



# Shadow & Claw

*Gene Wolfe*

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*The Book of the New Sun* is unanimously acclaimed as Gene Wolfe's most remarkable work, hailed as "a masterpiece of science fantasy comparable in importance to the major works of Tolkien and Lewis" by *Publishers Weekly*, and "one of the most ambitious works of speculative fiction in the twentieth century" by *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. *Shadow & Claw* brings together the first two books of the tetralogy in one volume:

*The Shadow of the Torturer* is the tale of young Severian, an apprentice in the Guild of Torturers on the world called Urth, exiled for committing the ultimate sin of his profession -- showing mercy toward his victim.

*The Claw of the Conciliator* continues the saga of Severian, banished from his home, as he undertakes a mythic quest to discover the awesome power of an ancient relic, and learn the truth about his hidden destiny.

## Shadow & Claw Details

Date : Published October 15th 1994 by Orb Books

ISBN : 9780312890179

Author : Gene Wolfe

Format : Paperback 413 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Science Fiction, Fiction, Science Fiction Fantasy

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# From Reader Review Shadow & Claw for online ebook

## Grace says

I must say that when I picked up the book I was not expecting this. Assassin's guild sounds interesting, but it was the worst book I have ever read.

The world Gene Wolfe created is great, but the characters...Bleck. Severian is just this random kid who falls in love with every single woman he sees; I thought it was so stupid that I continued on with the story. Now, I don't know why I wasted my time.

What was with the greenhouse that took up most of the book? And the flower to fight people with, what is that?

A friend of mine also read the book and we can't stop laughing about it!

So if you want to read a book that's so stupid it's funny, this would be a good one.

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## Dan Schwent says

**The Shadow of the Torturer:** Apprentice torturer Severian shows mercy for an imprisoned woman and helps her commit suicide rather than endure weeks of torture. For his crimes, Severian is sentenced to travel too the village of Thrax and take up the post of carnifex. Will Severian make it to Thrax alive?

The Shadow of the Torturer isn't your grandmother's fantasy. The tale of Severian isn't the hopeful quest story that's been written and re-written umpteen times in the past fifty years. The setting reminds me of Jack Vance's Dying Earth but much more developed and with the specter of space opera hanging in the background. Gene Wolfe takes the bare bones of the standard quest story and clothes it with literary merit, from the unreliable narrator, Severian, to references to classic works. The scene in the necropolis near the beginning is straight out of Great Expectations. Or straight out of Great Expectations if Pip was an apprentice torturer and helped Magwitch in a fight rather than fetch him a file...

Wolfe's writing is baroque and reminds me of the New Weird authors like China Mieville. The Book of the New Sun definitely isn't a beach read. Be prepared to divine the meaning of words from the context.

Apart from Severian, the cast isn't all that developed, but then, the unreliable narrator should probably be the center of attention. Dr. Talos and Baldanders steal the show with what little screen time they're given.

That's about all I can say without giving too much away. The world Wolfe has built is full of fresh ideas. How many other books do you know that feature two men fighting with flowers with razor sharp leaves?

**The Claw of the Conciliator:** Severian's journey to Thrax continues and his path brings him into contact with both friend and foe. Will he ever make it to Thrax?

Claw of the Conciliator continues Severian's rise from apprentice torturer to eventual Autarch. Wolfe's inventiveness grows as Severian encounters man-apes, a giantess, witches, an androgyne who might be The Autarch, a giantess, and many other interesting characters, including Dr. Talos and company. More is revealed about the Claw of the Conciliator, though much mystery remains. I get the feeling a lot of secrets are still lurking in the background.

One aspect of *The Book of the New Sun* I really enjoy is how Gene Wolfe has a lot of sci-fi elements lurking in the background, like aliens, wormholes and the true nature of Jonas, and the casual mention of what might in fact be laser guns. Wolfe's a sly one.

(view spoiler)

I don't want to spoil too much but I enjoyed *Claw* more than *Shadow*, possibly because I was used to Wolfe's style. While I felt like I was still in the dark, Wolfe knows how to reveal just enough to keep you firmly ensnared. Like Severian says, it's a hard road. I can't wait to see where it finally leads.

**2012 Note:** I went ahead and bumped this up to a 5. I'm not sure if it deserves it but I still catch myself thinking about this book almost a year after I finished it.

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## Lepton says

Gene Wolfe is not a misogynist??!!

Before all the sensitive types start in on Gene Wolfe's treatment of women in *Shadow* and *Claw*, I thought I would head off such criticisms by exploring women's freedom in Wolfe's *Urth*.

