

# The Snootiness of Gene Wolfe

The Usenet list — 46 messages, 25 voices, 28 Feb 2004

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/usenet/59>

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Josh — 28 Feb 2004, 23:43

I've read a lot of Gene Wolf (the complete Sun and Urth sequences plus a short story collection who's title currently escapes me), generally with great interest, the two Latros novels being a notable exception (I only skimmed the second). Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

I feel that his approach has been misconstrued by the SF community at large as being profound and insightful, rather than the empty display of erudition that it is. The appeal of his work is to the readers own sense of hubris - at least it was in my case. The comments I've read here don't contradict that.

Of course, I really should offer support for this assertion. (Well, sudden realization anyway). Consider that the entire justification for Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview). The plot, etc was layed on as thin veneer with elements sprinkled from Wolfe's extraordinarily broad knowledge of literature and myth, and mined with subtle puzzles that amused Wolfe. Taken on it's face, this series is muddled, conflicted, and unbelievable. Severian himself is never fleshed out.

The elitism is not justified. All three first person narratives I've read from Wolfe have used the same voice - precise, subtly flawed, infinitely patient, and maddeningly loquacious. Severian, Silk, Latros are the same person to me. Urth, the Ship + Green + Blue, the mediterannean of antiquity are all the same places (well, Green was a bit different). So at least when it comes to "range" Wolfe does not have anything to brag about.

The implicit question in any post is, why am I posting? In this case its mainly to share my thoughts, perhaps finding resonance with others, and also to give anyone who's willing a chance to tell me I'm wrong. I kind of want to be wrong, as I've invested a lot of time (and money) on Wolfe and I would prefer not to think that it was all essentially misspent vanity.

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Miles Bader — 29 Feb 2004, 01:25 · in reply to Josh

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> writes:

Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this  
observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

....

also to give anyone who's willing a chance to tell me I'm wrong.

Ok: You're wrong.

[Also, I suppose, a troll, but whatever.]

-Miles

`Life is a boundless sea of bitterness'

---

SpaceGirl — 29 Feb 2004, 02:08 · in reply to Miles Bader

"Miles Bader" <miles at gnu.org> wrote in message  
news:878yim1xu7.fsf at tc-1-100.kawasaki.gol.ne.jp...

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> writes:

Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this  
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also to give anyone who's willing a chance to tell me I'm wrong.

Ok: You're wrong.

[Also, I suppose, a troll, but whatever.]

-Miles

--

`Life is a boundless sea of bitterness'

You have to admit, a fairly eloquent troll, if that is indeed what that post was :)

I've not read any Wolfe, so can't comment beyond that!

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Matt Hughes — 29 Feb 2004, 07:12 · in reply to Josh

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message  
news:<Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>...

[a lot of contentious and pretentious twaddle]

Did you really write this or did you get some snooty, elitist, English majoring friend to draft it for you?

Gene Wolfe is one of the finest writers sf has produced. That's that. Troll off.

Matt Hughes

<http://mars.ark.com/~mhughes/>

Current story: Mastermindless (F&SF, March)

Next story: A Little Learning (F&SF, June)

Next novel: Black Brillion (Tor, November)

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Lawrence Person — 29 Feb 2004, 07:24 · in reply to Josh

In article <Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>,

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:

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I feel that his approach has been misconstrued by the SF community at large as being profound and insightful, rather than the empty display of erudition that it is.

For the moment, just for the sake of argument, let's pretend you're not a troll.

You are, however, part of a long line of posters to RAFSW (get thee to Google for details) who make the same fundamental categorical error about Gene Wolfe: "I don't understand his work, therefore his work isn't capable of being understood, therefore he's a fraud/pretentious/snooty/whatever."

Instead of presenting carefully constructed logical arguments as to why your subjective impression is mistaken (truly a fool's task anywhere, but especially on Usenet), I'll try another tact.

Of all the people making the "I don't understand Wolfe so he's not any good" argument, there seems to be a constant: none were professional writers (and certainly not professional SF writers). I am wagering that this observation applies to you well.

And the reason none of them was professional writers is that it is obvious none realized just how hard the effects Wolfe achieves are to carry off, and just how effortlessly he does so. I am. I do. And you're wrong.

However, rather than depending on my thus far fairly minor reputation as an SF writer (I often observe that I'm the 10th most famous SF writer in Austin, Texas), let's take a look at a short list of far more luminous scribblers who think Wolfe is a genius:

Neil Gaiman  
Roger Zelazny  
Ursula K. Le Guin  
Theodore Sturgeon  
Damon Knight  
James Tiptree, Jr.  
Greg Bear  
Lucius Shepard  
Michael Swanwick  
James P. Blaylock  
Patrick O'Leary  
George R. R. Martin  
Thomas M. Disch  
Michael Bishop  
Kim Stanley Robinson  
Jonathon Carroll  
Brain Stableford  
Orson Scott Card  
Algis Budrys  
Ian Watson

Now, that's a pretty impressive and diverse list, united only in their fame in the field, and their belief in Wolfe's brilliance. And that's just a quick scan through the cover blurbs on his books and a few other printed sources; if you did a comprehensive survey of SFWA, it would no doubt be easy to compile a list 10 (if not 50) times as long. Are we to believe that "snooty" Wolfe has pulled the wool over ALL their eyes? Or that all of the above are "elitists?"

It's as if you said that J. S. Bach was "boring," and Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Strauss, Stravinsky, Gershwin, Copeland, Bernstein, Sodheim, Glass, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Paul McCartney, Peter Gabriel, and Louis Armstrong all said you were wrong. We can believe you, or

we can believe the dozen experts in the field who say you're wrong.

Occum's Razor suggests that you're full of it.

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jere7my tho?rpe — 29 Feb 2004, 07:59 · in reply to Josh

In article <Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>,

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:  
I've read a lot of Gene Wolf (the complete Sun and Urth sequences plus a short story collection who's title currently escapes me), generally with great interest, the two Latros novels being a notable exception (I only skimmed the second). Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

I would have a hard time thinking of an author who is more down-to-earth, kind, and straightforward than Gene Wolfe. He's a Texas gentleman, with all that that implies.

He certainly doesn't see his work as elitist; he writes that way because that's the way he writes. My personal theory is that he cut his teeth on mysteries, in which readers are meant to piece together scattered and well-hidden clues to determine the identity of the murderer, and simply applies the same technique to SFnal worldbuilding. Rather than telling you flat-out that Severian's companion is a robot, he offers clues which you are meant to piece together. He expects that this will be fun and rewarding for you, as it is for fans of mysteries.

Of course, I really should offer support for this assertion. (Well, sudden realization anyway). Consider that the entire justification for Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview).

Inspiration != justification. Stephen R. Donaldson said he got the inspiration for the most powerful scene in The Power That Preserves from a can of Lysol in a gas station restroom.

Severian, Silk, Latros are the same person to me. Urth, the Ship + Green + Blue, the mediterannean of antiquity are all the same places (well, Green was a bit different). So at least when it comes to "range" Wolfe does not have anything to brag about.

Perhaps you should read Peace. Perhaps, also, you should consider that Severian and Silk have similar narrative voices because (Wolfe believes) everyone sees their own actions as reasonable and proper, and we're witnessing the events from inside their heads. If you see past the unreliability of their narration, you'll see that they are very different people.

