

Read It, Mid-October 2016

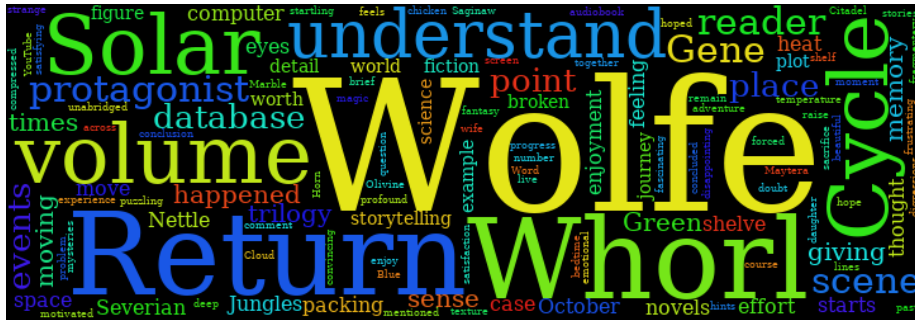


Figure 1: Word Cloud

My wife and I like to play a little game of chicken in October. We agree to tolerate the dropping temperatures without turning on the heat until November first. Then we see if anyone’s willpower cracks. (I should add that the kids don’t seem to care or notice; they run around so much that they generate their own heat, and don’t get cold, and won’t keep warm clothes on, until it is *really* cold. But for me, especially as I get older, October in Saginaw starts to get pretty uncomfortable; not just cold, but damp. Since my work keeps my largely sedentary, I have trouble keeping my body temperature up, even with wool socks and layers.

Anyway, I was the one to chicken out this year. Today is only the fourteenth, but I have a virus. I’ve got a sore throat and my lungs aren’t feeling like they should. The kids passed something to me. I feel awful. So I am giving up, and turning on the heat.

As I mentioned last time, I’ve been packing books for an upcoming move. We now have 51 boxes of books in a storage unit. I think we haven’t quite reached the halfway point in book packing, as far as volumes go. I’m not entirely sure. I have to make more progress if we have any hope of moving by the end of the year.

My computer is barely working. It is giving me occasional kernel panics, which are, I think, due to memory problems. Sometimes when I boot up I find that it is not recognizing all the installed memory. This is probably just be a case

of oxidized contacts, because it is eight years old. In the past I have fixed the problem by pulling out the memory riser cards, taking out all the memory modules, dusting them off, polishing the edge connectors with a soft eraser to remove oxidation, swapping them, and putting the whole thing back together. That might work again. Let's hope it does.

The computer holds my Delicious Library database. The database is backed up multiple times (and all the rest of my files are, too), so I won't lose any data if the computer goes completely belly-up, but it would be hugely inconvenient, because I'm using it, updating the database as I pack. The idea is that the database has a "shelf" for each box, showing exactly which books are in each box. I've included an estimate on the shelf-feet needed to shelve the contents of each box, so that we can choose to unpack only what we can shelve.

When I get through packing everything, I should have a freshly updated inventory of every book we own. I should also be able to purge the database of everything that *isn't* on one of the virtual shelves, meaning in a box. That should eliminate duplicates and books that are in the database but which I no longer own, having given them away or lost them.

In the midst of all this, I've been failing to get much writing done. My eyes have been bothering me. I suffer from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer_vision_syndrome and my lifestyle of the past sixteen months or so, where I'm not doing much with my eyes *other* than looking at screens, has made it considerably worse. On many evenings I just want to close my eyes, and the thought of spending one more minute staring at a screen makes me shudder. Often times I don't even want to read.

Anyway, on to the books, and some music.

***Return to the Whorl* by Gene Wolfe**

I have an unpleasant duty to perform. I am a big fan of Gene Wolfe. I have read his stories and novels and especially the Solar Cycle novels. I've come back to the New Sun books over and over again. Each time I get more out of them. They are a deep, moving, fascinating, humane, and even profound work.

I have finally finished *Return to the Whorl*. I have finally finished the *twelfth* and last volume of the Solar Cycle, almost thirty years after I first read *The Shadow of the Torturer*.

Disappointment and Frustration

Dear reader, it is a disappointing book. I've come at it every way I can, up, down, and sideways. I wanted to give Wolfe every benefit of the doubt that I possibly, because he has been such a source of inspiration. But ultimately I have to say that it isn't due to a lack of attention and effort on my part. I have worked hard to read these books. *Return* does not live up to the other

two volumes of the Short Sun trilogy, and it does not live up to the very high standards Wolfe set over the course of the whole Solar Cycle.

