The Distant Suns of Gene Wolfe

John Farrell

Lots of novel readers—from the highest brow to the lowest—nod politely when the science-fiction writer Gene Wolfe is mentioned. But even among science-fiction fans, one gets the sense that they're saying, "Yes, yes, we know how good he is, but we'd rather talk about such bestselling authors as Neil Gaiman or Robert Jordan, Laurel Hamilton or Neal Stephenson." As Glenn Reynolds, the inveterate science-fiction enthusiast and popular blogger of Instapundit.com, recently wrote, "Gene Wolfe is a superb writer, but I'm not crazy about his story-telling." I recently asked a veteran New York editor whether Wolfe could find a publisher today if he were just coming along as a young writer. "Probably not," she admitted. His writing is too religious, too difficult, and too strange.

Both the *Soldier* cycle and the *Book of the New Sun* series reveal the problem and the promise of Gene Wolfe. The *New Sun* series, for instance, takes place in a world more than a million years in the future, where artifacts of Christ still have healing power, while the *Soldier* novels chronicle the life of a mercenary bedeviled by gods and goddesses in the Mediterranean world a few centuries before the birth of Jesus.

The Book of the New Sun started out as a long novella and rapidly grew to a four-volume science-fiction tour de force. The hero, Severian, is a lictor—a professional torturer—whose entire life has been dedicated to the infliction of agony. "It has been remarked thousands of times," Wolfe once said, "that Christ died under torture. Many of us have read so often that he was 'a humble carpenter' that we feel a little surge of nausea on seeing the words yet again. But no one ever seems to notice that the instruments of torture were wood, nails, and a hammer; that the man who built the cross was undoubtedly a carpenter too; that the man who hammered in the nails was as much a carpenter as a soldier, as much a carpenter as a torturer. Very few seem even to have noticed that although Christ was a 'humble carpenter,' the only object we are specifically told he made was not a table or a chair, but a whip."

Or, as Severian puts it in *The Book of the New Sun:*

> Memory oppresses me. Having been reared among the torturers, I have never known my father or my mother. No more did my brother apprentices know theirs. From time to time, but most particularly when winter draws on, poor wretches come clamoring to the Corpse Door, hoping to be admitted to our ancient guild. Often they regale Brother Porter with accounts of the torments they will willingly inflict in payment for warmth and food; occasionally they fetch animals as samples of their work.
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> All are turned away. Traditions from our days of glory . . . forbid recruitment from such as they. Even at the time I write of, when the guild had shrunk to two masters and less than a score of journeymen, those traditions were honored.

It is a familiar charge of modern atheism that the existence of pain argues against the existence of God. "For some time it has seemed to me," Wolfe insists, "that it would be even easier to maintain the position that pain proves or tends to prove God's reality." The tale of Severian, apprentice to the Order of Saint

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Katharine of the Seekers for Truth and Penitence, is the tale of a man reared in the state-sponsored infliction of physical agony who comes to discover over his life's adventures that the power of pain ultimately points to something deeper. Expelled from his own guild when he shows mercy to one of their "clients," he is sent into exile as a disgrace to his guild. His adventures lead him to the estate of an order of religious women from whom he unwittingly comes into possession of an ancient relic, called the Claw of the Conciliator.

Unaware of its seemingly magical powers, Severian comes to realize that he can sometimes—not always—heal people with a touch from the glowing artifact. Only gradually does it become revealed to the reader that the Claw is believed to be a relic of Christ, the Conciliator, also known as the New Sun, who will one day return, bringing not only peace but a rebirth of the dwindling red orb in Urth's daylight sky. Severian eventually returns to the Guild from which he has been exiled, assumes the throne of the Commonwealth, and silences the machines of torture.

Gene Wolfe was born in 1931 in Brooklyn, but his family moved often. He did not settle in one place until he was ten; Texas became his home for the next fourteen years. He dropped out of Texas A & M in 1952 and was drafted and fought as an infantryman in the Korean War before returning to earn his bachelor's in mechanical engineering at the University of Houston. Along the way, he married a girl he had known since he was four years old and converted to Catholicism.

About his conversion, Wolfe says: "I was raised in a rather lax fashion as a Presbyterian. I don't think my father had any particular religious convictions. My mother had been raised as a Presbyterian and so I was nominally a Presbyterian. It was largely an answer to give when people asked you. . . . I married a Roman Catholic and had to take instruction in it in order that we could have a Catholic wedding. . . . I became interested in it, read and studied, and talked to people about it and so forth, and eventually converted. . . . I didn't read a lot of theology. . . . I read Chesterton's book on St. Thomas Aquinas . . . and ended up reading everything of Chesterton's that I could find. I had gone through very much the same thing earlier with C.S. Lewis."