----j7y

\*\*\*\*\*  
jere7my tho?rpe / 734-769-0913 "There is no spoon." "SPOON!" "There  
>>> j7y at liws.org <<< is no spoon." "SPOON!" "There is no  
invert liws to reply via email spoon." "SPOON!" -- The Tick vs. Neo

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Mike Williams — 29 Feb 2004, 08:26 · in reply to jere7my tho?rpe

Ouch!

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Josh — 29 Feb 2004, 09:41 · in reply to Lawrence Person

In article <Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>,  
Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:

Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

I feel that his approach has been misconstrued by the SF community at large as being profound and insightful, rather than the empty display of erudition that it is.

For the moment, just for the sake of argument, let's pretend you're not a troll.

Thanks, I appreciate that. I don't think I am, but that's a matter of opinion, in the end.

You are, however, part of a long line of posters to RAFSW (get thee to Google for details) who make the same fundamental categorical error about Gene Wolfe: "I don't understand his work, therefore his work isn't capable of being understood, therefore he's a fraud/pretentious/snooty/whatever."

Um, no. If you read my post you will see that I do, in fact, understand him (or at least, think I understand him) and his appeal to me. The fact is that his appeal to me (and to you, apparently) rests in the quality of difficulty that you brandish so proudly here.

That's the thing that perhaps wasn't clear enough in my first post: I really \*liked\* Wolfe because of his opacity. I \*liked\* the fact that his stories weren't blatantly obvious and the payoff not immediate. I \*liked\* the fact that I knew that the majority of readers wouldn't get half the stuff. I \*liked\* the feeling of self-importance when someone saw me reading Wolfe.

Indeed, for the very reason you mention, Wolfe is snooty! (Or at least, his work is. Apparently he's a very nice man, which I find very easy to believe. But when I say he's snooty, I mean his work. Perhaps I should have titled this thread "The Snootiness of Gene Wolfe's Work".)

Instead of presenting carefully constructed logical arguments as to why your subjective impression is mistaken (truly a fool's task anywhere, but especially on Usenet), I'll try another tact.

Yes, I suppose I should have stuck with my objective impressions, but subjective will have to do. But that goes for you, too, I'm afraid!

Of all the people making the "I don't understand Wolfe so he's not any good" argument, there seems to be a constant: none were professional writers (and certainly not professional SF writers). I am wagering that this observation applies to you well.

Well, first off I'm not making that assertion. See above. Second off, that's even \*more\* grist for my mill, so to speak. I mean, the \*definition\* of elitist work is that it can only be enjoyed by a few elite...those with special knowledge, abilities, etc. Professional SF writers, for instance.

And the reason none of them was professional writers is that it is obvious none realized just how hard the effects Wolfe achieves are to carry off, and just how effortlessly he does so. I am. I do. And you're wrong.

You are? You do? I am? How interesting!

However, rather than depending on my thus far fairly minor reputation as an SF writer (I often observe that I'm the 10th most famous SF writer in Austin, Texas), let's take a look at a short list of far more luminous scribblers who think Wolfe is a genius:

Never said anything about his intelligence, nor even his ability as a writer. I'm firmly in the "snooty" camp. The only shot I fired across the bow of his ability was a perceived lack of variety

in character and setting.

Neil Gaiman  
Roger Zelazny  
Ursula K. Le Guin  
Theodore Sturgeon  
Damon Knight  
James Tiptree, Jr.  
Greg Bear  
Lucius Shepard  
Michael Swanwick  
James P. Blaylock  
Patrick O'Leary  
George R. R. Martin  
Thomas M. Disch  
Michael Bishop  
Kim Stanley Robinson  
Jonathon Carroll  
Brain Stableford  
Orson Scott Card  
Algis Budrys  
Ian Watson

Oh, and by the way, argument from authority *is* a fallacy, after all.

Now, that's a pretty impressive and diverse list, united only in their fame in the field, and their belief in Wolfe's brilliance. And that's just a quick scan through the cover blurbs on his books and a few other printed sources; if you did a comprehensive survey of SFWA, it would no doubt be easy to compile a list 10 (if not 50) times as long. Are we to believe that "snooty" Wolfe has pulled the wool over ALL their eyes? Or that all of the above are "elitists?"

Forgive me for observing that you appear to be suffering from a strong dose of hero worship. Indeed, it blinds you from my central premise:

When Wolfe appeals, he appeals to our hubris.

Let me say that again:

When Wolfe appeals, he appeals to our hubris.

Perhaps I was wrong to infer that this makes him "snooty". Maybe I would be more correct in saying that it makes his fans snooty.

Which brings me round to the original question of why I posted this at all: because I had an idea, I posted it in an ill-formed manner, got some nice juicy feedback that helped me to focus the idea further. Thanks.

And apologies to Gene if he ever reads this: in the quest for interesting self-expression, I made a bad inference. I will change the subject line right...now!

It's as if you said that J. S. Bach was "boring," and Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Strauss, Stravinsky, Gershwin, Copeland, Bernstein, Sodheim, Glass, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Paul McCartney, Peter Gabriel, and Louis Armstrong all said you were wrong. We can believe you, or we can believe the dozen experts in the field who say you're wrong.

Occum's Razor suggests that you're full of it.

OK. But you're attacking the wrong assertion, which, I freely admit I poorly presented in my initial post. (I might add that even if you were attacking the right assertion, argument from authority *\*is\** a fallacy, after all.)

Cheers.

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Josh — 29 Feb 2004, 09:42 · in reply to SpaceGirl

"SpaceGirl" <NoSpaceSpamGirl at subhuman.net> wrote in news:c1rhej\$1mm1dc\$1 at ID-129131.news.uni-berlin.de:

You have to admit, a fairly eloquent troll, if that is indeed what that post was :)

Thanks Space Girl. Actually, I think I understand why he thought I was a troll. See my response to Lawrence Person (SF author extradenaire who was so kind as to participate in this thread) for a clarification of what I'm asserting.

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Josh — 29 Feb 2004, 09:49 · in reply to jere7my tho?rpe

"jere7my tho?rpe" <j7y at liws.org> wrote in news:j7y-80EFC8.02595529022004 at visionmassif.rs.itd.umich.edu:

In article <Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>, Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:

I've read a lot of Gene Wolf (the complete Sun and Urth sequences plus a short story collection whose title currently escapes me), generally with great interest, the two Latros novels being a notable exception (I only skimmed the second). Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

I would have a hard time thinking of an author who is more down-to-earth, kind, and straightforward than Gene Wolfe. He's a Texas gentleman, with all that that implies.

You say this with such feeling that I can't help but believe you. And it highlights the fact that I made a poor inference and expressed it in a too-aggressive manner. Really, I have no idea if Wolfe is Snooty. On further reflection, I believe that his *\*fans\** are Snooty, myself being but one of many, and my primary inspiration for the sweeping indictment.

