Shadows of the New Sun: Wolfe on Writing/Writers on Wolfe
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CHAPTER

12 Suns New, Long, and Short: An Interview with Gene Wolfe

Lawrence Person

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Abstract

Reprinted from *Nova Express*, Fall/Winter 1988, Person's interview focuses on *The Book of the Long Sun*, its clergyman hero, its religious dimension, and the contrast in narrative styles between this later work and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*. Wolfe discusses Severian's status as a Christian figure, his past and current influences, and clarifies his involvement in the development of the Pringles potato chip manufacturing machine.

Keywords: Gene Wolfe, Lawrence Person, Religion, Book of the Long Sun, Book of the New Sun, Fifth Head of Cerberus, Pringles

Subject: Literary Theory and Cultural Studies

Wolfe's *Nightside the Long Sun* (1993), the first volume of *The Book of the Long Sun* (which continued through *Lake of the Long Sun* (1994), *Caldé of the Long Sun* (1994) and *Exodus from the Long Sun* (1996)) not only marked his return to writing multi-volume fiction but also saw him revisit the universe of *The Book of the New Sun*. In 1999, he continued the series with *The Book of the Short Sun (On Blue's Waters* (1999), *In Green's Jungles* (2000) and *Return to the Whorl* (2001)). Lawrence Person's interview from *Nova Express* (Fall/Winter 1998) questions Wolfe on the interrelations between the three parts of this 'solar trilogy'.

LP: I'm given to understand that there are going to be at least two more books in the *Long Sun* cycle. Is this true, and will they take place on Blue, the planet settlers reach at the end of *Exodus From the Long Sun?*

GW: Actually, I call it *The Book of the Short Sun*, and it will be three books. It takes up about 20 years from *Exodus from the Long Sun*. Most of the action takes place on Blue. Some of it takes place on Green, and some of it takes place back in the Long Sun world.

LP: In *The Book of the Long Sun*, Patera Silk is one of the most wholly good, in the sense of being truly moral, characters in recent science fiction. Do you find such characters are rare in modern science fiction, and did you find it refreshing to use him as your protagonist?

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GW: Very much so. The idea of the clergyman hero was very popular back around the 1900s, and has gone completely out of style except for a few clergyman detectives. [Harry Kemelman's] Rabbi Small is the one that comes to mind immediately. G. K. Chesterton did a Catholic priest, Father Brown. But those are exceptions, and I thought to do something with that idea again. We were talking about war in my most recent panel, how easy it is and how dramatic it is. The same thing can be said about evil. A lot of people have the notion that evil is interesting and basically fun, and that good is dull and no fun, and I don't think that's true. If anything, the reverse is true, and I wanted to have a shot at proving that I was right.

LP: Even though Silk does his best to serve a religion that is in many ways a complete lie, he still does much good for the people of his manteion. Do you think that even false religions can serve salutary roles in people's ↳ lives?

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GW: I think that that's obviously true, and I think that just about any religion that we care to name is going to have elements of falsehood. Jesus Christ lived 2,000 years ago. That gives us 2,000 years to attach extraneous elements onto the Christian religion, and some of them I think are false and wrong. The same thing could be said of Judaism. Moses lived, what, 1,200 BC or so? So 3,000 years or so ago. Yet you have people like Patera Silk, who are good people in bad religions, and they do a great deal of good despite the fact that many of the ideas they are serving are false. [*Pause*] I don't know it that's a satisfactory answer, but that's the best I can do.

LP: Just how do the religious values and theories Silk espouses in *Exodus from the Long Sun* accord with your own?

GW: They're generally pretty close. I've tried to avoid having Silk become a mouthpiece for ideas that are basically wrong. Obviously, Silk begins, at least, by considering Pas and Echidna and the other false gods of the Long Sun world as genuinely divine, and they are not. But his ideas of what divinity *means* of what divinity consists of, I think are fairly sound.

