

The Shadow of the Torturer

Gene Wolfe, 1980

>> Jon Courtenay Grimwood interrogates a sublime science fantasy.

All novels are fantasies. Some are more honest about it..."

Discuss.

Only, if you're Gene Wolfe, you don't have to discuss, you simply state. But life isn't that simple. The quote above might be Gene Wolfe talking about Neil Gaiman, but often the words quoted as Wolfe's are actually those of his characters.

"We say 'I will' and 'I will not' and imagine ourselves... our own masters, when the truth is our masters are sleeping."

Who knows if those are also Wolfe's thoughts? Come to that, who knows if they're the real thoughts of his main characters? Since these often lie to themselves, to other characters, and to the reader (whom they frequently address directly.)

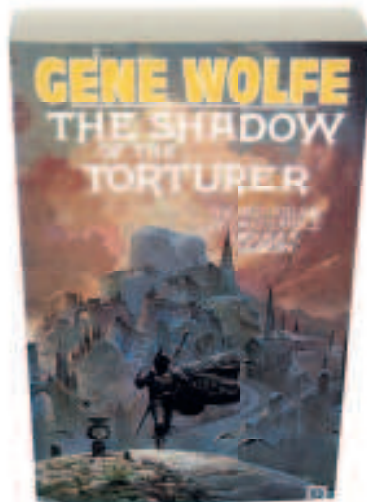
When Gene Wolfe published *The Shadow of the Torturer* in 1980 he was senior editor on *Plant Engineering* magazine, had written a hundred or so SF short stories and won a Nebula in 1973 for "The Death of Doctor Island". But nothing prepared readers for what was to come.

The Shadow of the Torturer is – for me at least – the definitive science fantasy novel. No-one did it better before Wolfe, and no-one has done it better since... Including Gene Wolfe himself. From their richly textured world where ancient spaceships nestle as turrets in castles so old no-one can remember why they were built, to their casual depiction of torture as everyday business, the novels making up *The Book of the New Sun* – of which *Shadow* is the first – are brilliant monsters. Anguished, imagery-laden, and brilliant. But monstrous.

This is Catholic guilt meshed with the dying days of our world. A retelling of the Christ myth, by someone who knows its absolute truth. Or maybe it's a retelling of the Apollo myth, with its pun on son/sun...

There are some basic rules to writing.

- 1) Make your main character likeable.
- 2) Don't muddle your readers.
- 3) Avoid flashbacks.
- 4) If you must have flashbacks, signpost them (for example: "London in 1983 was a very different place").



No-one did the science fantasy novel better before, and no-one has done it better since.

5) Don't foreshadow and give away what will happen later.

Tutors recite these as if reading from tablets of stone. Critics praise or damn based on how many are obeyed or broken. Gene Wolfe ignores them.

His main character is an apprentice torturer; the story slides backwards and forwards in time, told by an insane future emperor (think *I Claudius*); and we know what's going to happen next, because most of the time we're told in advance.

Shadow of the Torturer kicks off with the drowning and resurrection of Severian, its main character, flashes back, and then loops forward to a grave robbery, with the lightly decaying

body of a woman being stolen by an aristocrat. No attempt is made to explain who people are, why they're doing what they're doing or even the geographical location the action is taking place. The language is dense, almost biblical.

In the first nine pages we're given an inkling, but no more, of the politics and class underlying a world that is both past and future, fantastical and bound by the laws of science. Yet we know the world runs to rules, without knowing what the rules are. Because the first rule of world building is make it real, and Gene Wolfe's world seems so real it extends beyond the edges of the page.

Volume one of *The Book of the New Sun* won the World Fantasy Award and the British Science Fiction Award. Volume two won a Nebula and was shortlisted for the Hugo, while volumes three and four were both nominated for a Nebula, with the third being nominated for another Hugo.

Most novels can be pinned down to their time. *The War of the Worlds* is obviously late Victorian; *Neuromancer* is an obvious response to Reaganomics. *The Shadow of the Torturer* could have been written in 1960 or it could have been written last year. It is one man's vision of redemption. As personal as a painting by Hieronymus Bosch.

(And yes, I know it owes a debt to Jack Vance's *The Dying Earth*, which turns up in Severian's world as *The Book of Gold*. It's what Wolfe did with the inspiration that makes it so unusual.) **SFX**

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's most recent novel, *End of the World Blues*, has been nominated for both Arthur C Clarke and BSFA awards for best novel. Nice one, Jon!

Like this? Try these!

The Book of the New Sun: Parts two to four by Gene Wolfe (1981-1983)

The Claw of the Conciliator, *The Sword of the Lictor*, and *The Citadel of the Autarch* make up the other three volumes of *The Book of the New Sun*.



The Blade Itself Joe Abercrombie (2006)

Features Inquisitor Glokta, also disturbingly well versed in the art of torture, who can shorten a man's arm from fingers to elbow in neat little slices (nice!)



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>> "I like how Wolfe has made an unsympathetic character someone you can empathise with; he comes across as thoughtful, moral and loyal. It's one of those books I re-read and keep finding new things in it." **Barsoon**

>> "I hate Gene Wolfe books. I read the whole *Book of the New Sun*, I've read *Peace*, which I barely understood, and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* I wanted to throw in a lake." **Clown Asylum**

>> "What impresses me most is Wolfe's use of language. Using obscure, historic or obsolete vocabulary to describe his future Earth contributes to the alien nature of a world in decline." **blessedarethegeek**

>> "It was so dreadfully dull, the characters weren't likeable and it was just really blah... I shan't be reading anything else by Gene Wolfe." **Cally5000**

>> "I have to thank SFX for putting me onto this – I've loved *Shadow of the Torturer*. It's a relief to come across a genuine anti-hero, not just a cypher that the writer makes so unlikeable that you can't engage with him" **ottie**

>> "Slow ain't it? It's engaging, and the world is interesting, but I can feel my beard growing." **org**

>> "A bit dull – plenty of atmosphere but not a lot happening. I haven't gone back for the other three..." **johntoon**

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