He certainly doesn't see his work as elitist; he writes that way because that's the way he writes. My personal theory is that he cut his teeth on mysteries, in which readers are meant to piece together scattered and well-hidden clues to determine the identity of the murderer, and simply applies the same technique to SFnal worldbuilding. Rather than telling you flat-out that Severian's companion is a robot, he offers clues which you are meant to piece together. He expects that this will be fun and rewarding for you, as it is for fans of mysteries.

Of course, I really should offer support for this assertion. (Well, sudden realization anyway). Consider that the entire justification for Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview).

Inspiration != justification. Stephen R. Donaldson said he got the

inspiration for the most powerful scene in *The Power That Preserves* from a can of Lysol in a gas station restroom.

Not to mention the fact that such an inspiration is hardly snooty now is it? (I'm starting to consider this group as an oven where half-baked ideas can become, if not delicious, then at least palatable).

Severian, Silk, Latros are the same person to me. Urth, the Ship + Green + Blue, the mediterannean of antiquity are all the same places (well, Green was a bit different). So at least when it comes to "range" Wolfe does not have anything to brag about.

Perhaps you should read *Peace*. Perhaps, also, you should consider that Severian and Silk have similar narrative voices because (Wolfe believes) everyone sees their own actions as reasonable and proper, and we're witnessing the events from inside their heads. If you see past the unreliability of their narration, you'll see that they are very different people.

How do they differ? I can list a variety of ways in which they are the same, but I forgot all the details.

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Mike Williams — 29 Feb 2004, 10:22 · in reply to Josh

"Josh" <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:Xns949E112EE9E9Aifyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11...

Indeed, for the very reason you mention, Wolfe is snooty! (Or at least, his work is. Apparently he's a very nice man, which I find very easy to believe. But when I say he's snooty, I mean his work. Perhaps I should have titled this thread "The Snootiness of Gene Wolfe's Work".)

I'm wondering what \*you\* mean by snooty"". I don't think anything you have said speaks to his work being aloof, haughty or exclusive. It's possible you're meaning something different and you're getting a reaction to your personal definition of snootiness.

When Wolfe appeals, he appeals to our hubris.

I think I'd like to hear your definition of 'hubris' too.

---

Doug — 29 Feb 2004, 10:46 · in reply to Lawrence Person

Lawrence Person <lawrence at io.com> wrote ...

And the reason none of them was professional writers is that it is obvious none realized just how hard the effects Wolfe achieves are to carry off, and just how effortlessly he does so. I am. I do. And you're wrong.

It's as if you said that J. S. Bach was "boring," and Mozart, Beethoven, Mahler, Strauss, Stravinsky, Gershwin, Copeland, Bernstein, Sodheim, Glass, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Paul McCartney, Peter Gabriel, and Louis Armstrong all said you were wrong. We can believe you, or we can believe the dozen experts in the field who say you're wrong.

I'm not a fan of Wolfe's. To continue your analogy -- and I do love a good analogy -- Wolfe for me is like the musician Richard Thompson.

I can appreciate his talent, and I get why other professionals in his field hold him in such high



esteem, but the work just doesn't do anything for me.

It's not a case of right or wrong, it's a case of taste, and we each respond to different flavors in different ways.

I feel the same way about Howard Waldrop, too... and he's even written one of my all-time favorite SF stories, "The Ugly Chickens."

[http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/classics/classics\\_archive/waldrop/waldrop1.html](http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/classics/classics_archive/waldrop/waldrop1.html)

Doug

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Michael Grosberg — 29 Feb 2004, 14:59 · in reply to Josh

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:<Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>...

I've read a lot of Gene Wolfe (the complete Sun and Urth sequences plus a short story collection whose title currently escapes me), generally with great interest, the two Latros novels being a notable exception (I only skimmed the second). Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

Of course, I really should offer support for this assertion. (Well, sudden realization anyway). Consider that the entire justification for Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview). The plot, etc was layed on as thin veneer with elements sprinkled from Wolfe's extraordinarily broad knowledge of literature and myth, and mined with subtle puzzles that amused Wolfe. Taken on its face, this series is muddled, conflicted, and unbelievable. Severian himself is never fleshed out.

Funny, I could say the same thing about LOTR, a book created to provide a background for a couple of artificial languages, full of ancient obscure words and myths. Frodo is never fleshed out, the book is muddled (Tom Bombadil. what is he doing there? and why all the songs?) and unbelievable (magic rings? giving the world's most important artifact to a small halfling to carry? I mean, really...).

Maybe Wolfe does this too intentionally. But the thing is - he succeeded. I only read the Book of the New Sun so far, but I'm definitely looking for the others (I already have the Long Sun books, but I'm trying to find \_Urth\_ first). Even on the most basic level of creating a good, readable yarn, TBOTNS works. And of course there's so much more to it (others will be better than I am at expanding on the meaning of TBOTNS). I didn't feel it was too "literary", although I'm sure there's a ton of stuff I'm missing, and I certainly didn't need to use a dictionary to read it - all the obscure words are MEANT to stay obscure, after all. And as for Severian, he is very well fleshed out, and very human. I especially liked the fact that even as he was having great adventures, his mind was always going back to the one thing on the mind of all teenagers: girls :-)

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Josh — 29 Feb 2004, 17:16 · in reply to Mike Williams

"Mike Williams" <mike@nospam4me> wrote in news:4041bd80\$0\$28871\$afc38c87 at news.optusnet.com.au:

"Josh" <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:Xns949E112EE9E9Aifyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11...

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I'm wondering what \*you\* mean by snooty"". I don't think anything you have said speaks to his work being aloof, haughty or exclusive. It's possible you're meaning something different and you're getting a reaction to your personal definition of snootiness.

I meant something like <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=snooty>

I've already revamped my assertion, which you quoted below (so I assume you've read it), so you're attacking something I've already retracted. Jeremy Thorpe spoke eloquently for Wolfe's character and in so doing helped me to realize that I had made an inference error. Namely that snootiness of the fanbase implies snootiness of the artist. This is not always the case!

Wolfe is kind of like modern day opera. The sense I get is that, although there are undoubtedly those who really enjoy opera for it's artistry and fundamental merit, there is a larger portion of the fan base that likes it because it is opera, and by liking it one shows one's sophistication and taste. Perhaps even better examples would be people who (say they) like 12 tone symphonies or reading Immanuel Kant. My guess is that 4 out of 5 of such people like the \*idea\* of enjoying such haughty entertainments more than the entertainments themselves. Does this mean Shoenberg or Kant are themselves snooty? Not necessarily. Maybe they were just down-to-earth artists who were trying to be as straight-forward as possible, and were just taken up by the wrong crowd. (Or maybe not.)

Anyway, I think such pretense is bad (I was going to write "without merit" but then realized...), and I don't want to be that way. Now that I'm aware of it perhaps I can enjoy reading Wolfe and enjoy him all the more for what he has written, rather than how he is perceived. One thing is certain: posting this comment has been a tremendous catharsis and I appreciate the feedback immensely.

When Wolfe appeals, he appeals to our hubris.

I think I'd like to hear your definition of 'hubris' too.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=hubris> does the trick.

---

Mike Williams — 29 Feb 2004, 23:29 · in reply to Josh

"Josh" <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:Xns949E5E5FE4919ifyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11...

