

The Knight by Gene Wolfe and his wonderful narrative technique

The Usenet list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 30 Oct 2005

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JavaJosh — 30 Oct 2005, 09:59

A marvelous book. In tone, style and character this was very similiar to The Book of the Long Sun. It is a story about a boy transported to a magical world, where he himself is transformed into a physically powerful man. As is Wolfe's wont, the story is told as if it were penned much later by the protagonist himself. That technique is what I'd like to talk about.

I very much like this style for it's dispassion. This narrative effect contrasts nicely with the action itself, which is often passionate. It encourages a distance which maximizes the reader's observational instincts, rather than immersive instincts.

In a sense, Wolfe's books are more intriguing for their voice than for their subject matter. In a first-person narrative the reader is much more entwined with the protagonist than with other schemes. After all, every word you read is of the protagonist. Therefore even when you read 'there was a chair' you know not only that there was a chair, but that the protagonist did not find anything much to say about it, and that for some reason it was worth noting that the chair was there. These small effects add up into a very complete character.

The downside to this technique is that the reader becomes very sensitive to mistakes. When inconsistent language is used, or the description becomes a bit too...authorly, it's hard not to see Gene Wolfe himself bleed through his protagonist. Luckily these mistakes are few and far between, perhaps more so in "The Knight" than in the previous Wolfe books that I've read.

A second and equally important characteristic of Wolfe's narrative is the implicit importance of language, and intentional speaking. Wolfe's narrators are often correcting themselves, carefully qualifying their statements, and generally being very deliberate with their speech. I strive to speak intentionally as well, and insofar as Wolfe shows how it could be done, he is writing a positive role-model. I very much appreciate that.

There is more I'd like to write about the story of The Knight but that will have to wait for another post. In the meantime, I hope that anyone reading this goes out and reads The Knight because it is as enjoyable as it is thought-provoking, has a good role model for a protagonist, and most importantly it's a lot of fun!

Howard Brazee — 30 Oct 2005, 19:16 · in reply to JavaJosh

How did you think The Wizard followed up?

I liked the way the universe was fleshed out, but didn't care so much for the people as much.

JavaJosh — 30 Oct 2005, 22:02 · in reply to Howard Brazee

Howard Brazee wrote:

How did you think *The Wizard* followed up?

I just started that, Howard. There is a 20 year subjective gap between the books, Abe is all grown up, and it shows in the tone. So far Abe sounds even more like Patera Silk of *The Book of the Long Sun* fame.