On *Urth*, women are:

1. Permitted to learn to read. There are actually a number of women in the narrative that not only can read but also can read and understand something akin to Latin. But, don't you dare call it Latin, because it's not. Gene Wolfe said so.
2. Free to wear clothes or not as they see fit. Much care is taken that women should be offered to wear clothes and even clean clothes when their pathetic nature raises our empathy and pity. Yet, a woman is also apparently free to disrobe and throw herself naked and pleading to exchange sex for the life of a loved one.
3. Free to sell her body for money legally. Money? Good. Sex? Very good. Sex for money? Men have money; a woman, her sex. How can that be wrong?
4. Free to be beaten. That a woman should be suffered to live for giving offense to a man is a blessing onto her. She may be beaten and pushed down and she is not hurt much.
5. Free to be imprisoned unjustly. In this enlightened age of the far future *Urth*, women are suffered to live despite they give offense to men and the law of Men. The expense and time to imprison and persecute...err...prosecute a woman in light of her actual value to society is a charity granted to her and her sex.
6. Free to be tortured. That the Order of the Seekers for Truth and Penitence should seek to imprison and torture women clearly indicates that women are thought to be capable of speaking truth or even knowing truth. Similarly, this would also suppose that a woman has a soul capable of penitence or that a woman possesses a soul at all.
7. Free to be publicly maimed and executed. The branding and public execution of a woman suggests the

physical vessel of the woman's body contains a space for moral instruction through ritualized excruciation and killing. A woman is no mere animal that can be killed or beaten without conscience. Her body and her life are valued enough to bring forth a physical and moral revulsion to a public branding and execution that is not only a moment of moral teaching but also Thanatonic catharsis.

8. Free to be raped in prison. Make no mistake. In past ages a woman in captivity was the rape toy of every guard and low level official in the prison system. Under the care of the Order, a woman may only be raped as a form of torture by the head inquisitor or his designee. She may be bartered amongst the inquisitor and his inferiors, but she shall not be abused by any other men.

These are only some of the many freedoms that women enjoy in the world of Urth so lovingly and intellectually crafted by Gene Wolfe. I for one salute his feminist spirit and his magnanimity to grant women a dignified and full existence in the world of his own creation.

And in case my sarcasm isn't clear, F\*\*\* you, Gene Wolfe!

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**Jessica ❀ ➡ Silverbow ➡ ❀ Rabid Reads-no-more says**

MUST read at first available opportunity, b/c Servo is an ode to one of Pierce Brown's favorite characters in literature, **Severian the Torturer** .

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**Apatt says**

Gene Wolfe's The Book of the New Sun is one of the most revered severed series of all time. Neil Gaiman, Ursula Le Guin, GRRM and goodness knows what other celebs swear by them, not to mention armies of fans among sf readers everywhere. With this kind of adulation writing a review for the books is a risky undertaking. I mean you are fine if you love the books unconditionally and happy to declare yourself a convert, but what if you don't?

Fortunately for me I like the book (part 1 & 2) well enough to be able to show some appreciation of its merit, less fortunate is the fact that I don't actually love it.

"Shadow & Claw" is an omnibus volume comprised of the first two books of the "The Book of the New Sun": Volume 1: The Shadow of the Torturer and Volume 2: The Claw of the Conciliator. The series is often described as "a novel in four parts" so having read just parts 1 & 2 so far I can not claim to have read the entire book. In fact my attempt to review The Shadow of the Torturer after I finished it was a miserable failure because 25% of a book is too little to write about. Worse still, I first read "The Shadow of the Torturer" on audiobook and in that format most of it was incomprehensible for me, these books need to be read attentively and I can not do that while jogging. I always find printed books to be more intimate and easier to follow any way.

The first thing I noticed about Wolfe's writing is the prose, it is florid, literate and complex, I often had to read sentences or whole passages twice to decipher their meaning. His writing is also often highly evocative, for example this particular sentence is still rattling around in my head:

*“The hope in her voice now made me think of a flower growing in shadow.”*

I have never seen a flower growing in shadow but the sentence conjured up a feeling of hopelessness very clearly for me.

Many reviews of this book mention that it demands multiple reading for full comprehension. Personally there is at least 15% of the book that I do not quite understand, perhaps after a few days of digesting it more details will fall into place. The author has a habit of suddenly going off on tangents that leave me floundering. There is a whole chapter describing a play put on by the characters that at the time of writing makes no sense to me.

The protagonist and narrator of the story Severian is not exactly likable as he seldom shows any emotion, even though his actions are often driven by his feelings. The female characters are all very well developed and I really feel for their plights, including the more villainous ones.

OK, that is the best I can do at this point (pathetic, I know), once I finish the remaining volumes I will try to add more substance to this review. This brings me to this passage from the end of the first and second volumes:

*“Here I pause. If you wish to walk no farther with me, reader, I cannot blame you. It is no easy road.”*

Definitely no easy road, but I’m game!

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## **Ross Lockhart says**

Forming the first half of Gene Wolfe’s dying earth tetralogy *The Book of the New Sun*, *Shadow and Claw* collects the series’ first two books, *Shadow of the Torturer* and *Claw of the Conciliator*. The conceit of the *The Book of the New Sun* is fairly unique, presenting itself as Gene Wolfe’s translation (also the case with Wolfe’s *Latro in the Mist*) of a memoir from the far future, forming a sort of bildungsroman of a torturer’s apprentice named Severian (which sounds so much like Severin from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* that I can’t help but wonder if the latter inspired Wolfe’s naming of the former), following his journey from youth to manhood (and beyond) over the course of a single summer. Wolfe’s literary language is sublime, choosing archaisms over neologisms to present a universe that, on the one hand, fits nicely into the “dying earth” subgenre of science fiction pioneered by Jack Vance, yet, on the other, is wholly original (though I did detect a nod to Walter M. Miller, Jr.’s *A Canticle for Leibowitz* in Severian’s descriptions of the monastic lives lived by those in his Guild of Torturers. Set pieces, including a to-the-death duel with giant (and deadly) flowers, a surprising mystery play performed by primary and secondary characters, and the against-genre-expectations (but character correct) use to which Severian first puts his sword, are satisfying, startling, and occasionally shocking. Great stuff. Come for the banquet, stay for the alzabo... and dessert.