"Mike Williams" <mike@nosspam4me> wrote in news:4041bd80\$0\$28871\$afc38c87 at news.optusnet.com.au:

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I'm wondering what \*you\* mean by snooty"". I don't think anything you have said speaks to his work being aloof, haughty or exclusive. It's possible you're meaning something different and you're getting a reaction to your personal definition of snootiness.

I meant something like <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=snooty>

I as you may have noticed used the same reference, which is why I don't think you justified your assertion that Wolfe's work is "aloof, haughty or exclusive".

I've already revamped my assertion, which you quoted below (so I assume you've read it), so you're attacking something I've already retracted.

I quoted your correction that the work was snooty, and that's why I asked you to justify it in terms of the definition of snooty.

When Wolfe appeals, he appeals to our hubris.

I think I'd like to hear your definition of 'hubris' too.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=hubris> does the trick.

Yep, and with that definition I don't see any justification for the assertion. (ooo 3 "-tion" words in one sentence). It seems to me to be a very curious statement.

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Miles Bader — 29 Feb 2004, 23:40 · in reply to Josh

Josh <[if.you.want.to.email@visit.joshbrain.tripod.org](mailto:if.you.want.to.email@visit.joshbrain.tripod.org)> writes:

You say this with such feeling that I can't help but believe you. And it highlights the fact that I made a poor inference and expressed it in a too-aggressive manner. Really, I have no idea if Wolfe is Snooty. On further reflection, I believe that his \*fans\* are Snooty, myself being but one of many, and my primary inspiration for the sweeping indictment.

Well I suppose you've aptly demonstrated that point in this thread...

But the original accusation remains completely silly -- Wolfe's work is actually very readable whether or not you bother to figure out what everything `means'. His prose-style in particular is lovely without being obscure.

-Miles

[[nurgle]] ddt- demonic? so quake will have an evil kinda setting? one that will make every christian in the world foamm at the mouth?  
[iddt] nurg, that's the goal

---

Thomas Womack — 29 Feb 2004, 23:41 · in reply to Michael Grosberg

Maybe Wolfe does this too intentionally. But the thing is - he succeeded. I only read the Book of the New Sun so far, but I'm definately looking fot the others (I already have the Long Sun books, but I'm trying to find \_Urth\_ first).

I have read BOTNS and am half-way through Urth; I'm not sure that the term to describe Wolfe's style isn't "infuriating". Lots of it reads rather like the perspicacity-demonstrating scenes from Sherlock Holmes, but cheating in that the reader hasn't seen sufficient of the clues (particularly when the clue is that an alien species sounds odd for its kind, it being the only exemplar of its kind we've seen).

I think really I find that life is too short to read very much written in first-person by that unreliable a narrator. The including process doesn't work because we only see Severian reaching conclusions, rather than particularly acquiring the ability to reach the conclusions ourselves; shortage of infodumps is as much of a problem as excess of infodumps, at least for me. For me, invoking a world by a well-described character's reactions to it worked much better in something like \_The King's Peace\_.

The book that's really impressed me recently is Dorothy Dunnett's "Niccolo Rising"; absolutely superb pacing, and a really compelling environment, quite substantially thanks to everything being told in a well-calibrated omniscient third-person.

Tom

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Nancy Lebovitz — 01 Mar 2004, 00:11 · in reply to Josh

In article <Xns949E112EE9E9Aifyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>,

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:

Thats the thing that perhaps wasn't clear enough in my first post: I really \*liked\* Wolfe because of his opacity. I \*liked\* the fact that his stories weren't blatantly obvious and the payoff not immediate. I \*liked\* the fact that I knew that the majority of readers wouldn't get half the stuff. I \*liked\* the feeling of self-importance when someone saw me reading Wolfe.

It's plausible that part of Wolfe's appeal is that he engages the feeling of being intelligent, and even that he engages the feeling that one is more intelligent than other people.

It's rather harder to prove that Wolfe doesn't offer anything else, though.

I'm not a tremendous Wolfe fan, but I think there's something fine and pulpy about duelling with poisonous hypnotic flowers, or beaches so old that their sand is all specs of broken glass, or (a bit more subtly) people living out their lives in a palace waiting room.`

Nancy Lebovitz nancy at netaxs.com www.nancybuttons.com  
Now, with bumper stickers

Using your turn signal is not "giving information to the enemy"

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Richard Horton — 01 Mar 2004, 02:39 · in reply to Matt Hughes

On 29 Feb 2004 18:45:20 -0800, mhughes at mars.ark.com (Matt Hughes) wrote:

Thomas Womack <twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk> wrote in message news:<+tv\*P4jeq at news.chiark.greenend.org.uk>...

The book that's really impressed me recently is Dorothy Dunnett's "Niccolo Rising"; absolutely superb pacing, and a really compelling environment, quite substantially thanks to everything being told in a well-calibrated omniscient third-person.

To me it's odd that you would find Wolfe's unreliable narrator infuriating but you're not bothered by Dunnett's practice of having vitally important matters take place offstage then having the characters refer to them as if the reader ought to know what they're talking about. Gradually, of course, the reader clues in. I enjoy the teasing, but I've known readers who find the plot lacunae so annoying they refuse to read Dunnett.

The Niccolo books just get better and better, by the way. Dunnett was as good a historical novelist as Cecilia Holland, and that's saying something.

Indeed.

For what it's worth, I prefer Dunnett's earlier series, which is linked to the Niccolo books: The Chronicles of Lymond. Beginning with The Game of Kings. (Which is not to say that the Niccolo books aren't quite good themselves.)

Fabulously colourful, adventurous, complex, twisty, emotionally wracking -- HF doesn't get any better.

Rich Horton | Stable Email: [mailto://richard.horton at sff.net](mailto:richard.horton@sff.net)  
Home Page: <http://www.sff.net/people/richard.horton>  
Also visit SF Site (<http://www.sfsite.com>) and Tangent Online (<http://www.tangentonline.com>)

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Matt Hughes — 01 Mar 2004, 02:45 · in reply to Thomas Womack

Thomas Womack <[twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk](mailto:twomack@chiark.greenend.org.uk)> wrote in message news:<+tv\*P4jeq at news.chiark.greenend.org.uk>...

The book that's really impressed me recently is Dorothy Dunnett's "Niccolo Rising"; absolutely superb pacing, and a really compelling environment, quite substantially thanks to everything being told in a well-calibrated omniscient third-person.

To me it's odd that you would find Wolfe's unreliable narrator infuriating but you're not bothered by Dunnett's practice of having vitally important matters take place offstage then having the characters refer to them as if the reader ought to know what they're talking about. Gradually, of course, the reader clues in. I enjoy the teasing, but I've known readers who find the plot lacunae so annoying they refuse to read Dunnett.

The Niccolo books just get better and better, by the way. Dunnett was as good a historical novelist as Cecilia Holland, and that's saying something.

