

Read It, Late September 2016

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Well, the second half of August went fast. And so did most of September. This blog post has been sitting on my computer, unfinished, for some time. I'll try to be more regular, although I am now spending my free time packing my books for a move, which is taking up a great deal of time. The library takes up a lot of boxes, and a lot of storage space! I had to rent a second storage unit. I purchased heavy-duty 12" x 12" x 12" boxes from U-Line, so that I can stack them without worrying about crushed boxes and damaged books. So far I have almost fifty boxes of books packed. I am not sure exactly how many boxes we will need, but I suspect it will be about a hundred. As I pack them, I am taking pictures of each book, and updating my Delicious Library database. So if all goes well, by the time we are completely packed, I will have a complete catalog of every book I own.

Packing and sorting books always brings up the question of whether and what books to purge, and how. I have pulled out a few to give away, but I have not really taken the time to consider whether to keep each book. It is difficult to decide. A lot of the books, especially my older computer science books, took considerable effort to track down. Many are long out of print and scarce. It would be almost criminal to just send them off to the Goodwill or a library book sale. They are unlikely to find a good home that way. I have in the past considered setting myself up as a seller on Alibris, but you have to pay to do that. That might make sense after the move. Alternately, I could list books on eBay. Basic eBay listings don't cost me anything, as a seller, unless the item sells.

Anyway, on to the books.

***Acceptance* by Jeff VanderMeer**

When I reviewed *Authority* a short while ago, I wrote:

I have started reading the third part with low expectations. I haven't finished it yet. Already, it is more engaging than the second one. But I think my final verdict will likely be that readers should read the first book, which I reviewed highly in May, and stop there.

And in short, this is exactly what happened. I finished *Acceptance* and found it unsatisfying. Like *Authority*, it suffers in comparison to the first book, *Annihila-*

tion. It sets up the sensation that there will be revelations and climaxes. We learn a little more and speculate a little more about what is going on in Area X, and there are some interesting and disturbing *scenes* and *moments*, but overall the latter two books in the trilogy both lack the sense of sustained build-up, forward movement, and storytelling that kept me happily turning pages of the first one.

So I'm going to do what I said I would do, keeping the first volume in my library and giving away the other two, and accept that VanderMeer tried, but somehow wasn't able to make these books really work together as a trilogy. I think the setting might still be a fertile setting for other stories, but the stories VanderMeer actually managed to tell in *Authority* and *Acceptance* just didn't live up to the uncanny weirdness, beauty, and intensity he achieved in the first volume. Which is a shame, but not exactly a startling revelation, since many, many trilogies follow in those same well-worn tracks.

The Stainless Steel Rat Books

Some time ago I read Harry Harrison's original novel *The Stainless Steel Rat*, released all the way back in 1961.

In the last couple of weeks I picked up an omnibus paperback containing the first three books and so completed the next two books, *The Stainless Steel Rat's Revenge* and *The Stainless Steel Rat Saves the World*.

Revenge features a storyline about an alien civilization that has expansionist aspirations, and is busily invading other planets. Harrison's world is not deep or complex but it is entertaining and fast-moving. His plot points often seem a little bit clichéd and feel like TV dramas, but I think one could make the case that this is, in part, because his novels have influenced several generations of screenwriters.

In *World* there is an elaborate time-travel narrative. Time-travel stories were not new in 1972, but some of the tropes weren't quite as tired. Slippery Jim travels back in time to 1975, and has highly amusing adventures trying to figure out the culture of old Earth.

I'm currently working on *The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You*. In this volume, Slippery Jim's twin sons are full-grown and ready to embark on a dubious adventure with Jim and Angelina.

Let's face it; the Stainless Steel Rat stories are not heavy, or deep. At least, the ones I've read so far are not, although amid Slippery Jim's constant boozing, an admirable personal philosophy does emerge — a philosophy about personal freedom, coercion, and the role of the state and the military.

Harrison is apparently still writing Stainless Steel Rat stories over fifty years later, so maybe the new ones get heavier or deeper. I don't yet know. The volumes I've read so far are slightly satirical but mostly just amusing adventures

in the mold of old-fashioned adventure tales. They are admirable as light reading. Each one consists of about 21 short chapters. There are lots of narrow escapes and cliffhangers. They are, in fact, a nice antidote to some of the much heavier works that I'm reading. Works like...

The Book of the Short Sun

Having finished the New Sun books in unabridged audiobook format, including *The Urth of the New Sun*, I jumped straight to the Short Sun books. I have tried to read the Short Sun books a couple of times to date. Each time I got hung up, if I recall correctly, about halfway through *In Green's Jungles*.

