

THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH and THE CASTLE OF THE OTTER

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sdchema!donn — 11 Feb 1983, 01:23

Gene Wolfe's tetralogy THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN is now complete with the publication of THE CITADEL OF THE AUTARCH. CITADEL follows the ex-torturer Severian, shocked by his loss at the end of the previous volume (THE SWORD OF THE LICTOR), as he wanders northward and becomes embroiled in the war with the Ascians. It rapidly becomes apparent that the war is more than just a struggle for territory, but its full complexity does not become apparent until a series of not-quite- coincidences leads to Severian's accession to the position of Autarch of the realm. The book concludes with Severian's regal return to the Citadel in which he was born and raised as a torturer, where he resolves to attempt to bring forth the New Sun, just as the former Autarch tried to do, but failed. The book also explains more of the background to the peculiar Christian/Hindu mythology, and even provides a science-fictional rationale for some of it. All in all an excellent book and worth buying in hardcover (as I did). Most of the important threads of plot from the previous volumes are wrapped up, but alas we do not find out whether Severian succeeds in his final task; if this matters to you, then you will want to read the (projected) sequel THE URTH OF THE NEW SUN when it comes out.

If like me you would like to know even more about the world of THE BOOK OF THE NEW SUN, there is yet another book, THE CASTLE OF THE OTTER (Ziesing Bros.: Willimantic, Connecticut, 1982, 117pp.). The title of this book derives from a mistaken announcement of CITADEL in Locus magazine; Wolfe couldn't resist using the name because he knew the perfect epigram for it (from THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS). Wolfe explains why he wrote the book: "When a writer has the gall to do an entire book, even a very small one, about the writing of a previous book, it's more or less customary for him to announce that he's acting in response to innumerable and insistent demands. Unfortunately, I'm not... Why do it, then? Out of a sort of blind optimism. Every writer worth his two-cents-a-word hopes, in some little corner of his mind at least, that somewhere out there, there are a few people who will do more than read his book, pitch it away, and reach for the next one -- people who will read and reread, study the cover, perhaps, in search of some clue, shelve the book and later take it out again, just to hold. There was a time when I could put the palm of my hand flat on the front of a tattered paperback called THE DYING EARTH and feel the magic seeping through the cardboard: Turjan of Miir, Liane the Wayfarer, T'sais, Chun the Unavoidable. Nobody I knew had so much as heard of that book, but I knew it was the finest book in the world." Needless to say, THE DYING EARTH by Jack Vance and its sequel THE EYES OF THE OVERWORLD are among my absolute favorite books and there are more than a few similarities between NEW SUN and DYING EARTH... an interesting bit of trivia.

More trivia in THE CASTLE OF THE OTTER:

- * NEW SUN originated as an unpublished novella called THE FEAST OF SAINT CATHERINE.
- * The story grew from a novella to a novel to a trilogy to finally a tetralogy...
- * NEW SUN as a whole went through two drafts before the first

volume came out, in a situation not unlike THE LORD OF THE RINGS -- Wolfe wanted to be able to change the first book on the basis of plot events in the last book...

- * There is a chapter "Words Weird and Wonderful" that glosses all the strange words in THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER on a chapter by chapter basis.

- * There are also chapters on writing, on publishing, on warfare in Severian's time and also a chapter containing a set of jokes as told by various characters from NEW SUN.

Yours trivially,