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## **BlackOxford says**

### **Fantastic Conjunctivitis**

Wolfe is most often compared to Tolkien and Lewis. However this is regurgitation of marketing hype. There is little in terms of style or symbology to link Wolfe with either. Aside from the genre of fantasy and a clear talent for creative world-building, Wolfe dwells in a very different universe, a universe not all that dissimilar from Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy.

The physical environment of Wolfe's city of Nessus could easily fit into Peake's Gormenghast Castle and vice-versa: A vast, half-ruined, place, unknown except locally to its inhabitants. A gothic labyrinth that harbours all manner of surprises and threats.

Both sets of works play off a background of ancient but incomprehensible tradition that establishes the rigid conditions from which the protagonist must escape. Unlike Severian, Titus knows his forebears, but this difference makes no difference to the comprehensive social discipline and constraint applied to both of them.

Both Titus in Peake and Severian in Wolfe are sympathetic characters who struggle against the bonds of convention to capture some sort of independent identity. Both have only a vague notion of what lies outside the boundaries of the city/castle but they yearn toward it with a clearly erotic drive.

Many of the other characters also are inter-changeable. The Chief Archivist and his assistant in Wolfe could be copies of Peake's Barquentine and the villainous Steerpike. Bellgrove in Peake could be one of Wolfe's Masters.

Peake wrote Gormenghast between 1946 and 1959. It inspired several other works, most notably China Mieville's 2000 steampunk fantasy Perdido Street Station. Wolfe's three (or four) books were written between 1980 and 1983. I have been unable to find any mention of Peake (who died in 1968) by Wolfe or in critical analyses of his work. In a 2014 interview with Wolfe specifically about writers who had influenced him, he makes no mention of Peake (<https://www.technologyreview.com/s/52...>).

So an interesting case of parallel inspiration or a demonstration of the anxiety of influence? Any views are welcome.

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## **Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says**

Brilliant but also crazy difficult to unpack, and truly tedious for me for long stretches.

\*sigh\* Maybe I'll give it another shot one of these times, now that I'm (definitely) older and (hopefully) wiser.

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## **Erik says**

The book's cover offers a blurb from Neil Gaiman: "The best SF novel of the last century."

*Yeah, okay Neil, I thought to myself. I bet you say that to all the pretty books.*

Then I read the book. And he was right. At least, right if you define "best" as "none better" rather than "better than all." Book of the New Sun belongs in a class of its own. If there's anything to compare it with, I haven't read it.

With this quartet, Gene Wolfe did for speculative literature what Raymond Chandler did to detective fiction back in the 50s: He raised it above its humble genre trappings. Chandler opened my eyes to a new type of writing. Prior to cracking open the pages of *The Long Goodbye*, I perceived literature as a dichotomy: entertaining genre "trash" and high-falutin' Literary tomes. The former focuses on the 'what' while the latter focuses on the 'how' but both possess merit. Chandler's fiction blurs that line. His plots are as entertaining as they come, yet much of a reader's delight arises from the sharp style and tremendous wit with which he wrote.

So it is with *The Book of the New Sun*, though Wolfe's style could not be more different than Chandler's. While Chandler's Marlowe narrates with sharp, forceful prose, Wolfe's Severian - an apprentice torturer - narrates this old earth science fantasy blend with meandering complexity and guile, unreliable even in his claim that he's a liar. Does he lie? Yes – but not in the manner you might think. He lies not by shape, but by weight, giving you the facts plainly enough but hiding their import.

Such subversion exists throughout the quartet. It is entirely readable as a straight-forward hero's journey of the Campbellian variety. It's an adventure in the same way Chandler's novels are mysteries. They entertain at the surface level. But they are also so much more than that. In Chandler's case, his novels are a how-to manual for dealing with a world (that is, our world) so reliant on manipulation that we take for granted the deception we encounter, and might even feel lost without our daily dosage of bullshit advertising, politicking, journalism, and TV drama. In *The Book of the New Sun*, the adventure masks an allusive labyrinth, a riddle of time and meaning, that must be traversed by careful reading.

Which, if we're being honest, is problematic these days. Most people are not careful readers and don't want to be. That is their prerogative, though as a writer myself, I find it frustrating. The defining trait of modern entertainment is its ease of consumption. *Book of the New Sun* is not easily consumed. With long, tortured sentences, complex diction, discursive asides, and more than a few instances of elision, even a superficial reading requires work. To attain any sort of depth requires even more.

But this work does not go unrewarded. The complexity doesn't exist for the sake of complexity, but rather to ambush the reader with a delightfully refreshing subversion and to present a complete picture of a character's mind and life. I even found the book rewarding on a sentence-by-sentence level. It is peppered throughout with insight and interesting prose.

In short, *Book of the New Sun* is very much like a trek through a hilly country. More difficult than taking a car to be sure, but not all that challenging, and I never knew what new beauty I'd find over the next hill.

To be shorter still, I loved this book. I absolutely loved it. It changed me the way a good love affair changes you. It taught me to expect more from my literature.

