57 · in reply to Brian McElhinney

In article <1991May30.233326.5041 at tc.fluke.COM> mce at tc.fluke.COM (Brian McElhinney) writes:

Book of the New Sun" he was also writing FREE LIVE FREE. [Talk about a contrast; my most and least favorites]

FREE LIVE FREE was an attempt to get away from "Severian, Severian, Severian" and create "one character that everyone likes, but what I actually seem to have done is give everybody one character to dislike."

Yeah. He also said everyone complained it wasn't science fiction, but he rebuts that by saying that he planted clues all the way along that pointed towards the science fictional element in the end.

That really irked me; as if we dumb readers must not have seen those clues, else we wouldn't say it wasn't SF. Wrong...I saw the clues all the way along. They were pretty obvious, after all, and furthermore about the only thing that kept some of us reading (albeit with a lot of yawning and grimacing).

But he should know what every aspiring SF writer is lectured about in the "how-to's" and in editorial columns & comments: a touch of window dressing does **not** make a story science fiction. Only the most extreme definitions of SF include things that just happen to have a tiny bit of (completely non-essential!) SF background.

I don't blame him for wanting a change of pace, but I deplore the lack of intellectual honesty that he displays in failing to call a spade a spade. Or insisting that his screwdriver should be called a spade. It means that I'll have to be on my guard about his books, instead of just buying

them on sight, as I was happily doing with him (and very few other authors) for a while.

Doing that to your readers means an impact on sales. Tsk.

Doug

Viktor Haag — 03 Jun 1991, 16:35 · in reply to Doug Merritt

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Perhaps your reporting of the situation is misleading, but from your statement three paragraphs above it seems that Wolfe does not claim that FLF is SF but rather that it has a SFional element in the ending.

I don't blame him for wanting a change of pace, but I deplore the lack of intellectual honesty that he displays in failing to call a spade a spade. Or insisting that his screwdriver should be called a spade. It means that I'll have to be on my guard about his books, instead of just buying them on sight, as I was happily doing with him (and very few other authors) for a while.

Oh yes, you had better be on the lookout. I mean, Wolfe might try and expand your horizons a little bit by sneaking a story past you that doesn't meet your twelve step guidelines for the existence of an SF novel.

Of course, I will have to read the actual article myself before commenting further, but I will say that you seem to be one of those people who spend their time whining that the 'purity of the art form is being besmirched' by horrible people who are being intellectually dishonest by stretching the medium a bit. God forbid that we should invite creativity or innovation into the hallowed halls of ****SF****.

barf

Jim Mann — 03 Jun 1991, 19:15 · in reply to Doug Merritt

In article <1991Jun2.015734.14702 at netcom.COM> doug at netcom.COM (Doug Merritt) writes:

Yeah. He also said everyone complained it wasn't science fiction, but he rebuts that by saying that he planted clues all the way along that pointed towards the science fictional element in the end.

That really irked me; as if we dumb readers must not have seen those clues, else we wouldn't say it wasn't SF. Wrong...I saw the clues all the way along. They were pretty obvious, after all, and furthermore about the only thing that kept some of us reading (albeit with a lot of yawning and grimacing).

So you would only read it if it were SF? If the SF material wasn't there, you'd quit reading. (That's what your last sentence DOES say.) Good fiction is good fiction. Gene Wolfe writes good fiction, that happens, most of the time, to have SF or fantasy elements. But if it didn't, I'd read it anyway.

But he should know what every aspiring SF writer is lectured about in the "how-to's" and in editorial columns & comments: a touch of window dressing does **not** make a story science fiction. Only the most extreme definitions of SF include things that just happen to have a tiny bit of (completely non-essential!) SF background.

Sounds to me like the problem isn't Wolfe's fiction but our insistent on categories. "This is SF, this isn't." That's not what matters. What matters is "This is good, this isn't."

I don't blame him for wanting a change of pace, but I deplore the lack of intellectual honesty that he displays in failing to call a spade a spade. Or insisting that his screwdriver should be called a spade. It means that I'll have to be on my guard about his books, instead of just buying them on sight, as I was happily doing with him (and very few other authors) for a while.

You'll have to "be on [your] guard about his books"? Why? Because he might sneak in something that isn't "really SF"? In fact, I agree with you on one point. I sometimes wish that Wolfe's books wouldn't always be labeled as "SF" since there are lots of folks out there who would like much of what he writes, but don't ever see it. Many mainstream readers are as silly as many SF readers. SF readers guard against books that "really aren't SF." Mainstream readers guard themselves against books that are "really SF."

