

[blue, spoilers, read only when finished] First rants

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Sep 1999

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Dan Rabin — 27 Sep 1999, 22:50

I was going to send in a few comments last night after I finished reading _On Blue's Waters_, but somehow the awe prevented me. There is also Horn's expressed frustration that writing about something doesn't convey it--not even close. But this mailing list is a haven for those of us who must write about Wolfe's works anyhow, so here goes.

The craft! I just reread _The Lord of the Rings_, and I am reminded of a passage where Gandalf and Pippin are riding together impressively fast on Shadowfax. Then they see the war-beacons, and at Gandalf's urging Shadowfax **really** starts to pour it on.

Well, we thought Gene Wolfe was amazing before, but now...

Several matters of craft leap out at me on this initial reading.

There is, first of all, the intricate mode of narrative, in which Horn narrates his own story, but intermingles the retrospective mode of (most of) _New Sun_ with the journalistic mode of the _Soldier_ books and "Seven American Nights". There are thus two narratives in motion at once, and the narrator only knows (or thinks he knows) the outcome of one of them. It's all **so** smoothly done, but when I can escape the spell for a moment, it's rather astounding.

There is, secondly, the finely controlled progressive revelation of important events. Wolfe has always been good at this, but now he's got the technique polished like a praetorian's armor. How many little bits of narrative have to be added up to find out what happened aboard the lander? As this big denouement approaches, the intrusions of the Gaon narrative get longer! Seawrack, Krait, Sinew's reappearance are all mentioned before they happen.

Third, Wolfe passes all this astounding technique off as Horn's ineptness as a writer! **We** know that it's Gene-ius hard at work, but within the book's world it's Horn being bad at deciding what to write about and writing under considerable stress. The convoluted story-telling not only serves Wolfe's purposes by doling out events to us in the order and quantity he chooses, but also serves to characterize Horn!

Moving from the craft to content, I noticed that Wolfe's recurring motifs seem to have moved to a new level of maturity. Memory, truthfulness, what it is to be human, what it is to be good, all seem to be more subtly nuanced in _Blue_ even than in _Long Sun_. Mucor seemed to me to make a rather abrupt switch from creepy to good girl, but Wolfe seems to be able to keep his portrayal of Krait very balanced as he becomes more sympathetic.

Wolfe has a tendency to make his protagonists very, very observant; here he tones it down so that Horn's recognition of Auk's lander can stand out.

Other motifs that recur here: A book that the narrator doesn't expect to be read, confusion of identity (Horn/Silk/Babbie), resurrection (Horn says he has died), traveler with a shifting set of

companions, protagonist committed to a hopeless goal (cf. Silk vs. Blood), protagonist in authority skips out early (Severian in Thrax, Horn/Silk in Gaon), and more.

And now on to plot and theme.

The pre-publication capsule reviews dwelled perhaps too long on the reasons why Horn is asked to undertake his quest. As Horn realizes, it was all just a McGuffin; clearly what matters is that the Vironese have an unresolved relationship with Silk. Following the lead of *_Long Sun_*, the quest is Not What It Seems. We've already heard from David Hartwell that the surprises just increase in the later volumes.

What we *_do_* know is that a narrator who usually believes himself to be Horn, but has had a death/resurrection episode (possibly the pit on the island, possibly not) has returned to Blue physically changed (taller, not bald), and has declined to return to New Viron. This narrator believes he has failed in his quest. My guess would be that he will turn out to have actually succeeded in bringing Silk in some way that neither he nor we can understand at this point, and that this may be the reason for the complicated mode of narrative: so that the big final surprise can be in the *_later_* story. If I'm right (not likely, when dealing with Wolfe), the effect should be a bit like having *_The Urth of the New Sun_* intermingled with *_The Book of the Long Sun_*.

Then there's the matter of the inhumi. I find Wolfe's treatment to be very refreshing in this age of vampire chic. I will be **very** disappointed if we don't eventually get a full explanation of the secret that Krait revealed to Horn.

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It has just occurred to me that the narrative structure of *_Blue_* has something in common with the *_Odyssey_*, in which the famous adventures, told in retrospect, are followed by a laborious homecoming. There are also the wife left at home and the son who sails in search of the missing father, monsters, and a siren to consider! [I had to go flip through the *_Odyssey_* to see if I recalled its structure correctly.]

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So, do they find Auk and Chenille on Green? Where is Silk that is dangerous to approach? Mainframe? (that tantalizing compound "Passilk"). Will Horn/Silk bring Olivine's eye to Maytera Marble/Rose? Will Patera Remora ever finish a sentence? Must we wait a year to get our next ration of answers and questions? Ah! cruel Whorl!

-- Dan Rabin

P.S. If we count *_New Sun_* and *_Long/Short Sun_* as the same universe, Wolfe will have devoted twelve books to this universe by the end of *_Short Sun_*. That's certainly not a record for science fiction, but it's very impressive considering the quality.

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's *Book of the Long Sun*.