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**Szplug says**



Gene Wolfe, the poetically accented writer of intricate fantasy/science-fiction hybrids like this exquisite tetralogy, was inspired by that other pen-wielding magician Jack Vance's *Tales of the Dying Earth*: Wolfe's series also takes place on a radically altered Earth in the far, far future when the Sun's fuel is running dangerously low. Amidst the wreckage of past civilizations lies the sprawling, endless city of Wolfe's protagonist torturer-apprentice Severian. Beginning as a gauzy, haunting *bildungsroman*, influenced subtly throughout by the Roman Catholic faith of the author and homages to other great works, Severian, cursed and blessed with a flawless memory that may or may not be allergic to the truth, makes a moral choice that leads to his flight from the vast metropolis, a journey requiring literally days of travel. As the story progresses while the fuligin-clad youth ventures forth past the city walls into unknown lands - and companions attach themselves to Severian in pursuit of unknown ends - the itinerant torturer becomes aware of troubles at the court of the Autarch, the all-powerful, myth-shrouded monarch of the torturer's world, who faces scheming rebel courtiers and consults with the enigmatic Hierodules. Severian will also hear rumors of a fierce war with strange-speaking foreigners from the alien culture of the north.

Each of the four books that comprise the tetralogy unfold with a subtle shift in tone and tincture. In my opinion, the opening book possesses itself of an atmospheric wonder rarely achieved in the field of fantasy fiction. Whereas Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* begins with a localized and bucolic expedition that little hints at the historic importance of the quest vaguely discernible upon the horizon, and Stephen Donaldson's *Lord Foul's Bane* initiates the reader into the grim, isolated and self-loathing existence of an embittered leper whose first overwhelming experience with The Land inspires him to an act of rape that jars the reader out of the moment, Wolfe's *The Shadow of the Torturer* is, in many ways, the strongest book in the series. From the opening sentences the reader is immersed in the portentous but ineffable shimmering of a mysterious civilization aged in its incantatory urban flavor like an oaken whiskey; the entirety a smoothly flowing, warming, and immensely enjoyable unfolding as the words daub every action, puzzle, and rumination with the purplish shadows of *myth-in-itself*. Severian's story is a narrative dream hatched from the timbered depths of moral perturbability and painted in the hues of enigmatic unbinding. The aura of lush decay that permeates the first book provides an ambiance Wolfe can never *quite* attain to, let alone transcend, in the following three pieces; but the route each of the three provides for the journey towards self-realization for the Torturer Apprentice are, nonetheless, worthy companions to the opening act.

This is neither a Tolkien clone nor a genre-checklist fantasy-lite: Wolfe is a gifted writer who excels at painting sombre moods and shifting scenery, at casting mysterious strangers to beset the torturer and scattering hints that Severian's story is not *all* what it seems; and he expects the reader to make the effort to puzzle through his mysteries and render his veils. A thoroughly enjoyable and sublime series that only gets better with further readings.

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### **J.G. Keely says**

Wolfe has an almost legendary status amongst fellow authors; Gaiman called him 'a ferocious intellect', Swanwick said he's "the greatest writer in the English language alive today", and Disch called this series "a tetralogy of couth, intelligence, and suavity".

You can rarely trust the popular market to single out good authors, but you'd think it might be safe to listen to the opinions of other writers (especially an assemblage of Nebula and Hugo winners in their own right). I will give his fans one concession: Wolfe is an author who defies expectations. Unfortunately, I was expecting him to be remarkable and interesting.

This book had been sitting on my shelf for months, along with other highly-praised works I've been looking forward to, but I bade my time, waiting for the mood to strike. Few live up to their reputation, but most at least deliver part of the promise.

I would expect any author mentioned in the same breath as Peake to have an original and vibrant style, but I found Wolfe's writing to be simple without being elegant. His language and structure serves its purpose, only occasionally rising above mere utilitarianism, and then he rushes to florid flourishes that fall flat as often as they succeed. Sometimes, it is downright dull. The prose of the second book is stronger than the first, but its plot and characters are more linear and predictable.

I appreciated his 'created language' more than most fantasy authors, but I didn't find it particularly mysterious or difficult, because all of his words are based on recognizable Germanic or Romantic roots. Then again, after three years of writing stories about Roman whores in Latin, I had little problem with 'meretriculous'. Even those words I wasn't familiar with seemed clear by their use.

The terms are scattered throughout the book, but rarely contribute to a more pervasive linguistic style, as might be seen in *The Worm Ouroboros*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Gormenghast*, or *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. Wolfe's terms pepper otherwise and unremarkable modern style, which hardly helps to throw us into a strange world.

He is better than the average fantasy author, but he resembles them more than he differs from them. His protagonist started off interestingly enough: an apparently weak and intelligent man, which made it all the more disappointing when he suddenly transformed into a laconic, wench-loving butticker who masters sword-fighting, finds the Super Magic Thing and follows the path of his Awesome Foretold Fate. Again, I must agree with Nick Lowe: Wolfe's plot owes more to magic and convenience than good storytelling.

It relies on the same tricks over and over: any time a character is about to give important information to us, there will be a sudden attack or other interruption, as convenient and annoying as the moment when the dying man says "I was killed by . . . aargh". We also get problems solved by divine intervention whenever things start to slow, which doesn't leave the characters much room to be active.

He also seems to suffer from the same sexual discomfort that plagues so many fantasy authors. There is an undercurrent of obsession with women and their sexuality, complete with the sexualization of rape and murder. It's not so much a case of misogyny as it is an inequality in how characters behave.