LP: You have literally dozens of characters in *The Book of the Long Sun*, yet many times you have scenes with a number of characters all speaking in turn without being identified, and yet their speech patterns are so clearly and cleverly differentiated that we're never confused about who's talking. Just how do you *do* that?

GW: [Laughs.] I'm certainly glad that you were never confused! There are two things. Obviously, you have the speech patterns. Spider does not talk like Maytera Mint. And if you understand speech patterns, you should be able to put in any statement Spider makes, certain characteristic phrases or mistakes, or whatever, that will identify him as the speaker. The other thing is, that if you're doing it right, the speech that, oh, let's say, Maytera Marble makes under a certain circumstance, is not the speech that Blood would make under that circumstance. When Maytera Marble talks, she is saying something that only Maytera Marble would say. When Blood speaks, he is saying something that only Blood would say. And so the reader, if the reader is intelligent, knows who said that from what was said.

LP: Early in your career, critics placed you both inside and outside the New Wave. How heavily did the New Wave influence your own work, and did you feel you were part of it?

GW: I don't think I was heavily influenced by the New Wave. If I was a part of it, I was only a very remote, peripheral person. I suppose the epicentre of the New Wave was J. G. Ballard, although you might dispute that, and I certainly was at a great distance from J. G. Ballard. But if I could sell a story because of that connection, I was happy to do it.

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LP: Speaking of the New Wave, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, especially in ↳ book form, does utilise a lot of New Wave techniques, including nonlinear narrative forms and unreliable narrators. Why did you feel you needed to tell those interlocked stories in that particular way?

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GW: [Pause.] I don't really know at this point, except that they were the stories I thought to tell. I wrote the original novella 'The Fifth Head of Cerberus' to begin with. It always seems to me that if you have a narrator, if the narration is not by an all-knowing, all-seeing author, if you're going to say that this person in the story is going to tell the story, then the narrator is damn well going to be unreliable. Real people are unreliable narrators, even if they try to be reliable narrators. Ask any courtroom lawyer about examining five or six different witnesses to the same event. The five or six witnesses are all trying to tell the truth, but they have all seen different things, or in some cases think they have seen things that are not in fact there. Once I had done the original story, I wanted to do other related stories so that I could make a book, and the obvious thing seemed to be to do a prequel and a sequel, which is basically what I did. So they're non-linear, if you want to put it like that. Of course, I did do the rather tricky thing, which I suppose is New Wave, of having one of the characters in one of the other stories as the purported author of, a, aggh.... I'm sorry, I've lost the titles of my own stories.

LP: '"A Story" by John V. Marsch.'

GW: '"A Story" by John V. Marsch', yes, which is not actually written by John V. Marsch, but by the shadowchild who has *replaced* John V. Marsch. [*Laughs.*] *That's* New Wave. But belonging to a literary movement doesn't consist so much of using a certain set of techniques, as it consists in running with a certain set of people, and only to a very small degree did I run with that set of people. So as I said, I would be very peripheral as a New Wave writer.

LP: By contrast, the story in *The Book of the Long Sun*, though very complex, is told in a very straightforward and transparent narrative style. Do you think that the more complex the story, the more clear the narrative structure should be?

GW: It's almost that it has to be, or it isn't complex, it's simply confused. If you have a machine with three or four parts, you can shake them up in a box and it's still pretty clear what's there. If you have a machine with 10,000 parts and you shake them up in a box, what you have is a box of junk.

LP: I know a lot of people ask this, but is there a link between *The Book of the Long Sun* and the *Urth* cycle?

GW: Is there a connection? Oh yes, absolutely. In fact, in *The Book of the Short Sun*, we will come back to the world of Severian's childhood.

LP: A few years ago, Michael Andre Driussi published *Lexicon Urthus* about *The Book of the New Sun*. How did p. 170 it make you feel that someone was writing ↳ an entire book about your work, even after you had provided a stab in that direction with *The Castle of the Otter*?