Jim Mann jmann at vineland.pubs.stratus.com Stratus Computer

Not since Cromwell's troops, their puritan sensibilities offended by beauty, went around smashing decorative art in churches has there been an act of folly comparable to the abandonment and destruction of Forbes Field, the Pirates' home for generations.
-- George F. Will, from *Men at Work: The Craft of Baseball*

Doug Merritt — 04 Jun 1991, 04:12 · in reply to Jim Mann

writes:

They [the clues] were pretty obvious, after all, and furthermore about the only thing that kept some of us reading (albeit with a lot of yawning and grimacing).

So you would only read it if it were SF? If the SF material wasn't there, you'd quit reading. (That's what your last sentence DOES say.)

No, it doesn't! My last sentence says that I found it boring, except for the tidbits that kept me going. The reason they kept me going was that they lent **suspense** to something otherwise incredibly dull. The reductio ad absurdum to your interpretation is that would imply I would

keep reading *anything* that had lots of juicy SF elements, no matter how boring, and clearly I said nothing of the sort (nor is it true; I've given up on lots of F&SF that was pure genre yet boring). You're reading too much into what I said.

Good fiction is good fiction. Gene Wolfe writes good fiction, that happens, most of the time, to have SF or fantasy elements. But if it didn't, I'd read it anyway.

I agree partially, except that I defy anyone to claim that *Free Live Free* is a great novel under any category at all. Let's say it was published as mainstream: it's still dull. The most you can say for it is that it is a character study that teases without fully revealing the characters. That might be interesting in an 8000 word vignette, but Wolfe did not pull it off in the full length novel. Or have I missed reviewers who thought it was great? I haven't seen such that might indicate that my take on it was narrow minded, although I admit of the possibility.

You guys who think that anyone who complains about "supposed SF" not really being SF must therefore perforce be incredibly shallow are just knee-jerk reacting.

Sounds to me like the problem isn't Wolfe's fiction but our insistent on categories. "This is SF, this isn't." That's not what matters. What matters is "This is good, this isn't."

Fair enough, except that I claim that FLF is not worth novel-length treatment regardless of criteria, in or out of genre.

In fact, I agree with you on one point. I sometimes wish that Wolfe's books wouldn't always be labeled as "SF" since there are lots of folks out there who would like much of what he writes, but don't ever see it.

Yes, except that *Free Live Free* is not one of the ones that I would recommend to mainstream readers. If we were talking about something else, that would be a good reason for the soapbox.

I was about to counter-flame someone much, much less polite than you, but I thought that a calm difference of opinions deserved priority. Now on to the flame. ;-)
Doug

Doug Merritt — 04 Jun 1991, 04:20 · in reply to Viktor Haag

In article <1991Jun3.163555.25853 at watdragon.waterloo.edu> vahaag at crocus.waterloo.edu (Viktor Haag) writes:

Perhaps your reporting of the situation is misleading, but from your statement three paragraphs above it seems that Wolfe does not claim that FLF is SF but rather that it has a SFional element in the ending.

Perhaps; the original text is actually quite open to interpretation: "I also get a lot of flak saying, 'It reads like a mainstream novel until you get to the end and it turns out to be science fiction.' There were something like a dozen planted clues as to what was going on through the story."

You *could* read that in a variety of subtly differing ways, but it seems to me clear that he agrees that it reads like a mainstream novel for the most part, but also has clues all the way along that the ending is going to be science fiction. And the publisher labelled it "TOR Science Fiction", so there's no question from anyone about what it's supposed to be.

Support for *your* position can be found in Orson Scott Card's "How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy", pg 11: "...even though they aren't really science fiction or fantasy in the publishing-category sense or the community sense (there are neither rivets nor trees, neither science nor magic, and they certainly aren't what readers were consciously looking for) their

stories are nevertheless strange, in ways that editors outside the field of sf and fantasy find quite threatening." Card calls this the "What SF Writers Write is SF" category (actually "boundary") of SF.

I won't argue with Card (I'd be shot down with ad hominem arguments), but nonetheless even he points out that such things "certainly aren't what readers were consciously looking for". Good point.

I didn't say Card shouldn't write things like FLF, and I didn't say it was a bad book. I *did* say that it was false advertising to call it SF. Card and Wolfe would both argue with me about that, but equally clearly, they would be quite keenly aware of what I meant.

As far as literary freedom goes, Wolfe is on firm ground. He has the artistic right to write what he likes, and Card has given him reason to allow the labelling "science fiction".

But they're both aware that some people may be in a mood to read something that *feels* like science fiction, and may be disappointed if a book does *not* feel that way. I said that would impact sales, and I'm sure they would agree, and further say that such was the price of artistic license, and that it's worth it. Neither Card nor Wolfe can be accused of commercialism! That doesn't affect what I said, though.