The women always seem to end up as playtoys for the narrator, running around naked, desiring him, sparring with him coyly, but ultimately, conquered; and the camera pans away. They always approach him, desire him, pretending they don't want him, then give themselves up to him. It's the same old story of an awkward, emotionless male protagonist who is inexplicably followed and harangued by women who fall in love with him for no given reason, familiar to anyone who's seen a harem anime.

I will grant that the women have more character than the average fantasy heroine, but it still doesn't leave them with much. Instead of giving into love at first sight, they fight it as long as they can, making it that much sweeter when the narrator finally 'wins'. The sexuality was not new, interesting, arousing, or mutual, it was merely the old game of 'overcoming the strong woman' that is familiar to readers of the Gor books.

The sense of 'love' in *The New Sun* is even more unsettling. It descends on the characters suddenly and nonsensically, springing to life without build or motivation. The word never comes up in connection with any psychological development, nor does it ever seem to match the relationships as they are depicted. More

often than not, it seems love is only mentioned so the narrator can coldly break his lover's trust in the next chapter.

Several times, the narrator tries to excuse himself for objectifying women by mentioning that he also objectifies ugly women. What this convolution of misogyny is supposed to represent, I couldn't say. The narrator seems very interested in this fact, and is convinced that it makes him a unique person. It made it very clear to me why the most interesting antiheroes tend to be gruff and laconic, because listening to a chauvinistic sociopath talk about himself is insufferable.

Then there is the fact that every character you meet in the story turns up again, hundreds of miles away, to reveal that they are someone else and have been secretly controlling the action of the plot. It feels like the entire world is populated by about fifteen people who follow the narrator around wherever he goes. If the next two books continue along the same lines, then the big reveal will be that the world is entirely populated by no more than three superpowered shapeshifters.

Everyone in the book has secret identities, secret connections to grand conspiracies, and important plot elements that they conveniently hide until the last minute, only doling out clues here and there. There are no normal people in this world, only double agents and kings in disguise. Every analysis I've read of this book mentions that even the narrator is unreliable.

This can be an effective technique, but in combination with a world of infinite, unpredictable intrigue, Wolfe's story begins to evoke something between a soap opera and a convoluted mystery novel, relying on impossible and contradictory scenarios to mislead the audience. Apparently, this is the thing his fans most appreciate about him--I find it to be an insulting and artificial game.

I agree with this reviewer that there is simply not enough structure to the story to make the narrator's unreliability meaningful. In order for unreliable narration to be effective, there must be some clear and evident counter-story that undermines it. Without that, it is not possible to determine meaning, because there's nowhere to start: everything is equally shaky.

At that point, it's just a trick--adding complexity to the surface of the story without actually producing any new meaning. I know most sci fi and fantasy authors seem to love complexity for its own sake, but it's a cardinal sin of storytelling: don't add something into your story unless it needs to be there. Covering the story with a lot of vagaries and noise may impress some, but won't stand up to careful reading.

Fantasy novels are often centered on masculinity, violence, and power struggles, and so by making the narrator an emotionally distant manipulator with sociopathic tendencies, Wolfe's story is certainly going to resemble other genre outings. If Severian is meant to be a subversion of the grim antihero, I would expect a lot of clever contradiction which revealed him. His unreliability would have to leave gaping holes that point to another, more likely conclusion. If the protagonist's mendacious chauvinism is not soundly contradicted, then there is really nothing separating him from what he is supposed to be mocking.

Poe's Law states that it can be difficult to tell whether something is an act of mockery or an example of genuine extremism, and perhaps that's what's going on here: Wolfe's mockery is so on-the-nose that it is indistinguishable from other cliché genre fantasy. But even if that were true, then the only thing separating Wolfe from the average author is the fact that he's doing it on purpose, which is hardly much of a distinction. If a guy punches himself in the nose and then insists "I meant to do that", I don't think that makes him any less of a dumbass.

Human psychology and politics are fraught enough without deliberately obfuscating them. Unfortunately, Wolfe does not have the mastery of psychology to make a realistically complicated text, only a cliched text that is meta-complicated.

After finishing the book, I tried to figure out why it had garnered so much praise. I stumbled across a number of articles, including this one by Gaiman and this one by an author who wrote a book of literary analysis about the New Sun series.

Both stressed that Wolfe was playing a deliberate meta-fictional game with his readers, creating mysteries and clues in his book for them to follow, so that they must reread the text over and over to try to discern what is actually happening. I won't claim this isn't a technical feat, but I would suggest that if Wolfe wanted us to read his book over and over, he might have written it with verve, style, character, and originality. As the above critic says:

*"On a first, superficial reading, there is little to distinguish Wolfe's tetralogy from many other sf and fantasy novels . . . The plot itself is apparently unremarkable."*

Perhaps I'm alone in this, but I have no interest in reading your average sword-wielding badass gender-challenged fantasy book over and over in the hopes that it will get better. If Wolfe is capable of writing an original and interesting story, why cover it with a dull and occasionally insulting one?

I have enjoyed complex books before, books with hidden messages and allusions, but they were interesting both in their depths and on the surface. I didn't find the New Sun books particularly complex or difficult. His followers have said that he isn't 'concerned with being conspicuously witty', but I'd suggest he's merely incapable of being vibrant or intriguing.