GW: Well, I was immensely flattered by it, and I've found Michael's work actually to be useful to me. I have those books (he's also done one on the *Long Sun*), and I use them for reference. This is what's called critical apparatus, and you get this when at least one person thinks what you've written is important, and I'm flattered that Michael Andre-Driussi thinks I'm important.

LP: Critics have made much of Severian as a Christ figure. Do you think that this interpretation is valid in view of the first four books?

GW: No. He is a Christian figure, which is different. He is trying to become Christ-like. He is basically what practically all of us who are men are, he is a bad man trying to be good. He makes progress as the books progress. He becomes a better person, and a larger person in a spiritual sense. But no, he is not a Christ figure. At least he never was to me.

LP: And did you feel you needed to write *The Urth of the New Sun* to make his spiritual progression clearer?

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GW: No, I felt I needed to write *The Urth of the New Sun* to show what the ultimate outcome was. Really, David Hartwell said that I should put a paragraph in at the end that says 'Oh, Severian leaves Urth, and saves the sun, and everything is OK.' [*Laughs.*] And I said 'David, that's more than a paragraph.' It's really like the Acts of the Apostles, you read it to find out what happened to St Peter. Well, what happened to all these people, what happened to all these places? Did the sun in fact die? It was written to answer those questions.

LP: How heavy an influence was Jack Vance, and how much did you use *The Dying Earth* as a conscious template for *The Book of the New Sun*?

GW: It was very considerable. I did not try to write an imitation of *The Dying Earth*. I certainly took that idea from Jack Vance. I had read that years and years before and had been enormously impressed with it. So yeah, he was a very considerable influence. I'm sure that's where I got the basic idea that's behind *The Book of the New Sun*.

LP: Who are some current writers whose work you admire?

GW: I hate this question because I know I am going to leave out some people who I absolutely and positively should not leave out. Nancy Kress, Patrick O'Leary, Kathe Koja, Michael Swanick, Harlan Ellison.

LP: Let's jump back a bit. Who were some of the writers who influenced you in your youth?

GW: Vance was certainly one. G. K. Chesterton. Much earlier than either of those, L. Frank Baum and Ruth Plumly Thompson, who continued the Oz books, they certainly influenced me. The first science fiction story I ever read was by Theodore Sturgeon, and I think that was a major influence. I read *Alice in Wonderland*, and at least *tried* to be influenced by it. p. 171 ↳ Arthur Conan Doyle, H. G. Wells, Bram Stoker. I remember reading all those guys.

LP: You've won, if memory serves, two Nebulas. Yet, in a rather infamous incidence you *didn't* win a Nebula for 'The Island of Dr. Death and Other Stories', even though you had been told you had. How did this particular incident come about and what was your reaction to it?

GW: Well, superficially at least, it was a mistake by Isaac Asimov. In those days they gave the MC not only the name of the winners, but also the names of the runners-up, which he also announced. And in the case of whatever category that was, Isaac's eyes slipped over 'No Award' to the first actual name of the list, which was Gene Wolfe. In retrospect, it was kind of nice for me, since Joe Hensley told me that if I would now write 'The Death of Doctor Island', I would win on a sympathy vote. So I said 'Well, I'll try it.' [*laugh*] This guy obviously doesn't think I can write a story called 'The Death of Doctor Island', so I *will* write a story called 'The Death of Doctor Island' and we'll see. And so I did, and it won a Nebula. Of course, after that, fans kept coming up to me with new titles, until I wrote 'Island of the Death Doctor' and 'The Doctor of Death Island'. And after that I said 'I quit! I'm not going to do any more. They're confusing enough already!' The other confusing thing is I have both a story and a book called The Fifth Head of Cerberus, and my agent and I frequently get requests to reprint The Fifth Head of Cerberus that fail to make clear whether it is the book or the story they're talking about. It makes a great deal of difference because the legal situation is different as to who controls the rights, and we have to find out what it is. It's usually translation rights, someone in Norway or something. You have to find out which they want, to find out whether we can sell them to them, or whether we have to send them to Tor books.