These unabridged audiobooks from YouTube have given me another chance to finally make it through the Short Sun books, the challenging third series of Wolfe's "solar cycle" books. The third and last book of this trilogy, *Return to the Whorl*, unfortunately does not seem to be available on YouTube. I'm not sure if it was ever recorded like the others. There also is not an audiobook version available on Amazon, or via Audible, so I'll have to read that one in print form.

Even with the long hours of available listening time in the car, and large quantities of coffee, *In Green's Jungles* remains a difficult work.

Recap: *On Blue's Waters*

The first volume, *On Blue's Waters*, is for the most part structured as a relatively straightforward story, but events are related out of order. And as the story continues, more and more deeply strange elements are mentioned, some whose significance only becomes clear upon a second or even third reading.

Horn, a character from the Long Sun books, is the narrator of *On Blue's Waters*. He tells us about accepting a mission to travel across the planet Blue to claim a seat on a "lander," a spacecraft, which will return to the Whorl, the generation starship that brought humans to this solar system. His mission is to find Silk, the hero of the Long Sun books. He wants to bring Silk to Blue, because civilization on Blue is degenerating, suffering from a distinct lack of coherent, moral leadership.

Horn has several adventures and misadventures, all told in a complex, interleaved retrospect. He meets a young woman who seems to be human, but who has gills. She seems to have been transformed by a goddess into a literal siren. He is granted a vision of this goddess, who can take the form of a gigantic woman. She seems much like Juturna, the giant undine in the New Sun books.

Taking the young woman as his companion and lover, Horn violates his marriage. In a disturbing scene, he convinces the young woman, Seawrack, to sing for him. This singing arouses him so much that he brutally rapes her. It seems that both his violent and procreative instincts have been aroused, and he seems to hurt her as much as possible in the assault. This is a disturbing and baffling scene.

How are we to identify with the narrator afterwards? Was he really unable to control himself because of Seawrack's magical singing?

Wolfe here is clearly trying to challenge the reader by giving us a narrator who is difficult to empathize with, just as the New Sun books featured a young man who was literally a torturer, and whose job was to execute people by beheading, or perform other acts of punishment. I'm still disturbed by the way this Horn doesn't seem to fit with the Horn of the remainder of the trilogy; at the very least, Wolfe is warning the reader that "this isn't going to be easy." At worst, it seems almost a George R. R. Martinesque act of sadism. It fits, though, with a recurring theme in the book — just who is a monster, here, and monstrous, and who is human? We have humans behaving monstrously, and monsters who don't.

Horn meets one of the inhumu, a vampire-like alien being who takes on the appearance of a young boy. His relationship with this inhumu, Krait, is set up in relation to his relationship with Seawrack. The cast of characters on Horn's small boat is rounded out with a hus, an eight-legged creature a bit like a boar, named Babbie. Babbie is not human, but seems to develop greater intelligence and empathy as he spends time with Horn. So does Krait. Seawrack seems to have been human once, but only constant contact with Horn keeps her so. In addition to the actual storyline of *In Blue's Jungles*, Wolfe has set up some complex philosophical questions about personhood, especially how our conception of someone's personhood can change. But as soon as you have a feeling that you pretty well understand these issues, Horn in the present tense, who somehow now seems to have with him Silk's bird, Oreb, casually mentions how all these things happened back before he died. And Oreb calls him "Silk." And the issue of just who Horn actually *is* starts to loom large in the reader's mind.

Back to *In Green's Jungles*

In the second volume, *In Green's Jungles*, we continue to learn more of the story, out of chronological order. It doesn't seem that Horn is deliberately trying to be confusing by recounting events this way; it seems more likely that he *can't* tell them in order, because he is still traumatized and damaged by the events of his life, and not ready to remember some of the events. The lander was a trap, and operated by the inhumu, to take humans not to the Whorl but to their planet, Green, to serve as slaves and/or food. Although the title is *In Green's Jungles*, very little of the story actually takes place on Green, except in recollection of Horn's earlier sojourn there. At one point Horn even lampshades this, writing that he is supposed to be telling us about Green.

As *In Green's Jungles* opens, an older Horn recounts staying with a man named Inclito. Some parts of Horn's story are told in storytelling sessions with Inclito's family. We learn about some of Horn's time on Green. Some years have passed since Horn's sea voyage with Babbie, Krait, and Seawrack; I'm not sure how

many. In the “present” of much of *In Green’s Jungles*, Horn tells us of his role in a war between city-states. We learn more about the “vanished people,” an ancient race of Blue and Green. There are other inhumu characters to understand and contend with, some disguised and some not.