There were interesting ideas and moments in the book, and I did appreciate what originality Wolfe did have, but I found it strange that such a different mind would produce such hidebound prose, tired descriptions, convenient plots, and unappealing characters. It has usually been my experience that someone who is capable of thinking remarkable things is capable of writing remarkable things.

Sure, there were some interesting Vancian moments, where you realize that some apparently magical effect is actual a piece of sci fi detritus: this character is a robot, that tower is actually a rocket, a painting of a mythical figure clearly depicts an astronaut--but this doesn't actually add anything to the story, they weren't important facts, they were just details thrown in.

It didn't matter that any of those things were revealed to be something else than they appeared, because it didn't change anything about the story, or the characters, or the themes or ideas. These weren't vital and strange ideas to be explored, like the mix of sci fi and fantasy in Vance, Le Guin, or Lovecraft, but inconsequential 'easter eggs' for obsessing fans to dig up.

As Clarke's Third Law says: any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. Therefore, switching back and forth between magical explanations and super-technological ones doesn't mean much, on its own. They're indistinguishable. Star Wars may use the trappings of sci fi, but it's just a fantasy story about wizards and knights in space. In order to make the distinction meaningful, you've got to put some kind of spin on it.

Overall, I found nothing unique in Wolfe. Perhaps it's because I've read quite a bit of odd fantasy; if all I read was mainstream stuff, then I'd surely find Wolfe unpredictable, since he is a step above them. But compared

to Leiber, Howard, Lovecraft, Dunsany, Eddison, Kipling, Haggard, Peake, Mieville, or Moorcock, Wolfe is nothing special.

Perhaps I just got my hopes up too high. I imagined something that might evoke Peake or Leiber (at his best), perhaps with a complexity and depth gesturing toward Milton or Ariosto. I could hardly imagine a better book than that, but even a book half that good would be a delight--or a book that was nothing like that, but was unpredictable and seductive in some other way.

I kept waiting for something to happen, but it never really did. It all plods along without much rise or fall, just the constant moving action to make us think something interesting is happening. I did find some promise, some moments that I would have loved to see the author explore, particularly those odd moments where Silver Age Sci Fi crept in, but each time he touched upon these, he would return immediately to the smallness of his plot and his annoying prick of a narrator. I never found the book to be difficult or complex, merely tiring. the unusual parts were evasive and vague, and the dull parts constant and repetitive.

The whole structure (or lack of it) does leave things up to interpretation, and perhaps that's what some readers find appealing: that they can superimpose their own thoughts and values onto the narrator, and onto the plot itself. But at that point, they don't like the book Wolfe wrote, they like the book they are writing between his lines.

I'll lend the book out to some fantasy-loving friends and they'll buy the next one, which I'll then have to borrow from them so I can see if there's ever a real payoff. Then again, if Severian's adolescent sexuality is any evidence, the climax will be as underwhelming as the self-assured, fumbling foreplay. If I don't learn to stop giving my heart away, it's just going to get broken again.

Ah well, once more unto the breach.

My Fantasy Book Suggestions

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### **Christopher Paolini says**

I just finished reading *Shadow & Claw*, the first half of *The Book of the New Sun* by Gene Wolfe. It is, without a doubt, one of the most impressive sci-fi/fantasy books I've ever read. The prose is gorgeous: a unique and wonderful mixture of language that employs all sorts of ancient and otherwise unused words to evoke a far different time and place. I'm not done with the series yet, so I'm not sure how it's going to end, but so far, I've found the story dark and mysterious and enthralling. The main character, Severian, is an apprentice torturer, but don't let that put you off; the violence is handled discreetly and with tact, and while it's an important part of the story, it never feels exploitative. In some ways *Shadow & Claw* reminded me of Jack Vance's work but more cohesive, so if you enjoy that sort of thing, I think you'll like this as well. Overall, I'd say the story and the world reminds me of a dream—a dream of gods and shadows and hidden meanings. A dream of questions and hard-fought answers.

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### **Rob says**

----- update 12/2/2015 -----

On this, my first re-reading, I'm stopping with *Shadow of the Torturer* in a "for now" kind of moment. There are some other things I'd like to read as 2015 winds down. Not sure if I enjoyed the story more or about the same this time around. Certainly not less.

----- original review -----

My first pass through Gene Wolfe's *Shadow of the Torturer/Claw of the Conciliator* was summed up with a status update I made about two-thirds of the way through:

Flashes of brilliance between swaths of tedium.

I did not *dislike* the book, and I expect to re-read it and enjoy it even more some day; but it did not strike me thus. Not on this first reading.

Aerin said it well:

Reading these books is like trying to watch a foreign movie without subtitles - from two miles away with a crappy set of binoculars, and the audio coming over a fuzzy radio frequency, mixed with three other simultaneous broadcasts. [...] most of the time you're just watching incomprehensible things happening, thinking if you could only see things a little more clearly and understand what the hell people were saying, this might be a really interesting story.

And (and Aerin hints at this, as well) -- there is this tendency to wink-and-nudge your way through a book like this. There's some High Vocabulary, and there is an Intricate Plot, and recognizably Epic Characters. And you know for a fact that Gene Wolfe is no dummy; he is a talented storyteller and a gifted author. And who wants to be left behind? Wolfe is gifted and talented and this is a great and convoluted-and-complex-but-epic story and so... it must be brilliant. Who wants to admit that they're left behind? that they didn't get it? that they were frustrated by it, even as they enjoyed it? (Or at least *wanted* to enjoy it?)