Matt Hughes  
<http://mars.ark.com/~mhughes/>

Current story: Mastermindless (F&SF, March)  
Next story: A Little Learning (F&SF, June)  
Next novel: Black Brillion (Tor, November)

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Mike Ward — 01 Mar 2004, 03:33 · in reply to Miles Bader

Miles Bader <[miles at gnu.org](mailto:miles@gnu.org)> wrote in news:87r7wdzc7a.fsf at tc-1-100.kawasaki.gol.ne.jp:

Josh <[if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org](mailto:if.you.want.to.email@visit.joshbrain.tripod.org)> writes:

You say this with such feeling that I can't help but believe you. And it highlights the fact that I made a poor inference and expressed it in a too-aggressive manner. Really, I have no idea if Wolfe is Snooty. On further reflection, I believe that his \*fans\* are Snooty, myself being but one of many, and my primary inspiration for the sweeping indictment.

Well I suppose you've aptly demonstrated that point in this thread...

But the original accusation remains completely silly -- Wolfe's work is actually very readable whether or not you bother to figure out what everything `means'. His prose-style in particular is lovely without being obscure.

I loved Book of the New Sun even though the entire time I was reading it I was thinking this ought to be terrible. I still don't know why I found it so good, but I did.

I can barely remember Urth the the New Sun. I posted a request for someone to remind me what happened in it not long ago. I got my memory jogged a bit, but I still can't recall much about or if it was any good or not.

The Fifth Head of Cerberus was absolutely amazing. I appreciate the fact the Wolfe has enough faith in his reader to assume that he can figure it out on his own and not have be told point black what's happened.

Perhaps what comes across as snootiness to some is actually the respect Wolfe shows his reader by his refusal to dumb down the material.

Mike

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Htn963 — 01 Mar 2004, 06:10 · in reply to Thomas Womack

Thomas Womack <twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk> wrote in message news:<+tv\*P4jeq at news.chiark.greenend.org.uk>...

Maybe Wolfe does this too intentionally. But the thing is - he succeeded. I only read the Book of the New Sun so far, but I'm definately looking fot the others (I already have the Long Sun books, but I'm trying to find \_Urth\_ first).

I have read BOTNS and am half-way through Urth; I'm not sure that the term to describe Wolfe's style isn't "infuriating".

I liked BOTNS, but, yeah, that's an apt description of the effect his style usually has on me.

I think really I find that life is too short to read very much written in first-person by that unreliable a narrator.

Ditto. I haven't been tempted to read anything else by Wolfe after \_Urth\_, an overlong, rambling, pointless (and methinks self-indulgent\*) exercise in religious-philosophical jigsaw assembling which detracts from the vividness and panache of the previous BOTNS book.

\*And that's how I would describe Wolfe himself -- not snooty. The OP is welcome to overstate his case, of course.

Ht

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jere7my tho?rpe — 01 Mar 2004, 06:10 · in reply to Josh

In article <Xns949E128161373ifyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>,

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:  
"jere7my tho?rpe" <j7y at liws.org> wrote in  
news:j7y-80EFC8.02595529022004 at visonmassif.rs.itd.umich.edu:

I would have a hard time thinking of an author who is more down-to-earth, kind, and straightforward than Gene Wolfe. He's a Texas gentleman, with all that that implies.

You say this with such feeling that I can't help but believe you.

Well, good. :) = I say it with feeling because I've spent some time with him at cons, and I like him personally; he was unfailingly welcoming and kind and personable to me, when he had no real reason to be. This might mean I can't be exactly objective wrt his writing, but I hope I can.

Perhaps, also, you should consider that Severian and Silk have similar narrative voices because (Wolfe believes) everyone sees their own actions as reasonable and proper, and we're witnessing the events from inside their heads. If you see past the unreliability of their narration, you'll see that they are very different people.

How do they differ? I can list a variety of ways in which they are the same, but I forgot all the details.

Well, the big one is in their empathy with others. Severian has no empathy, except that inspired by selfish infatuation; he was raised to be a torturer, and can barely perceive others' pain in any other way than professionally. Silk has too much, such that he often has to overcome his empathy to be effective.

---j7y

\*\*\*\*\*  
jere7my tho?rpe / 734-769-0913 "There is no spoon." "SPOON!" "There  
>>> j7y at liws.org <<< is no spoon." "SPOON!" "There is no  
invert liws to reply via email spoon." "SPOON!" -- The Tick vs. Neo

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jere7my tho?rpe — 01 Mar 2004, 06:21 · in reply to Htn963

Ditto. I haven't been tempted to read anything else by Wolfe after \_Urth\_, an overlong, rambling, pointless (and methinks self-indulgent\*) exercise in religious-philosophical jigsaw assembling which detracts from the vividness and panache of the previous BOTNS book.

\_Urth\_ is atypical Wolfe, in that it's all about explaining rather than mystifying, and I didn't much like it; I think the \_Long Sun\_ and \_Short Sun\_ books are worlds better than \_Urth\_. And they're both more accessible than \_New Sun\_, imho.

---j7y

\*\*\*\*\*  
jere7my tho?rpe / 734-769-0913 "There is no spoon." "SPOON!" "There  
>>> j7y at liws.org <<< is no spoon." "SPOON!" "There is no  
invert liws to reply via email spoon." "SPOON!" -- The Tick vs. Neo

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Thomas Womack — 01 Mar 2004, 08:59 · in reply to Richard Horton

For what it's worth, I prefer Dunnett's earlier series, which is linked to the Niccolo books: The Chronicles of Lymond. Beginning with The Game of Kings. (Which is not to say that the Niccolo books aren't quite good themselves.)

I gave up on the Game of Kings after getting totally frustrated with what felt like a plethora of asides in untranslated Norman French; I'm planning to try again after finishing the Niccolo books. Merchants in Bruges are for me a much more appealing setting than feuding clans in Scotland, though (if only from titles) I'm aware that Lymond is likely to get out of Scotland at some point.

Tom

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Thomas Womack — 01 Mar 2004, 09:04 · in reply to Matt Hughes

Thomas Womack <twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk> wrote in message news:<+tv\*P4jeq at news.chiark.greenend.org.uk>...

The book that's really impressed me recently is Dorothy Dunnett's "Niccolo Rising"; absolutely superb pacing, and a really compelling environment, quite substantially thanks to everything being told in a well-calibrated omniscient third-person.

To me it's odd that you would find Wolfe's unreliable narrator infuriating but you're not bothered by Dunnett's practice of having vitally important matters take place offstage then having the characters refer to them as if the reader ought to know what they're talking about. Gradually, of course, the reader clues in.

I rather like that approach, in Dunnett and in GG Kay (with writers that good using it, it must have something to commend itself); it keeps my poor brain from atrophying, and offers an interestingly different sort of dramatic irony. I'm much more convinced that there is a Big Story of which the characters we're reading know parts than I am from Wolfe.

The Niccolo books just get better and better, by the way. Dunnett was as good a historical novelist as Cecilia Holland, and that's saying something.

I'm looking forward to the next ones, as soon as the library's catalogue server comes back on-line and I can actually order them ...

\_Niccolo Rising\_ I proselytised enthusiastically about, and lent out to a friend the day I'd finished it.

Who's Cecilia Holland? Georgette Heyer's real name, or some other writer I've not yet had the privilege to encounter?

Tom

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Richard Horton — 01 Mar 2004, 13:03 · in reply to Thomas Womack

On 01 Mar 2004 08:59:33 +0000 (GMT), Thomas Womack  
<twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk> wrote:

For what it's worth, I prefer Dunnett's earlier series, which is linked to the Niccolo books: The Chronicles of Lymond. Beginning with The Game of Kings. (Which is not to say that the Niccolo books aren't quite good themselves.)