Oh yes, you had better be on the lookout. I mean, Wolfe might try and expand your horizons a little bit by sneaking a story past you that doesn't meet your twelve step guidelines for the existence of an SF novel.

Oh, fuck you. Who are you to get up on your high horse and say things like that? Jim Mann disagreed quite extremely and forcefully with me, yet managed to do it politely. You should follow his example.

Of course, I will have to read the actual article myself before commenting further,

Thanks for that much.

but I will say that you seem to be one of those people who spend their time whining ...

On the basis of that single complaint of mine. Riiiggghht.

...that the 'purity of the art form is being besmirched' by horrible people who are being intellectually dishonest by stretching the medium a bit. God forbid that we should invite creativity or innovation into the hallowed halls of ***SF***.

Completely uncalled for, totally rude. What a dweeb. I'm sure you're a complete master of all the classics and all of modern literature and are a superb judge of art in its most hallowed forms. I grovel at your feet. Say hi to the Muses for me.

Doug

Brian McElhinney — 04 Jun 1991, 17:40 · in reply to P W Stephenson

pws at castle.ed.ac.uk (P W Stephenson) writes:

By the way, the quotes from the interview don't mention my second favourite book, after B.o.t.N.S., which is 'Peace'

After discussing people giving him flak for the ending of LIVE FREE LIVE, Wolfe goes on to say:

"Similarly in PEACE I strongly imply early on as to what's going on. I don't get as many complaints about it, because fewer people

are reading it, although I think it's one of my best books."

Perhaps some publisher should re-issue it! The *only* copy I have ever seen was an autographed hardback (and boy was I happy when I came across it!).

Perhaps the reason many people dislike LIVE FREE LIVE is not that it is such a bad novel, but that it is not a great novel, and Gene Wolfe has set us up to expect greatness. That would be unfortunate, because to create great works of art you have to take risks, and you will not always succeed brilliantly. Ah, but when you do...

Brian McElhinney "The locked and rusted gate that stood before us, with wisps mce at tc.fluke.com of river fog threading its spikes like the mountain paths, remains in my mind now as a symbol of my exile."--Gene Wolfe

Janet M. Lafler — 04 Jun 1991, 22:44 · in reply to Doug Merritt

Various people have been complaining about and, alternatively, defending Gene Wolfe's *Free Live Free*. I really liked this book, though I don't think it's his best and I certainly wouldn't recommend it to someone who hadn't read anything by Wolfe before. My sense of it was that it was a long, entertainingly told, very funny shaggy dog story. I had this figured from very early on. Now, this kind of thing is definitely an acquired taste, and I can understand why a lot of people might feel cheated by it, just as we all generally feel cheated by shaggy dog stories. (I happen to like them if they're well told.) Wolfe's story-telling style is very circuitous, and he often doesn't bother to deliver just what he promised. I enjoy this, but unless you like this for its own sake, and trust him to make it worth your while to read, you're not going to like Wolfe. He's a writer that I like very much, but I can understand why some readers find him infuriating, because sometimes, when he goes too far (for me), I get annoyed too.

/Janet

Brian Matthews — 05 Jun 1991, 06:36 · in reply to Brian McElhinney

In article <1991Jun4.174051.6210 at tc.fluke.COM> mce at tc.fluke.COM (Brian McElhinney) writes:

|Perhaps the reason many people dislike LIVE FREE LIVE is not that it is such
|a bad novel, but that it is not a great novel, and Gene Wolfe has set us up
|to expect greatness.

I've always thought this was the problem too. I happen to like *Free Live Free*, but readily admit it's not nearly as good as *Book of the New Sun*, for instance. On the other hand, I've read very few things as good as *BotNS*...

S H L G Bisson — 06 Jun 1991, 15:01 · in reply to Brian Matthews

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I've always thought this was the problem too. I happen to like *Free Live Free*, but readily admit it's not nearly as good as *Book of the New Sun*, for instance. On the other hand, I've read very few things as good as *BotNS*...

I tend to think that the most unsatisfying thing about *_Free Live Free_* was that it came across in the back blurb as another *_Winter's Tale_* (by Mark Helprin) and unfortunately was only a pale shadow of it. A pity that, for the genre needs more books like *_Winter's Tale_*, and now that Helprin no longer writes genre (or almost genre!) fiction it seems that there will be no more (unless John Crowley becomes more productive...).

Simon H Le G Bisson...net.jerriais...bibliophile, climber, and FORTRAN hacker...---