And that's where I landed with this one. I wanted to enjoy it, and I believe that there is an enjoyable novel in there--but unless you're going to give it the extra effort on the first pass (or unless you're a preternaturally brilliant ascetic), expect to be a little frustrated on that first pass.

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### **Nick T. Borrelli says**

There are certain books that can be considered life-changing experiences. Gene Wolfe is an author who has written one of those for me. The *Shadow of the Torturer* may very well be my favorite fantasy book of all-time if you pinned me down and forced me to give you an answer. I first read it in my early twenties, and recently picked it up again because I wanted to visit the world of Urth again. In many ways, *The Shadow of the Torturer* has everything that I look for in a great read: awesome world-building, post-apocalyptic setting, mysterious and complicated characters, an engaging and interesting plot, and just a really cool protagonist. The story takes place in what can only be considered a ravaged Earth (called Urth) which is now suffering

under a dying sun. The world has been thrown backward into an almost medieval setting and the people both dress and behave in the same manner. However, it is obvious that something is wrong and that underneath everything, the secret to what has occurred will slowly be revealed, whether it be by the end of this book or in subsequent books to follow. This fact alone made me devour the book when I first picked it up all of those years ago. I have always been drawn to a mysterious underlying history in the books that I read. *Shadow of the Torturer* has that in spades. Severian is a young man who is an apprentice to the Guild of Torturers in a sinister place called the citidel. We get an early impression that Severian does not necessarily relish the opportunity to join the torturers guild, it is just something that he sees as a natural progression of his studies. Severian feels a sense of loyalty to the guild since they raised him after he was left at their doorstep as a child. When a young woman named Thecla is brought to the citidel to be tortured, Severian soon forms a friendship with her. Needless to say, it is frowned upon for any torturer to form any kind of bond with their subjects as their grisly work mandates that no emotion be felt. When it comes time for Thecla to be tortured, Severian commits the ultimate sin of showing mercy to his victim and assists her in committing suicide to end her suffering. At this point, Severian is cast out of the citidel and left to wander the shattered land alone with only his cloak and sword *Terminus Est*. It is here where the true brilliance of the story takes hold and we get to experience the horrifically beautiful world that Gene Wolfe has created. I will warn most readers that this isn't a light and easy to read fantasy. It requires that you pay attention to every word and every sentence. Things happen that are foreshadows of events that occur later in the book and also the series. But if you feel like reading one of the more impressive monuments of dark fantasy ever imagined, then give *Shadow of the Torturer* your time. You will not be disappointed. This is an omnibus version which also includes the second Book of the New Sun - *Claw of the Conciliator*. *Claw* is also a tremendous continuation of the series. Just pick up all four books, whether they be the single-volume editions or the omnibus versions. You'll see what true fantasy writing can be when in the hands of a master like Gene Wolfe.

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## **Agnieszka says**

My three favorite novels in the world are *Dune* by Frank Herbert, *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, and *The Book of the New Sun* by Gene Wolfe. I bet that many of you have read, and many more have heard of, the first two, but I wonder how many have read the last. *The Book of the New Sun* is less accessible than *The Name of the Rose* and weirder than *Dune*. The mind-bending future world, where the sun is so close to dead that you can see the stars in the daytime, is on par with *Dune* in its richness and complexity. The (mostly religious) philosophy, which the characters often discuss in casual conversation without it seeming contrived, is on par with *The Name of the Rose* or better. But the characterization is better than either. Although the main character is male, the female characters are far more real, vivid, and varied than almost anything I've encountered in fiction, and particularly science fiction.

The book is full of hints and allusions and puzzles. Despite what some readers may say, all the pieces are there and it's quite possible to put them together, though it might take a second read-through and some thought. I think many readers come away frustrated because they read the first volume alone and find that they have more questions than answers. There's also Gene Wolfe's love of obscure vocabulary--he doesn't make up words, he just resurrects them. I liked learning that an epopt is the opposite of a neophyte and that a carnifex is another word for executioner. You can get by with context, but if you're a word nerd the OED will beckon you. Every now and again the narrative pauses while the characters read a story from a book of tales or have a story-telling contest. The narrator-main character tries to fool you into thinking that it's just an interlude included for his sense of completeness, but like many of things he says, it's just a subtle lie or perhaps self-deception.

It's one of those books that I wish fervently my friends would all read, because it's such a pleasure to discuss. I'm not sure I've done a good job of convincing anyone, but if you're a fan of difficult pleasures, this is a book for you.

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## **Adam says**

If Peake's *Titus Alone* (after being rewritten by Lovecraft and Borges) was narrated by the crazy guy from Nabokov's *Pale Fire* it would only hint at the joys of this book...

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## **Christopher says**

Gene Wolfe's four-volume *Book of the New Sun* must rank among the finest works of literature of the past quarter-century. *SHADOW AND CLAW* is an omnibus consisting of the first half, the volumes *THE SHADOW OF THE TORTURER* and *THE CLAW OF THE CONCILIATOR*.