And then, as Incanto, who is Horn, and who may also be in some sense Silk, is left to sleep in the snow next a freezing inhuma, he somehow takes a whole contingent of fighting mercenaries to Green, via some kind of astral travel. And *then* things get so strange and difficult that, I think, this is the point at which I gave up in my previous attempts to complete it, and set the book aside.

I’ve done better this time, but I have to admit that after finishing *In Green’s Jungles* in audio form, I immediately had to go back and listen to most of it a second time, before I felt like I understood it to my own satisfaction. I don’t feel like listening to it a third time would be out of the question. I think it wouldn’t hurt, in fact, to re-read or listen to all four of the Long Sun books, and then *On Blue’s Waters* and *In Green’s Jungles* again. (Unfortunately I can’t find the last Long Sun book, *Exodus from the Long Sun*, in audio form).

Tearing Apart the Narrative

In Green’s Jungles is an *immensely* and *deceptively* complex work. It bounces around in time and space such that it really would not be easy to put the chronology of events into a completely rational order. One would have to make a detailed outline and then cut it apart and reorder everything. In fact I get the sense that Wolfe constructed these three Short Sun books by doing the opposite — tearing a detailed chronology of events to shreds and reassembling it. The resulting narrative is as told by a narrator who is himself deeply damaged and confused, although (I think) not actually deluded or misled as to the true nature of events, as Severian often is in *The Book of the New Sun*.

I wish I had *Return to the Whorl* in audio form. That book is also complex. I’d like to be able to listen to it in the car as well. Instead, I’ve been reading the printed version again. I have not gotten very far yet. In *Return to the Whorl* we finally start to learn what happens in between Horn’s “death” and how he fails — sort of — to complete his mission. Because I am not that far into it, I am not really sure whether *In Green’s Jungles* represents the peak of narrative confusion and complexity in the trilogy, and things start to become more linear in the third book, or whether Wolfe will be twisting things up even more. I’m betting that he is, at least for a while, going to ratchet the degree of difficulty up even higher. In 2013, I wrote:

Reading *In Green’s Jungles* is like looking through a kaleidoscope held by someone else. As soon as you start to figure out what you’re looking at, and say “Ah! Yes, I think I see what is going on,” he twists the kaleidoscope and says “how about now?” And it’s all a jumble of pretty fragments again.

I don't feel like I'm even at a point yet where I can adequately review this trilogy. I'm a good reader. I once audited a seminar class on James Joyce's *Ulysses* and I had a lot to say about that book, and felt as though I got a great deal out of it. I still have my notes. I was an English major and studied big and difficult books, classic works of literature like *Moby Dick*. Wolfe can, when he wants to, really make things *hard* by playing with the fundamentals of storytelling, in a way that Joyce didn't (Joyce played with language and presentation freely, but *Ulysses* still observes storytelling unities), and Melville didn't (*Moby Dick* is chock-full of long, discursive digressions, but again, it's still very much a linear story).

The Book of the New Sun: An Unreliable Narrator

The Book of the New Sun, the first long novel in Wolfe's Solar Cycle, is so fascinating in part because it *can* be read in a very satisfactory way as a fantasy/adventure novel set in the *milieu* of Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* stories, just as *Moby Dick* can be read as an adventure story about whaling. It is perfectly respectable to read and enjoy Severian's adventure as a big travelogue, exploring his world and winding his way to his ascent of the throne. But the story is not quite what it appears. The fantasy world turns out to be a science fiction world. Many things that initially seem magical have a technological explanation. The lacunae and oddities and inconsistencies in Severian's story reveal that he is not what he seems. In reading Severian's account, at least for a second or third time, Severian's identity becomes somewhat complex as we realize that his timeline has been manipulated and his whole existence across timelines interfered with. Horn has not, I think, had any such external manipulation done to him by powers above the stage. But he has nonetheless been badly damaged, or maybe enlightened, as you may prefer to think of it. His identity itself altered, and the narrative that he unspools reflects this chronological confusion; it's a tangled ball of yarn.

The Book of the Long Sun: Concentrated Storytelling

The Book of the Long Sun, the second long novel in the Solar Cycle, seems right off the bat to give us an unreliable narrator — a young priest who has, in the first book's first scene, a vision, or perhaps a mild stroke. He sets off on a great mission, believing that he has been granted enlightenment by the mysterious God, the Outsider. The story is actually quite straightforward, although through various details we come to understand that this story is connected to the *Long Sun* books because the gods of the Whorl, the generation starship, are the uploaded children of Pas, who is himself the uploaded Typhon, the two-headed ruler of Urth who Severian meets in both the four-volume novel and the "coda" *The Urth of the New Sun*. And Silk, it turns out, is not unreliable at all, although he may be divinely inspired, by a real God, not one of the fraudulent technologically-enhanced human "gods" of the Whorl.