LP: You've done some work with small presses, including Mark Ziesing and Cheap Street. How does working with a small press differ from working with a major publisher, and how vital do you think the small press is to the genre?

GW: It differs in that it's so much easier to pin down responsibility. With a major publisher, if they want to run you around in a circle, they can run you around forever. Jane says that Joe made her do it, but Joe says

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that Sam made him do it, and Sam says that it's company policy established by Bart, and blah blah blah blah blah blah, and what it all boils down to is ‘We won't do what you want us to do.’ With a small press publisher, there's an easily identifiable individual who is in charge, and if this person is saying no, you know damn well who it is who's saying no. And at least there's somebody who you can argue with and deal with and perhaps cut some kind of deal. One of the nice things about Tor is that you don't get this runaround to p. 172 the extent you get from other publishers. When push ↳ comes to shove you can go to Tom Doherty and the buck stops here. He is the man. And if he tells them to do it, then by God they'll do it or lose their jobs. I think that small press publishing is the lifeblood of the genre. If we were to lose all of the small presses, which I don't think we're going to do, but if we were to do that I don't think the genre would survive indefinitely.

LP: Since you've worked at all three, which length are you most comfortable with: short fiction, stand-alone novels, or multi-volume works?

GW: I'm most comfortable with short fiction. After that, the multi-volume work. Short fiction gives something of nice size that you can deal with. The multi-volume work can give you all the room that you need. The stand-alone novel is quite tough because it has to be pretty darn long, but not *too* long, and I find it the most constricting of the bunch. To put it another way, I can write a 2,000 word short story, or I can write a 4,000 word short story. I cannot go from a 60,000 – well, I could go from a 60,000 – I couldn't go from an 80,000-word novel to a 160,000-word standalone novel. I would probably have something no publisher would want at that length. Come to think of it, all the books in *The Book of the Short Sun* are pushing it, so we'll see.

LP: Unless, of course, it's a big, big fantasy book, and they want the huge bugkillers for that.

GW: That may be. They want the bug crusher. I've seen some of those Robert Jordan novels. I haven't read them in their entirety, I've read pieces of them, and they are enormous novels.

LP: I for one don't have the time to read Robert Jordan. I just wonder who has.

GW: Well, you would have time if the story *seized* you sufficiently, and there are people that it does. They will devour the damn things over the space of a week and feel awful when it ends, because their book is now finished.

LP: Both the ‘Sun’ works feature worlds upon which multiple societies and cultures co-exist in different locales, and you have in the past criticised sf works that depict monocultured worlds and societies. Do you think it's too hard for modern science fiction writers to create multiple fictional cultures, or is it just sheer laziness on their parts?

GW: I think it's mostly laziness. Mental sloth more than anything else. We have no indication that we are ever going to get a homogenous, worldwide culture. A number of people seem to take that almost as a given, as communication becomes faster, as transportation becomes faster, everybody will speak the same language and everybody will go to the same movies and so on and so forth. I doubt it; I really, really doubt it. There is an awful lot of vitality in languages, there is an awful lot of vitality in cultures. If you look at a big p. 173 city, you discover that, on various levels of ↳ society, people are talking in ways that are almost different languages already. Now, if you posit a city that would occupy, say, the eastern half of North America, which would be far bigger than anything we have, it seems to me highly likely that you would get a great deal of diversity among the neighbourhoods and social levels. If you haven't read *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* by G. K. Chesterton, you really should. It's a London in which each neighbourhood takes it upon itself to be its own little city-state with its own flag and its own sacred ceremony and so forth, and the balkanisation of London and what comes out of it.

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LP: How do you go about researching a book? In particular I was wondering where you found the vast array of arcane and foreign words used in both of the Sun works.