While working for Proctor and Gamble, Wolfe helped design the machine that makes the well-known Pringles potato chip. He left the company after sixteen years, however, to become an editor for *Plant Engineering* magazine, where he worked until 1981. He had been writing and publishing short stories since the mid-1960s (including a long-forgotten short novel called *Operation Ares*). In 1973, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* got him notice among his peers in science fiction. In 1975, Harper published *Peace*, his first and, to date, only mainstream novel (also one of his personal favorites), about a wealthy old man who builds museum-style rooms in his mansion to match the rooms from houses of his past life.

The Book of the New Sun is considered Wolfe's signature work. But shortly after chronicling Severian's adventures in the world a million years after Christ, Wolfe looked back to the past, creating a different soldier on the opposite end of the historical timeline, set in the world prior to the rise of Christianity.

Soldier of the Mist (1986), *Soldier of Arete* (1989), and the newest installment, *Soldier of Sidon* (2006), begin with the same contrivance: an archeological discovery, an ancient scroll, with an introduction by Wolfe posing as translator.

> About two years ago, an urn containing scrolls of papyrus, all apparently unused, was found behind a collection of Roman lyres in the basement of the British Museum. . . . After passing through several hands, they became the property of a Mr. D___ A___, a dealer and collector in Detroit. He got the notion that something might be concealed on the sticks on which the papyrus was wound and had them X-rayed. The X-rays showed them to be solid; but they also showed line after line of minute characters on the sheet (technically the *protokollon*) gummed to each stick. Sensing himself on the verge of a discovery of real bibliotic importance, he examined a scroll under a powerful lens and found that all its sheets were covered on both sides with minute gray writing, which the personnel of the museum, and of Sotheby's, had apparently taken for dust smears. Spectrographic analysis has established that the writing instrument was a sharp "pencil" of metallic lead. Knowing my interest in dead languages, the owner has asked me to provide this translation.

Each of the novels opens with Latro telling the reader: "I am to write everything that takes place on this scroll, as concisely as I can. I will try. I must read this every morning, too." The scroll is Latro's key to his identity and our key to piecing together what happens to him throughout his adventures. Every night sleep wipes away in his mind the events and meetings of the previous day, so from day to day he is dependent on the daily journal he keeps.

Latro's adventures take place immediately after the battle of Plataea, in which the armies of Athens and Sparta repulsed the invasion of Xerxes in 479 B.C. A Roman in the service of the Persian emperor, Latro is actually named Lucius, but he has forgotten this. He finds himself a prisoner among the victorious Greeks,

recovering from the head wound that has cost him much of his memory. He is a slave, with companions such as Io, a young slave girl, and an African warrior who becomes one of his most reliable friends. Latro makes friends with others as well (some of whom will be familiar to anyone who has read the *Histories* of Herodotus) as he makes his way through the Athens and Sparta of the Persian Wars, trying to find his way back to his wife and home in Italy.

Latro's wound has not only damaged his memory but also touched him in some way, giving him occasional access to the world of spirits and gods—or so his friends believe, because he reports interactions with the deities, coming and going almost as prosaically as the people he meets every day. Thus, for example, in *Soldier of Sidon*, the captain of an Egyptian ship takes Latro to the shrine of the goddess Hathor, where he will procure a wife for himself to accompany him on the trip.

> "Hathor was wet-nurse to Osiris," the priest explained. "We give animal heads to many of our gods to illustrate their honor and authority. You foreigners are frequently puzzled by it, wishing your gods to be like yourselves. Hathor is not like us, but a mighty divinity. It is Hathor who feeds the dead and governs love and family. . . ."
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> I heard no more. A horned woman taller than any man had stepped from behind the image of the goddess. As she strode toward us, it seemed that some other held a lamp behind her, so that her whole form was outlined with light, although her smiling face was shadowed. "You go into danger, foreign man," she told me. "Do you wish my help? You may have it at a price."
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> I wanted to kneel but felt I could not. My body was still standing next to Muslak. "I need your help very much, Great Goddess, but I have nothing to give but my sword."

Before Latro's vision fades, the goddess asks him to protect her "kitten" in return for her favor. When Latro sees that one of the women being shown to the captain bears a clasp on her headband in the shape of a cat, Latro asks his commander to procure her for him as well. In Latro, the deities could not have found a more guileless target: "I like this young scribe. He is eager to teach, yet very ready to learn. Not many men are like that. I cannot know whether he is brave or not, for Myt-ser'eu says we have not known him long and there has been no fighting. Yet his eyes say he is, and what is better yet, that he does not know it. I would rather have him at my side than most men. Surely his god must favor him! What god would not favor such a priest?"

Latro's openness allows him to make friends of more-honorable warriors, even those who oppose him at first. But it also makes him easy prey for the gods who take advantage of his honor for their own ends. The constant interference of the deities—sometimes in his favor, sometimes not—plagues Latro, and in moments of despair he more than once considers suicide, although his soldier's code prevents him. His hopelessness and death wish could be interpreted as the state of mankind before the Incarnation: honorable, well-meaning, but also despairing, mired in ignorance and darkness and desperate for salvation. But Wolfe cannot be accused of such straightforward allegory. The novels are too dense with the details of history.