The Book of the Long Sun is not complex in the sense that *The Book of the New Sun* is complex. The plot is relatively straightforward. The challenge to the

reader stems from the way the storytelling across the four volumes is so intense, complex, and focused. Events take place in an extremely compressed time scale. Dialogue is packed with meaning. There are dozens of characters to meet. Small details mentioned in passing become significant later, and there is a **lot** of detail to absorb.

The Book of the Short Sun: An Unreliable Narrative

The Book of the Short Sun takes yet another approach to narrative, in that we don't necessarily have an unreliable narrator, but a scrambled *narrative*. It is definitely the most difficult of the three Solar Cycle series. I think that *The Book of the New Sun* endures because of the way the reader can enjoy it on multiple levels, and it richly rewards re-reading. Too, I've started listening to *The Book of the Long Sun*, which I've read twice already. Unlike *The Book of the New Sun*, the story of Silk does not become more confusing on re-reading, but richer and more beautiful. I am listening with admiration as I see just how brilliantly Wolfe sets up the story from the very first sentence, making the onrushing events that overtake Silk seem inevitable. It's a bit like an incredibly detailed short story.

Unlike these other two series, though, *The Book of the Short Sun* seems to *require* re-reading in order to understand the most fundamental aspects of the book, such as:

- “Who is telling the story?”
- “What happens in the story?”
- “Who are the other characters in the story?”
- “Which of these characters are people?”
- “Which of the characters are monsters?”

And as I have not even completed all three *Short Sun* books once, I still feel like I'm not quite ready to answer these questions. And I'm not really prepared to *advocate* for this trilogy like I have advocated for the other two, because I really have come to believe that this trilogy just *isn't* written for everyone. It's really written for a reader who wants at the outset to take on a multi-dimensional chess game with Gene Wolfe. And I'm not entirely sure, yet, whether it's even written for *me*.

A Fragmented Narrator for a Fragmented Narrative

There isn't a lot of analysis out there on the Short Sun books, probably because they are so complex. Even though the trilogy is fifteen years old, I suspect that not very many readers have actually completed it, and of those readers, even fewer came away feeling that they understood it. I did find one interesting and, I think, correct interpretive note in the form of some incomplete notes on the Wolfe Wiki, which today seems to be off-line; I don't even know who to credit these thoughts to, but they start off like so:

I believe we can take the old pen case as a metaphor for the old

body Horn has brought back from the whorl. “At present it holds two quills, for I have taken the third one out. Two were in it when I found it in the ashes of our shop. The third, with which I am writing, was dropped by Oreb not so long ago.” To push the analogy, the three pens are three spirits: Silk, Pas, and Horn. The third, with which he begins to write this book, will be “dropped” before the end.

See <http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=TheBookOfTheShortSun.TheOldPenCase> (although as it exists in the form of a Wiki, that page may well have changed by the time you go to look at it).

I’d like to be able to sum up and render some useful final judgement on *The Book of the Short Sun*, but I simply can’t — at least not yet. Maybe I’ll be able to do so soon. For now, it’s just too big. For the moment let’s just say that if *The Book of the New Sun* is Wolfe’s *Ulysses*, I hope that *The Book of the Short Sun* is not his *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Next time I will try to include some notes about Robert Borski’s book *Solar Labyrinth*. This is a book of short essays about *The Book of the New Sun* and the mysteries in that text, particularly the mysteries surrounding the identities and relationships of some of the characters. I re-read this work while re-reading *The Book of the New Sun*, to refresh my memory. Borski’s book is interesting, but in some ways, to me at least, not fully convincing. More on that next time!

Scorecard

Completed since last time:

- *Acceptance* by Jeff VanderMeer
- *The Stainless Steel Rat’s Revenge* by Harry Harrison
- *The Stainless Steel Rat Saves the World* by Harry Harrison
- *The Stainless Steel Rat Wants You* by Harry Harrison
- *On Blue’s Waters* by Gene Wolfe (unabridged audiobook)
- *In Green’s Jungles* by Gene Wolfe (unabridged audiobook)
- *Solar Labyrinth* by Robert Borski
- *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J. K. Rowling (bedtime reading for the kids)

In progress:

- *Return to the Whorl* by Gene Wolfe
- *Nightside the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (unabridged audiobook)
- *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle (bedtime reading for the kids)
- *A Hat Full of Sky* by Terry Pratchett (bedtime reading for the kids)

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