GW: That's really tough as far as the words are concerned. I started out with the idea of not coining Tars Tarkas type names. I don't mean that I think that's something other people shouldn't do, I don't feel that way at all. But I felt in this book I am not going to do that, I don't think it's right for *this* book. What's right is using archaic names and archaic terms for things in connections in which it will be clear to the reader what is meant. Then I had to go looking for a whole bunch of them, which I did. I have the *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary* in the microtype thing that you have to read with a magnifying glass. Some book club was giving it out as a premium at one point, and I think every writer in the world joined to pick it up. I have found you can do a lot by looking up the Latin or Greek word that corresponds to something you need a word for, and then going back to unabridged dictionaries on the assumption that someone will have anglicised this term as a new word. And very often you find that somebody did indeed do that, and it crops up in the *Oxford* dictionary for a citation in the 18th century or whatever. Of course, I used the names of extinct animals, and I myself anglicised them to a certain degree. Avram Davidson did wonderful work like that, in using obsolete placenames, and he had these funny little European countries that don't actually exist, but if you look back, he's taking a place name from the third century AD, or something like that, and saying to himself: ‘Suppose this place survived as an entity with that name? Here it is.’ Davidson was a fine, fine writer.

LP: Who are the best editors you've worked with over the years?

GW: Oh, David Hartwell, obviously. He's been my principal editor over the years. Other than David Hartwell, Damon Knight would have to come in second. After Damon Knight, perhaps Kris Rusch.

LP: For quite a while you were the editor of *Plant Engineering* magazine. Do you think that doing so gave you any special insights into how the pace of technological change is reshaping society?

GW: Yes, I was *an* editor, actually, on the staff of *Plant Engineering* magazine. I was lucky enough to be the robot editor, so I got to work with p. 174 ↳ modern, real world robotics. I actually have two diplomas from robotics schools I attended. So that was very nice. I guess I'm branching off into other things, but I also got to be the Letters to the Editor editor, which was good and fun and taught me a lot of stuff, and I was the cartoon editor. [*Laughs.*] Basically I had a *real* good job.

LP: Along those lines, is it true you invented the machine that makes Pringles potato chips?

GW: I developed it. I did not invent it. That was done by a German gentleman whose name I've forgotten for years. I developed the machine that cooks them. He had invented the basic idea, how to make the potato dough, pressing it between two forms, more or less as in a wrap-around, immersing them in hot cooking oil, and so forth and so on. And we were then called in. I was in the engineering development division, and asked to develop the mass production equipment to make these chips. And we divided the task into the dough making/dough rolling portion, which was done by Len Hooper, and the cooking portion, which was done by me, and then the pickoff and salting portion, which was done by someone else, and then the can filling/can sealing portion which was done by a man who was almost driven insane by the program because he would develop a machine, and he would have it almost ready to go, and they would say, ‘Oh, instead of 300 cans a minute, make it *500* cans a minute.’ And so he would have to throw out a bunch of stuff, and develop the new machine, and when he got that one about ready, they'd say ‘Make it 700 cans a minute.’ And they almost put him in a mental hospital. He took his job very seriously and he just about flipped out.

LP: I work for a semiconductor equipment manufacturing company as a technical writer, so I deal with the engineers who are building the machines that are building computer chips, so that story sounds fairly familiar to me.

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GW: I like and admire technical writers, if they're good. When I was an editor, they were the people I was buying the articles from, very largely when I didn't write them myself. It's a greatly underrated skill.

LP: And a reasonably well paying one in modern society.

GW: I'm glad to hear it.

LP: This year you're up for a Hugo for 'No Planets Strike', which might be summarised as 'talking animals in the Holy Manger on another planet'.

GW: Yes.

LP: What gave you the idea to write that?

