

The Greatest Sci-Fi Writer You've Never Heard Of

A brief swim through Gyll for the uninitiated

I'm not entirely sure the title is appropriate, not because of my concern regarding whether you've heard of Gene Wolfe before but more so because I'm not entirely sure his magnum opus discussed below, *The Book of the New Sun*, is purely sci-fi. Some stand by my choice of words while others call it a fantasy story set in a sci-fi world. I've even come across it being called 'science fantasy' and this might be the best way to describe Wolfe's work. But I digress.

As you've deduced by now, Gene Wolfe is the greatest sci-fi/fantasy/science fantasy writer that I've declared you've never heard of — and if you can contest this claim, the chances of you having read his work are even slimmer. The giants of these worlds — Tolkein, Lewis, Asimov, Clarke, and so on — are widely appreciated, for good reason, and known even by those outside these genres. It wouldn't be farfetched to say that these are names known by most, whether you are a voracious reader or haven't picked up a non-textbook since school.

Wolfe, on the other hand has a seemingly dedicated fan base outside of which most readers have seem to forgotten his mastery over prose and world building. He's probably your favourite writer's favourite writer (an idiom I feel compelled to steal from Sasha Colby) and it's time you discovered his genius.

Urth: The Beginning of the End

I found Wolfe's tetralogy, *The Book of the New Sun*, which follows the life of a torturer's apprentice named Severian, in a second hand bookstore. The premise of the series and the cover art by [Don Maitz](#) grabbed my attention enough for me to buy the whole set. Expecting nothing more than a good old fantasy read, I began by journey into Urth, a world at the brink of death.

The first book in the series, *The Shadow of the Torturer*, reads as pure fantasy except for minor details that seem displaced. When I first read the book, a few years ago, I struggled to get through it — not due to of a lack of interest but because how hard a read it was. The reader is thrown headfirst into the world and Wolfe's prose is intentionally filled with archaic words that are consistently presented without any context. Even when there is an understanding of the world that develops over the chapters, Wolfe drowns you in even more world-building that is oddly reminiscent of the past with confusing hints of futuristic phenomena. While Severian grows up surrounded by citadel towers and witches he never meets he also discovers the existence of a tiny cube that holds the entire world's library within it. While the citizens of his home city, Nessus, roam around in carriages pulled by strange beasts there are those more fortunate who soar above in their *ships*.

Urth is magical not only because of the supernatural that seems to follow Severian through his journey but also because it's a testament to layered storytelling. As frustrated as I was during my first read of the book, it was twice as enticing on my second try as things started falling in place — something I have to entirely credit the podcast, [Alzabo Soup](#) for. I wouldn't suggest listening to them on your first read though — the joy of discovering Wolfe's genius may get watered down. Regardless of how you go about it, you soon realise that *The Book of the New Sun* is not just about Severian's story but a metaphor for the entire world of love, memory, kinship, loyalty and faith.

Wolfe is an expert at describing his world in detail without it ever coming across as heavy handed exposition. Urth is as comforting as it is alien, as wondrous as it is cumbersome.

Memory: A Flawed Hero

Severian is an unreliable narrator, if there ever has been one. He confidently proclaims from the first chapter that he has a perfect memory, a *fact* he wants to drill into the reader's mind. It becomes clear soon enough that he is also a liar of sorts, or desperate at least — after all the quartet of books is his autobiography in a foreign language from the future, translated to modern English by Wolfe himself. Severian has an agenda, this much is clear even when nothing else is. At the end of the first chapter Severian lets the reader know that he is now the Autarch, the ruler of his land, and the books are a personal, historical documentation of his own life. When he repeatedly fails to recount incidents in the following chapters it becomes clear that either he is trying to hide something from the reader or he is just not a great liar. He is charming though, very much so and his fallacies only often become apparent on rereads.

Wolfe hasn't made Urth easy to navigate and has applied the same philosophy to his protagonist — Severian is a great one, but not the perfect hero. He is deeply flawed, misogynistic and repeatedly saved by chance as opposed to taking charge of life with logic and reasoning. He is often guided by impulse or lust and yet manages to wade through some dire situations with ease. Wolfe doesn't want you to root for him blindly and employs this perfectly.

Philosophy: The Hidden Treasure

Through the actions of Severian and the others in the books, Wolfe also muses on the workings of the world. These are as universal to us as to the strange cyborgs and aliens inhabiting Urth. When Wolfe goes off on seeming tangents talking about symbols and dreams, they can come across as a side-step from the main storyline but they're so good that I don't really mind them. It's not true to describe them as such though as they always manage to weave a tapestry of the characters' true nature.

These aren't just ramblings about life thrown into the story, they are meditated thoughts infused into a tale of cryptic nomads. They just so happen to be some of the best philosophical reflections I've come across in sci-fi.

Legacy

Wolfe has been cited as one of their favourite writers by giants in the world like Neil Gaiman, Ursula K Le Guin, George R R Martin, Patrick Rothfuss and Neil Stephenson and yet seems to have eluded the mass readership of sci-fi and fantasy. His intense prose and inherent requirement for multiple readings of his works may be off putting to some and probably the main reason I can think of for the lack of his deserved popularity.

It's worth it though. Every single word is.

Often while most writers choose spectacle over substance, Wolfe has managed to retain both. Scarcely do I think of a book for more than a week after I've read it. *The Shadow of the Torturer* though has surpassed all levels of personal obsession. I've now spent more time listening, watching and reading about the book than actually reading the book itself. I'm currently reading the *The Claw of the Conciliator*, the sequel to *Torturer*, and the world has only continued to dazzle and impress.

I admit Wolfe's work isn't for everyone. But when it does scratch that itch you didn't know you had, there's nothing more satisfying.