In *Soldier of Sidon*, for example, Latro joins the expedition of a Phoenician sailing up the Nile to explore the region below Egypt for the Persian satrap Achaemenes, who has ruled the country since the Persians conquered it. Like its earlier installments, *Soldier of Sidon* reads like a fictional travelogue through ancient Egypt—an Egypt that more than two thousand years ago was already ancient—and Latro, with his new wife at his side, marvels at the many sights.

> The city [Mennufer/Memphis] is noisy and crowded, exciting but tiring, particularly when one goes from shop to shop in the jeweler's quarter. The streets are narrow, and the buildings crowded together like men. The floor on the street is always a shop. There are other things above, and Myt-ser'eu says sometimes these are finer shops for the rich. This inn has a cookshop on the street—it was where we ate—and rooms for rent above. The highest are best and cost most. The walls at the street are very thick, as they must be to support so many levels above them. This keeps the lower levels cool, while the wind and a thick roof cool the upper levels.
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> Myt-ser'eu wants to buy cosmetics tomorrow. She says that she may only look at them and we may buy nothing, but I am not so young as to believe it. She also says that her own city, called Sais, was the capital of Kemet [Egypt] long ago. Now the satrap rules from here, and she is glad. She would not wish him and all his foreign soldiers in her city. I am a foreign soldier myself—so I read. Yet Myt-ser'eu left Sais with me. No one can know the heart of a woman.

When Latro first boards the riverboat, he sees that one of the passengers, a magician, has created for himself the waxen image of a beautiful woman he can call to life at will. Her fleeting appearances terrify the crew, for she seems to be a sort of golem or vampire. She appears only at night, and throughout the novel the reader wonders whether Latro, in an unguarded moment, will allow himself to be tricked by her into

exposing his mistress to danger; despite her seductive approach to Latro, the demon woman clearly wants the blood of the girl.

As the story progresses, the adventurers decide to detour in order to save the son of one of the higher-born Egyptian passengers who is held captive by Nubians. Latro leads an expedition to free the young man, only to be caught by their adversaries—and lose his sword in the process.

Since his sword is his honor, Latro is close to despair. The captives are eventually purchased and freed when the king of Nysa recognizes Latro from their adventures in Greece and embraces him as a brother. In the end, it is Latro's fierce adherence to his soldier's code and his desire to recover his lost sword that allow him to escape the dangers that beset him. *Soldier of Sidon* closes with Latro's entries becoming more and more disjointed as he wanders through Egypt hunting for his sword. Myt-ser'eu, who clearly loves him, doggedly pursues the Roman throughout the country and comes to his aid, but we are left with the lone soldier as lost—if not more so—as when the novel began.

The subjection of men to the whim of gods is a theme Wolfe has worked with in several other novels, and not always successfully. *There Are Doors* (1988) focuses on the plight of a mental patient who believes the goddess Aphrodite has persisted into the modern era; but the novel, told in a detached third-person voice, seems strained and rigged like an elaborate game. Another, *Castleview* (1990), projects the legendary figures of the Grail saga into a Chicago suburb with more success, although it, too, lacks the unifying force of a first-person narrator and threatens to collapse under the weight of its too-large cast. *Soldier of Sidon* returns Wolfe to his more confident first-person style.

The *Soldier* novels have not been as widely read as *The Book of the New Sun.* This seems odd, as they are more accessible, with a historical setting that is less mysterious to the average reader than that of his science-fiction saga of the Urth of the New Sun. It may be that in the long run they will represent Wolfe's most enduring work. Consider passages such as this:

> A man's life is indeed short, ending in death. If it were long, his days would be of small value. If there were no death, of none. Let him fill each day with honor and joy. Let him not condemn himself or another, for he does not know the laws of his existence or theirs. If he sleeps in death, let him sleep. If while sleeping he should meet a god, he must let the god decide how well or ill he lived.
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> The god he meets must rule upon a man's life, never the man himself.

That last sentence, and its note of defiance, perhaps hints at what the man of the ancient world was ready for on the eve of the Incarnation: a true deity who would come to judge a man's life without tyrannizing the man himself. FT

The Argument

Our priest exulted, "How wonderful His ways,"
then climbed his pulpit's Calvary. The tide,
lit by the after-dawn had brimmed the bay's
calm space, reflecting light on the roof inside.
What boy, by a choir-loft window, could resist
turning to look? A seal swam round a trawler
whose lantern-masts were moored above in mist,
and rippled sparkling water-lap down all her
salt-rust length. Past diesel pumps and dock,
the sun unpicked the nets by the fish-house door
as I watched the seal clamber on Pollock's Rock.
The mist had almost dissolved and a green pour
of ocean swelled and turned by the harbour stair
while the priest struggled, explaining God's design,
and the seal shook his watered quiff of hair,
slicked down for Sunday morning, just like mine.

—Oliver Murray