GW: I have to think for a moment. I was reading a book on clowns, and I came across this quotation from Shakespeare about the sacredness of Christmas Eve, and how fairies have no power to wound, no planets strike, meaning this is a reference to astrology, where Saturn and things like that are the evildoers. Saturn enters your astrological house and you have all p. 175 ↳ sorts of troubles, etc. And I thought [*laughs*] well, isn't that interesting. Shakespeare felt the aliens could not attack on Christmas Eve. And that cooked in my brain for a while, and somehow I mixed it up with the legend that animals could speak on Christmas Eve. And in fact, until I went back and looked at the Shakespeare quote again, I thought that was in there. But there is this legend that at midnight on Christmas Eve, the animals in the barn or wherever discuss in human voices the birth of the Christ child. And that seemed like something I could work with. So I worked out real talking animals, and had them be clowns, because I had been reading about clowns, and a reason for them not to speak most of the time, and then a reason for them to speak on Christmas Eve, and so on. And I came up with a story I really like, and am very happy with. At this point I don't know whether it's going to win the Hugo, but I sure hope it does. That would be great if it did. I've never won a Hugo. I've won three World Fantasy Awards, and two Nebulas, and a lot of other awards: the British Science Fiction Award, the British Fantasy Award, the Prix Apollo, which is the French award, and so forth, but I've never won a Hugo and I'd like to. [*Original Editor's Note: This was not to be, as Mike Resnick's 'The 43 Antarean Dynasties' won the Hugo for Best Short Story.*]

LP: Just as long as they don't announce you and go 'Sorry, no award!' That would be a bummer.

GW: Yeah! Well, I wish Isaac Asimov were back to do it. But I don't think they do 'No Award' in the Hugos, which I think is a good idea.

LP: Well they do, but you have to beat out all the other nominees, which is almost an impossibility under the Australian Rules Ballot. You've often talked about Homer as both an influence and a fountainhead for the storytelling tradition. Do you think there's insufficient appreciation of Homer and other classical authors in the modern world?

GW: Oh yes, absolutely. Classical studies are something we have, by and large, dropped. That means we have put behind us an awful lot of good stuff. We are becoming less able to understand our own culture. We have this assumption in science fiction, I think, and in ordinary life, that people somehow understand their culture. You know, the man from the spaceship lands, and runs into a farmer with tentacles, and the farmer could explain everything about how his society works. That ain't necessarily the truth. Our society has been evolving at least since ancient Greece. You could make a pretty good case for the idea that western civilisation began with the ancient Greeks. And the people who would object to that would not say that it began later, they would say that it began sooner. And it has gone so far and gathered so much momentum that we are losing sight of its roots. There's an oriental gentleman over there whose roots are probable Japanese or Chinese, but he is wearing western clothing, and I'm virtually certain he's speaking English. We need to know where all these p. 176 ↳ things came from. The business suit; we talk about suits for management

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and so forth, the business suit was originally the hunting costume for a squire. And we know a little but more about how that started.

LP: Final question! Homer, of course, is one of those writers whose work is remembered, at least in his case, thousands of years after his death. How well do you think your own work will be remembered?

GW: Oh Lord! [*Long pause*.] Goodness sake. [*Pause*.] This is really, *really* a mean question that you're asking.

LP: [*Laughs*.] That's why we put it last.

GW: Well I'm glad you did. Uh, I don't know. Two or three hundred years possibly. It's very hard to answer that without being either falsely modest or braggadocios. I would guess, a couple, three hundred years. That's only a guess.

LP: And how do you think you'll be remembered? As a science fiction writer? As a writer? As a late 20th century American writer?

GW: As a late 20th century American writer probably more than anything else. I doubt science fiction as a concept will be still around in 300 years from now. But they will have a number of other concepts, a number of other genres that grew out of what we now call science fiction. They will have forgotten very largely that there was this thing called science fiction, and what they are really dealing with is sprouts put out by this thing. Ancient writers had no such thing as fantasy. They wrote what we now call fantasy, but they didn't know it was fantasy, and they didn't consider it a genre. The genre Homer worked in was the epic poem, something we've pretty well dropped.

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