I gave up on the Game of Kings after getting totally frustrated with what felt like a plethora of asides in untranslated Norman French;

There are translations for all of them somewhere -- not sure if they are on the web. Elaine Thompson would know.

I was able to enjoy the book despite not being able to read any of the asides. But, yeah, it's a bit offputting.

I'm planning to try again after finishing the Niccolo books. Merchants in Bruges are for me a much more appealing setting than feuding clans in Scotland, though (if only from titles) I'm aware that Lymond is likely to get out of Scotland at some point.

And it's not really a spoiler to mention that Niccolo ends up spending some considerable time in Scotland.

(Dunnett, of course, was Scottish.)

Rich Horton | Stable Email: <mailto:richard.horton@sff.net>  
Home Page: <http://www.sff.net/people/richard.horton>



**Richard Horton — 01 Mar 2004, 13:08 · in reply to Thomas Womack**

On 01 Mar 2004 09:04:59 +0000 (GMT), Thomas Womack  
<twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk> wrote:  
Who's Cecilia Holland? Georgette Heyer's real name, or some other  
writer I've not yet had the privilege to encounter?

Another wonderful historical fiction writer. I prefer Dunnett slightly, but many people prefer Holland. Not much like Heyer at all. (Though I like Heyer too. (I think Georgette Heyer was her real maiden name, her married name was something like Rougier.))

Holland as also written one unambiguous SF novel: *\_Floating Worlds\_*, from 1975 or so, set in a future in which the Solar System is pretty much fully colonized, and Earth is something of a backwater. An Earth woman gets involved in the rather gothic politics of some heavy planet folks. I liked it a lot, thought it read very much like Historical Fiction. It was nominated for a Nebula but Holland withdrew the nomination in favor of the paperback edition, with then did not get nominated.

Holland's other novels include *Great Maria*, *The Earl*, *The Firedrake*, *The Bear Flag*, and lots more. No series that I know of.

Rich Horton | Stable Email: <mailto:richard.horton@sff.net>  
Home Page: <http://www.sff.net/people/richard.horton>  
Also visit SF Site (<http://www.sfsite.com>) and Tangent Online (<http://www.tangentonline.com>)

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**Ron Henry — 01 Mar 2004, 16:36 · in reply to Josh**

"Josh" <[if.you.want.to.email@visit.joshbrain.tripod.org](mailto:if.you.want.to.email@visit.joshbrain.tripod.org)> wrote in message  
news:Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11...

I've read a lot of Gene Wolf

Um. You're so familiar with his work that you mis-spell his name in the first line of your post? Sigh.

Hint: let's say you're not simply a random troll-like troublemaker (I don't feel like scrutinizing your post closely enough for clues to tell) -- be careful about obvious and egregious mis-spellings, since they are the sure mark of a random jerk who is just trying to incite people.

Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this  
observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

[bulk snipped]

I kind of want to be wrong,

Well, that's very fortunate.

Ron Henry

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**Elaine Thompson — 01 Mar 2004, 20:14 · in reply to Richard Horton**

On Mon, 01 Mar 2004 13:03:43 GMT, Richard Horton  
<[rrhorton@prodigy.net](mailto:rrhorton@prodigy.net)> wrote:  
On 01 Mar 2004 08:59:33 +0000 (GMT), Thomas Womack  
<twomack at chiark.greenend.org.uk> wrote:

For what it's worth, I prefer Dunnett's earlier series, which is linked to the Niccolo books: The Chronicles of Lymond. Beginning with The Game of Kings. (Which is not to say that the Niccolo books aren't quite good themselves.)

I gave up on the Game of Kings after getting totally frustrated with what felt like a plethora of asides in untranslated Norman French;

There are translations for all of them somewhere -- not sure if they are on the web. Elaine Thompson would know.

Not necessarily, I can't keep up with everything. But I am aware of Nancy Wright's efforts, which are on paper - see

<http://www.dorothydunnettreadingaids.com/>

And the Dunnett Companions, of course. I think they're OOP, though, and Nancy's work is offered at her cost.

Elaine Thompson <Elaine at KETHompson.org>

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William December Starr — 01 Mar 2004, 20:47 · in reply to Nancy Lebovitz

I'm not a tremendous Wolfe fan, but I think there's something fine and pulpy about duelling with poisonous hypnotic flowers, or beaches so old that their sand is all specs of broken glass, or (a bit more subtly) people living out their lives in a palace waiting room.

Huh. I thought that that last one was probably the least subtle, most in-your-face farcical suspension-of-disbelief breaker in the whole Book of the New Sun series.

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William December Starr — 01 Mar 2004, 20:52 · in reply to jere7my tho?rpe

In article <j7y-80EFC8.02595529022004 at visonmassif.rs.itd.umich.edu>, "jere7my tho?rpe" <j7y at liws.org> said:

[Gene Wolfe] certainly doesn't see his work as elitist; he writes that way because that's the way he writes. My personal theory is that he cut his teeth on mysteries, in which readers are meant to piece together scattered and well-hidden clues to determine the identity of the murderer, and simply applies the same technique to SFnal worldbuilding. Rather than telling you flat-out that Severian's companion is a robot, he offers clues which you are meant to piece together. He expects that this will be fun and rewarding for you, as it is for fans of mysteries.

Of course, often in those mysteries there's a point near the end in which the detective gathers all the suspects together in the drawing room and Explains It All for the benefit of us mere mortals who haven't figured it out...

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Christopher J. Henrich — 01 Mar 2004, 21:35 · in reply to Josh

In article <Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>, Josh

<if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:

I've read a lot of Gene Wolf (the complete Sun and Urth sequences plus a short story collection who's title currently escapes me), generally with great interest, the two Latros novels being a notable exception (I only skimmed the second). Therefore I feel somewhat qualified to make this observation: Mr. Wolfe is a snooty elitist author.

I am surprised that you have read so much of Wolfe if you really dislike his writing.

[snip]

Consider that the entire justification for Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview).

Wolfe has said somewhere that he has a sense of humor which makes strong men faint and women reach for weapons. Maybe the interviewer got a taste of it here. Four volumes is a bit much for upstaging Darth Vader.

Chris Henrich

The wonderful thing about not planning, is that failure comes as a complete surprise, and is not preceded by a period of worry or depression.

-- "Kiltannen"

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Brian Palmer — 02 Mar 2004, 00:40 · in reply to Lawrence Person

Lawrence Person <lawrence at io.com> writes:

Of all the people making the "I don't understand Wolfe so he's not any good" argument, there seems to be a constant: none were professional writers (and certainly not professional SF writers). I am wagering that this observation applies to you well.

And the reason none of them was professional writers is that it is obvious none realized just how hard the effects Wolfe achieves are to carry off, and just how effortlessly he does so. I am. I do. And you're wrong.