The *Book of the New Sun* is shelved among science-fiction, but it is much more. Wolfe draws on Christianity, the works of J.L. Borges, medieval morality plays, and a thousand elements of "*Spiritus Mundi*." It is essentially a Christian allegory, as "Sun" is clearly the homophone of "Son." However, this element doesn't intrude on the unbelieving reader. The *BotNS* is written with a colourful array of obscure English words, for example: *odalisque*, *fulgurator*, *carnifex*, *cenobite*, *peltast*. Nonetheless, Wolfe gives such context that reaching for the *Oxford English Dictionary* is hardly necessary. A saint's dictionary helps, however, as most characters are named for nearly-forgotten saints.

*SHADOW AND CLAW* introduces us to Severian, an apprentice to a guild of torturers in a far-future Earth, when the sun is dying. As he confesses early on, Severian's narration is essentially the story of how he has "backed into the throne." He begins by telling the reader of his exile for showing a condemned woman mercy and his going forth into a world both alien and wispily recognizable.

*THE CLAW OF THE CONCILIATOR* continues Severian's wanderings, and his unwitting involvement in the mysterious politics of his day. Most striking is a play transcribed in the second half. "Dr. Talos' Play: Eschatology and Genesis" seems at first a poorly written morality play, but the careful reader will notice myriad hidden references to the book's plot, Greek and middle-eastern myth, and the renewing salvation of Christ as seen by Christianity.

Severian is among of one the most complex and believable narrators I've ever read. Wolfe uses Severian to see Urth through his eyes, and much of the information we gather about his world comes from what he doesn't understand. For example, he lives in a world where one no longer distinguishes between ocean and space-going craft, and his confusion gives us important clues about the character Jonas. Furthermore, this book, although only four volumes and a coda, spawns whole years of exegesis, as denizens of the 'net mailing-list "*Urth-I*" can attest. Mystery has always been a continual element in Wolfe's works, but answers do lurk in every paragraph.

I admit that the *Book of the New Sun* is not for everyone; its million allusions and complex language require



a fair degree of classical education and may bore many people. Nonetheless, for me it was "The Book of Gold," as I discovered it at an age when it sped me on to the glories of world literature. It shows the way to Borges, Robert Graves, Roman and Greek history and myth, the splendour of exegesis and, for at least me personally, the Church. If this review makes the work sound appealing, I would recommend buying SHADOW AND CLAW and experiencing this wonderful work.

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## **Wanda says**

I started into this series with trepidation—I wasn't sure exactly how I would feel about a torturer as a main character. But Severian (get it, severe, sever) turns out to be charming in his own way—he is intelligent, empathetic, and friendly. Most of all, torture is just a job. He does it because it is he is a member of the guild, not because he has some psychopathic joy in the process. He does what needs to be done, follows the rules of his guild (except that one time that gets him into trouble), and generally just tries to do a good job. His one characteristic that annoys me is his tendency to "love" which ever woman is closest to him—and they change over fairly regularly and then change back. So far (end of book 2), he hasn't found a woman that he isn't interested in nor has he found one who rivets his attention.

In some ways he reminds me of the Knight, Sir Percival. There are repeated mentions of his "noble looks," suggesting that he may be the illegitimate son of someone of importance. Just as Percival spent his childhood in the forests, "ignorant of the ways of men," so Severian spends his youth confined to a small part of the Citadel, learning his trade as torturer and very little else. Around the age of 15, when Sir Percival had his life-changing encounter with King Arthur's knights in the forest, Severian has his life-changing evening in the necropolis where he encounters and assists the outlaw Vodalus. Like Percival, his ignorance of the ways of the world outside the Citadel often place him in perilous situations, which he comes through due to his basic honesty and ability to make friends who have the needed skills.

Urth is an interesting world too—a very old Earth, apparently formerly space-faring and technological, very much reduced to the rather Medieval state that Severian inhabits. There are occasional bits of technology that still work, continuously reminding the reader that this is in the far future, when the sun has dimmed just as the civilization has.

Wolfe's conceit in these novels is that they are translations from a future language, hence the plethora of words that sound like we ought to know the meanings, but it takes a little bit of thought to figure out exactly where they come from. I'm always interested in linguistics and I like it when an author is too.

I'll definitely be reading the third book in the very near future.

Since this volume is actually two books, it counts as 159 & 160 for me from the NPR list of classic science fiction and fantasy.

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## **Lindsay says**

I stopped after The Shadow of the Torturer.

It was ok, and I fully grasp the idea that a reader should be doing a lot of the work when reading a book. But

not this much work.

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## **Bess says**

Update 5/26: finally finished. Man, this is an intense book. I was tempted to give up on it at various points because it's so thoroughly dick lit -- I mean, the hero carries around a sword that he unsheathes, oils, and re-sheaths routinely throughout his travels, and he sleeps with nearly every woman he encounters, but usually in the most patronizing way imaginable (there's actually an extremely painful, cringeworthy attempt at some sort of epiphanic look into the male psyche, wherein it is brought to the reader's attention that men don't only want the hot chicks! They don't discriminate! They want the not-so-hot chicks, too! Preferably simultaneously!) ...all of which would be fine, if the whole thing weren't trying desperately to be something much less transparent than that.

Parts of this were delightfully magical -- actually, most of it was, imagery-wise. It's definitely a pleasure to feel like you've tapped into the mind of someone on a really good, permanent acid trip. But I think I need to go build back up my estrogen reserves before continuing on to the second half.

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I'll have whatever drugs this author is on. Kthxbai.

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