

Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun

The Usenet list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 13 Dec 1982

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utah-gr!thomas — 13 Dec 1982, 01:12

I'm not sure I'd call it a "quest" story. It might be, in a sense, but Severian really doesn't know what he's looking for (if anything). Maybe he's searching for the meaning of life, I'm not sure.

Among the things which make the series great for me are the language and the wonderful description of a future/past world. Wolfe manages to evoke wonderfully clear images of the fantastic world in which Severian finds himself. You can feel the tremendous weight of the (mostly ignored, but everpresent) immense past history pressing down upon the people of his time. Everything has been done, forgotten, rediscovered, and forgotten again. The world is running down to an end (or, as he seems to hope, a new beginning). This background, developed only implicitly in places, provides a rich backdrop for the story. The storyline in the first book seems a little thin, but only because of the wealth of subplots it begins. There are no extraneous incidents recalled, no characters introduced as mere padding. It is a difficult book to read, the motives of the characters are frequently hidden or inexplicable and the description of some events are unexpectedly cut short. You have to read every word, or you risk missing something important. But, then, real life is often this way, also. The "Book of the New Sun" is Severian's memoirs, and, although he has perfect recall, he is still human, not omniscient, and can't know everything.

I'm not sure I would classify it as "sword and sorcery", there is very little sorcery, and what "sorcery" there is is really forgotten science. Severian certainly carries a sword, but members of the Autarch's guard carry advanced energy weapons. I'm not sure it's classifiable as anything except "Speculative Fiction", and only that because there is no other category which can hold it. It is definitely not the escapism that so much SF is - if you are to understand the book on more than a superficial level, you must think about it, be willing to ferret out that which is not said directly.

If you're not sure you will like it, borrow a copy from a friend, or the library. The first book is not the whole story, it was only published as a multi-volume set because the publishing industry will not put out a single book that long. (Except for Michener, of course.) By all means, though, give it another chance.

=Spencer