However, rather than depending on my thus far fairly minor reputation as an SF writer (I often observe that I'm the 10th most famous SF writer in Austin, Texas), let's take a look at a short list of far more luminous scribblers who think Wolfe is a genius:

Without speaking more about the merits of the original poster's case, I just have to say this is a very silly argument by authority. In some cases, argument by authority is valid; but whether an author is snooty or not, or has a broad range, I don't think so.

It's even sillier when that authority is also based on on cover blurbs, given the general accuracy and relevance of such blurbs,

I'm awfully glad I'm a Beta, because I don't work so hard.

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Ryan Klippenstine — 02 Mar 2004, 02:38 · in reply to William December Starr

On 1 Mar 2004 15:47:34 -0500, wdstarr at panix.com (William December Starr) wrote:

I'm not a tremendous Wolfe fan, but I think there's something fine and pulpy about duelling with poisonous hypnotic flowers, or beaches so old that their sand is all specs of broken glass, or (a bit more subtly) people living out their lives in a palace waiting room.

Huh. I thought that that last one was probably the least subtle, most in-your-face farcical suspension-of-disbelief breaker in the whole Book of the New Sun series.

Oh, come now, there's no way that's worse than the Ascian "language." And as for subtle, how about Typhon and Piaton? I wonder what *that* could be about?

Ryan Klippenstine

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David Kennedy — 02 Mar 2004, 03:56 · in reply to Richard Horton

Richard Horton <rrhorton at prodigy.net> wrote:

[Cecelia] Holland [h]as also written one unambiguous SF novel: Floating Worlds, from 1975 or so, set in a future in which the Solar System is pretty much fully colonized, and Earth is something of a backwater. An Earth woman gets involved in the rather gothic politics of some heavy planet folks. I liked it a lot, thought it read very much like Historical Fiction. It was nominated for a Nebula but Holland withdrew the nomination in favor of the paperback edition, with then did not get nominated.

It's still in print as I bought the bright yellow Gollancz edition just over a year ago. I bounced off it hard. I gave it another month or so, then had another go before deciding that while many people like this novel, I'm not one of them.

David Kennedy  
[www.dkennedy.org](http://www.dkennedy.org)

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Richard Horton — 02 Mar 2004, 04:21 · in reply to David Kennedy

On 02 Mar 2004 03:56:00 GMT, David Kennedy <dave at dkennedy.org> wrote:  
Richard Horton <rrhorton at prodigy.net> wrote:

[Cecelia] Holland [h]as also written one unambiguous SF novel: Floating Worlds, from 1975 or so, set in a future in which the Solar System is pretty much fully colonized, and Earth is something of a backwater. An Earth woman gets involved in the rather gothic politics of some heavy planet folks. I liked it a lot, thought it read very much like Historical Fiction. It was nominated for a Nebula but Holland withdrew the nomination in favor of the paperback edition, with then did not get nominated.

It's still in print as I bought the bright yellow Gollancz edition just over a year ago. I bounced off it hard. I gave it another month or so, then had another go before deciding that while many people like this novel, I'm not one of them.

I will say that I read it back then, when I was 16 or so, and not since. A couple of years later, my then girlfriend, also an SF fan\*, remarked only slightly caustically that much of my enjoyment probably stemmed from a certain scene towards the middle. (The main character has been made a concubine of one of the heavy planet rulers. (I can't remember which planet.) She takes the opportunity to initiate another concubine into, well, the pleasures available to the concubines who aren't currently in their master's bed.)

\*(This woman was a bookstore manager. She used her authority to keep copies of Gene Wolfe's The Fifth Head of Cerberus on the shelves of her bookstore, which happened to be quite close to Barrington, IL, well past the date when it should have been stripped. One day she noticed a middle aged man browsing the book, with, as she put it, great emotion -- tears even. The man was Gene Wolfe.)

Rich Horton | Stable Email: <mailto://richard.horton at sff.net>  
Home Page: <http://www.sff.net/people/richard.horton>  
Also visit SF Site (<http://www.sfsite.com>) and Tangent Online (<http://www.tangentonline.com>)

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Htn963 — 02 Mar 2004, 10:56 · in reply to Richard Horton

Richard Horton <rrhorton at prodigy.net> wrote in message news:<6ZT0c.20551\$aH.16733 at newssvr31.news.prodigy.com>...

On 02 Mar 2004 03:56:00 GMT, David Kennedy <dave at dkennedy.org> wrote:

Richard Horton <rrhorton at prodigy.net> wrote:

[Cecelia] Holland [h]as also written one unambiguous SF novel: Floating Worlds, from 1975 or so, set in a future in which the Solar System is pretty much fully colonized, and Earth is something of a backwater. An Earth woman gets involved in the rather gothic politics of some heavy planet folks. I liked it a lot, thought it read very much like Historical Fiction. It was nominated for a Nebula but Holland withdrew the nomination in favor of the paperback edition, with then did not get nominated.

It's still in print as I bought the bright yellow Gollancz edition just over a year ago. I bounced off it hard. I gave it another month or so, then had another go before deciding that while many people like this novel, I'm not one of them.

Hmm, coincidentally, I just got a copy today on a whim from a clearance rack outside my local Half bookstore, never having heard of it. (And this happened to be the first newsgroup thread I read after getting home from the bookstore.)

I will say that I read it back then, when I was 16 or so, and not since. A couple of years later, my then girlfriend, also an SF fan\*, remarked only slightly caustically that much of my enjoyment probably stemmed from a certain scene towards the middle. (The main character has been made a concubine of one of the heavy planet rulers. (I can't remember which planet.) She takes the opportunity to initiate another concubine into, well, the pleasures available to the concubines who aren't currently in their master's bed.)

It'll probably take a bit more than just sex in heavy g's to get me to enthusiastically crack this big sucker open. [Notice all the double entendres] But at least the author being a predominantly historical novelist sounds interesting.

\*(This woman was a bookstore manager. She used her authority to keep copies of Gene Wolfe's The Fifth Head of Cerberus on the shelves of her bookstore, which happened to be quite close to Barrington, IL, well past the date when it should have been stripped. One day she noticed a middle aged man browsing the book, with, as she put it, great emotion -- tears even. The man was Gene Wolfe.)

This better have happened when Wolfe was just starting out or it'll be just maudlin rather than moving.

Ht

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Richard Horton — 02 Mar 2004, 12:57 · in reply to Htn963

On 2 Mar 2004 02:56:18 -0800, Htn963 at peoplepc.com (Htn963) wrote:  
This better have happened when Wolfe was just starting out or it'll be just maudlin rather than moving.

It would have been in 1976 or so, before Wolfe had had much (if any) in the way of commercial success, though after he was established as a major writer in the SF field.

Rich Horton | Stable Email: <mailto://richard.horton at sff.net>  
Home Page: <http://www.sff.net/people/richard.horton>  
Also visit SF Site (<http://www.sfsite.com>) and Tangent Online (<http://www.tangentonline.com>)

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wthyde — 02 Mar 2004, 17:42 · in reply to David Kennedy

David Kennedy <dave at dkennedy.org> writes:

Richard Horton <rrhorton at prodigy.net> wrote:

[Cecelia] Holland [h]as also written one unambiguous SF novel: *Floating Worlds*, from 1975 or so, set in a future in which the Solar System is pretty much fully colonized, and Earth is something of a backwater. An Earth woman gets involved in the rather gothic politics of some heavy planet folks. I liked it a lot, thought it read very much like Historical Fiction. It was nominated for a Nebula but Holland withdrew the nomination in favor of the paperback edition, with then did not get nominated.

