

Wolfe's New Sun

Claw of the Conciliator is the second volume of a tetralogy-in-progress, *The Book of the New Sun*, which already seems assured of classic status within the subgenre of science fantasy. This alone would be faint praise, for science fantasy is a doubtful sort of hybrid in which the more decorative elements of science fiction proper—*Star Wars* hardware, dinosaurs, apemen, etc.—cohabit with the traditional chimeras of myth and legend. Characteristically, writers of science fantasy set wind-up heroes in quest of some grail across a bedragoned landscape quite as though Cervantes had not long since laughed picaresque romance off the literary map. Even when practiced by writers I ordinarily admire—Ursula LeGuin, Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss—science fantasy strikes me as inauthentic, coy, and trivial—circus costumery and paste diamonds, the lot of it.

Insofar as it is possible to judge any tetralogy by its first two volumes, *The Book of the New Sun* is a vast exception to that rule. Gene Wolfe has managed to do what no science fantasy author has done heretofore—he's produced a work of art that can satisfy adult appetites and in which even the most fantastical elements register as poetry rather than as penny-whistle whimsy. Furthermore, he's done this without in any way sacrificing the showmanship and splashy colors that augur a popular success. Quite a balancing act, as Wolfe notes himself in passing, when, toward the end of the first novel of the series, *The Shadow of a Torturer*, the narrator, Severian, an apprentice in the guild of torturers, relates a tale he was told in his school days

of a certain Master Werenfrid of our guild who in olden times, being in grave need, accepted remuneration from the enemies of the condemned and from his friends as well; and who by stationing one party on the right of the block and the other on the left, by his great skill made it appear to each that the result was entirely satisfactory. In just this way the contending parties of tradition pull at the writers of histories. . . . One desires ease; the other, richness of experience in the execution . . . of the writing.

Review of *Claw of the Conciliator* and *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, by Gene Wolfe.

One could not ask for a tidier summing up of Wolfe's own achievement as an author—so long as one places the emphasis on “experience” rather than “richness” in the last phrase. Richness of imaginary detail is all too easily come by in a universe of unicorns and dragons: no sooner is one peril surmounted than Fancy, like the hydra, supplies a pair in its stead. But experience—in the sense of relevance to a real life intensely lived—is precisely what escapist fantasies are escaping from. In allegorical fantasies (and science fantasy is, in its nature, allegorical) it is only possible to achieve intensity and depth if each of the individual elements of the fantasy—the swords, ogres, magic jewels—bears a weight of meditated meaning that intensifies and deepens as the tale progresses (in the manner, say, of Wagner's Ring cycle). In most hands, these props are deployed with the artless caprice of children trimming a tree with their family's heritage of Christmas ornaments. Wolfe, however, is a Wagnerian, not a tree trimmer; his allegory actually has something to say, and it is said with art, acuity, wisdom, and wit.

At the risk of compressing it into extinction, I would submit that Wolfe's central theme is the nature of political authority and the use of terror as a necessary means to secure social stability in any society (but especially ours). “Here the master and I do our business still,” says Severian, as he pantomimes his trade as torturer in a masque performed at the Autarch's court. “We do it still, and that's why the Commonwealth stands.” This cannot be said to be his last word on the subject; rather, the first—the subject up for debate. Here at the center of the labyrinth it is impossible to second-guess the outcome of that debate, but that it will be satisfying can scarcely be doubted.

This is not to say that the web is flawless. I doubt that any tetralogy has ever been written in which the second volume didn't come off as second-best. There are chapters in *Claw of the Conciliator* that venture perilously close to pulp magazine hugger-mugger, and other chapters—one long interpolated masque, in particular—that are too archly Significant, after the manner of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*. (Wilder is a writer whom Wolfe resembles in other, and happier, respects.)

The acclaim and attention that *The Book of the New Sun* is winning among both critics and readers should further consolidate the reputation of Gene Wolfe as a writer of short fiction. Eighteen of his stories are assembled in *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, a collection that aspires to unity by the doubtful device of matching separate tales to national holidays: for Lincoln's Birthday a story about the reintroduction of slavery as a solution to the problem of overcrowded prisons; for Valentine's Day a whimsy about computer matchmaking; and so on through the calendar.

Actually, the stories suit their occasions fairly well, but sometimes I suspected that Wolfe was dipping toward the bottom of the barrel in order to accommodate his format. Even so, there are many first-rate stories, most notably the selection for Labor Day, "Forleson," a novella in which all the morose absurdities of a life devoted to middle-management job dissatisfactions are compressed into one day of high-speed, low-keyed nightmare.

A parting word concerning these books as items of commerce. Timescape Books has seen fit to wrap *Claw of the Conciliator* in a cover so lurid that only confirmed fans who have passed beyond shame will dare to be seen taking it from a bookshelf. The book itself is handsomely produced. By contrast, Doubleday (all too typically) disdains the decorums and amenities of book publishing so arrogantly that it might more honestly dispense the typesetting and binding altogether and simply market Xerox copies of its author's manuscript. Gene Wolfe deserves better, and so does anyone who pays ten dollars for a book.