It's still in print as I bought the bright yellow Gollancz edition just over a year ago. I bounced off it hard. I gave it another month or so, then had another go before deciding that while many people like this novel, I'm not one of them.

To me (way back in 1977) it seemed like an inferior rewrite of her novel "Until the sun falls", about the mongol empire (which I liked a great deal).

I don't insist on radically hard SF, or, at all, on realistic battle descriptions (whatever that means), but I thought that with respect to the former she had no concept of Newton's laws, and as to the latter that Mongol battle plans couldn't work in just the same way on a three dimensional battlefield.

I've always meant to give it another try, as I really like her historical novels. I may have been expecting too much from FW, which was highly touted when it was published.

William Hyde  
EOS Department  
Duke University

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Peter Shor — 02 Mar 2004, 23:49 · in reply to wthyde

wthyde at godzilla.acpub.duke.edu wrote in message news:<yv7zeksbno1s.fsf at godzilla.acpub.duke.edu>...

David Kennedy <dave at dkennedy.org> writes:

Richard Horton <rrhorton at prodigy.net> wrote:

[Cecelia] Holland [h]as also written one unambiguous SF novel: *Floating Worlds*, from 1975 or so, set in a future in which the Solar System is pretty much fully colonized, and Earth is something of a backwater. An Earth woman gets involved in the rather gothic politics of some heavy planet folks. I liked it a lot, thought it read very much like Historical Fiction. It was nominated for a Nebula but Holland withdrew the nomination in favor of the paperback edition, with then did not get nominated.

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To me (way back in 1977) it seemed like an inferior rewrite of her novel "Until the sun falls", about the mongol empire (which I liked a great deal).

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William Hyde  
EOS Department  
Duke University

When I read it (many years ago) it seemed like a mirror image of Great Maria, which is my favorite of her novels. The events are parallel, but the meaning is reversed.

Peter Shor

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G Klinedinst — 03 Mar 2004, 00:08 · in reply to Josh

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:

<snip>

Josh,

I am not a regular here I just happened across this and wanted to see if I could clarify why some people, including myself, love Gene Wolfe(not in a Severian-Jolenta way). :-) First off with regards to hubris, I think you are judging a very large community on the basis of a few individuals. Gene Wolfe is far bigger than RASFW, just as we are all much larger than this NG too.

Of course, I really should offer support for this assertion. (Well, sudden realization anyway). Consider that the entire justification for Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview).

This was probably said half-jokingly. Many artists like to play with interviewers, especially with regards to the "cookie-cutter" questions they ask. I would take that with a grain of salt.

The plot, etc was  
laid on as thin veneer with elements sprinkled from Wolfe's  
extraordinarily broad knowledge of literature and myth, and mined with  
subtle puzzles that amused Wolfe. Taken on it's face, this series is  
muddled, conflicted, and unbelievable. Severian himself is never fleshed  
out.

I disagree 100%. Everything you could ever want to know about Severian is shown in his actions. I think this is the core problem why you are having these conflicting feelings about his writing. When I first read the \_New Sun\_ series I was boggled by Severian. Why doesn't he say,

"I was really sad when X happened", or "So and so really scared me", etc. I thought he had no emotions or else very little emotion, almost like a robot, or a poorly fleshed out character, as you suggest. Upon further readings and also quite a bit of reflection I realized that his actions speak louder than words ever could. He simply isn't introspective. You have to put yourself in Severian's place, imagine what you would feel, what you would think, etc. Gene Wolfe is the ultimate "show, don't tell" author. He hints at the motives and feelings of the characters but doesn't explicitly say them too often. Part of the fun and excitement about reading Gene Wolfe is trying to figure out all of the characters' motivations. I don't think when he writes like this he is trying to be difficult or obtuse because he is snotty, but more because he enjoys it and he knows that there are many fans out there that enjoy it.

That being said, Wolfe probably isn't for everyone. To continue an analogy someone made earlier, I know that Bach was a genius but I don't personally enjoy his music and I'm not going to try to force myself to. You are perfectly reasonable to not like Wolfe. All I'm saying is that there is something very wonderful there enjoyed by many people.

-Greg

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wthyde — 03 Mar 2004, 18:49 · in reply to Peter Shor

[re: Floating worlds]

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When I read it (many years ago) it seemed like a mirror image of Great Maria, which is my favorite of her novels. The events are parallel, but the meaning is reversed.

That's one of hers I have not read. Now to find a copy...

William Hyde  
EOS Department  
Duke University

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Ron Henry — 04 Mar 2004, 13:55 · in reply to G Klinedinst

Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:

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This was probably said half-jokingly. Many artists like to play with interviewers, especially with regards to the "cookie-cutter" questions they ask. I would take that with a grain of salt.

Well, I think Wolfe was sincere that he flashed on an image while thinking about costume balls at cons, and that this gave him ideas that led to the look of the torturers' guild -- but the real problem here is misrepresentation and overstatement by the original poster. To say that "the entire justification for Severian" was an idea for a "Halloween costume" is to grossly misrepresent Wolfe's comments. I read the interview he's referring to, and it's just a case of



when Wolfe got a germ of an idea that, over time, evolved into a character. Long consideration of that character, in turn, lead to Wolfe beginning the New Sun books.

To call this the "entire justification" blithely ignores Wolfe's obvious interest in classic sf motifs that he reworks within the series, his serious consideration of morality and good/evil dichotomies, and not least the curious twisting and re-fashioning of imagery and symbology from historical Christian sources that all help propel the narrative.

Ron Henry

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Mike Williams — 06 Mar 2004, 13:40 · in reply to jere7my tho?rpe

"jere7my tho?rpe" <j7y at liws.org> wrote in message news:j7y-80EFC8.02595529022004 at visionmassif.rs.itd.umich.edu...

In article <Xns949D9FE6F929Difyouwanttoemailvisi at 199.45.49.11>, Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote:

Rather than telling you flat-out that

< Big spoiler>

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Chris Thompson — 07 Mar 2004, 21:21 · in reply to Ron Henry

In article <c27chc\$6ac\$1 at news01.cit.cornell.edu>,

Ron Henry <ronhenry at blahblahblah.clarityconnectcom> wrote:  
Josh <if.you.want.to.email at visit.joshbrain.tripod.org> wrote in message news:

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Severian was that Wolfe wanted to write a character who would make a good halloween costume (this was revealed in an interview).

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Wolfe also tells the story about the masquerade in "Helioscope" (originally written for Empire, but reprinted in The Castle of the Otter). It needs to be read in context, of course. But perhaps the most relevant comment is Wolfe's own (also in TCotO):

GW> You've now read two quite different pieces describing the way in GW> which The Book of the New Sun came to be written. I wasn't lying GW> in either---writing's a complex process, and if I wanted to I could GW> do a third piece giving quite different explanations. They, also, GW> would be true.

Chris Thompson

Email: [cet1 \[at\] cam.ac.uk](mailto:cet1@cam.ac.uk)