One might say that I just need to read it a few more times, and then everything will fall into place, and I'll understand it and it will work for me.

I don't think that's the case. My frustrating with the final book isn't that it doesn't make sense. I feel like I have the basics figured out, although some things remain puzzling. And I would also like to point out that the puzzling nature of the earlier parts of the Solar Cycle, the New Sun and Long Sun books, did not ruin my enjoyment of the *storytelling*, even on my first uncertain and slightly baffled initial reading. In fact, it was my deep enjoyment of both previous series that motivated me to come back to the books again and again.

I'm not sure I want to try reading the Short Sun books again at all, especially not *Return to the Whorl*. I might, but I have a pretty strong sense at the present time that *Return* is not going to magically improve so much on re-reading that I will want to recant this critical review.

I don't think it was inevitable that the trilogy would finish this way. The first two books of the Short Sun trilogy get progressively more challenging, and fragmented, but Wolfe could have, I believe, toned this down in the third volume and brought the story to a satisfying conclusion.

Instead he continued, and even intensified, the fragmentation and elliptical storytelling of *In Green's Jungles*, and the result is a story that does, eventually, make sense — but it is not satisfying, emotionally.

I'll come back to this in a moment, but first I want to talk about my current feelings about the whole 12-volume Solar Cycle.

The Solar Cycle in Retrospect

A few weeks ago, while I was still trying to finish *Return to the Whorl*, I left a comment on Reddit, giving a reader some unsolicited advice on how to read the Solar Cycle. Those comments, slightly, edited, follow:

The first series can be read the first time as, basically, a fantasy adventure story. If you don't get all the details, or have a nagging feeling that you haven't understood everything that is going on, or that Severian doesn't quite understand what is going on, that's totally normal, but you can get through the books the first time just understanding the surface plot.

You might then be motivated to go back and read them all again later, and understand all the events of the story in more depth, and then maybe read *Urth of the New Sun*, and maybe read some books *about* The Book of the New Sun, etc. You come to realize that even the genre of the book is in question — that the work is really science

fiction, not fantasy; and that there is no “magic” except technology indistinguishable from magic.

The Long Sun books are harder to read, in a way, because they do a few things differently. In the New Sun books there are a number of digressions and “side quests” — for example, the stories told in the camp of the Pelerines. You get more texture of the world in these digressions. If you skim lightly some of these digressive parts of the story on your first reading, you will still understand the basic trajectory of Severian’s journey.

The Long Sun books move much, much faster. There aren’t as many mysteries, but the time scale of the story is extremely compressed — days go by over the course of the four books, not years. And there’s just a huge amount of detail to keep up with. So reading them can be a bit challenging, with the large number of names and places and events to keep track of, and the way the plot-lines intersect. But it doesn’t have quite the sense of “what is really going on here?” as the New Sun books. The events unfold in pretty much a strict chronological order, and in limited set of places, and so there generally isn’t a lot of confusion over who is doing what, although a lot of the rich texture and detail and back-story of the world is revealed gradually — for example, there are hints about what Blood and Musk are actually up to with the birds of prey, but you won’t necessarily understand these hints until later.

The Short Sun books are, to me, much more challenging than the New Sun and Long Sun books. I have read the New Sun books at least five times. I’ve almost finished a third reading of the Long Sun books. But it took me three tries just to get through *In Green’s Jungles* without giving up, and I still have not made it through *Return to the Whorl*. In the Short Sun books the unities of time and space are shattered. The actual chronology becomes very broken. The books raise a lot of philosophical questions and they are fascinating, but the storyline itself is so broken up and fractured across time and space that it can be immensely frustrating trying to figure out who is doing what, and when.

I think they are definitely worth reading, but I just want to caution you not to expect an experience similar to the experience of reading the earlier books. You can enjoy the New Sun books figuring everything out. In the Long Sun books pretty much everything is eventually explained and it doesn’t take five re-readings to feel like you understand everything, although you really do have to concentrate to keep up. In the Short Sun books, just trying to figure out what is happening can be very challenging. But I would encourage

you not to give up on them.

If you feel the need to set them aside, well, I think that is a common reaction. You have to decide for yourself each time you try to read a book if the effort you put into it is worth the reward you get out of it. I think the Short Sun books are deliberately much harder and so will naturally weed out a lot of readers who don't want to work that hard. Honestly, I'm still not 100% sure that *Return* will be worth the effort, and I'm a reader who reads Dostoevsky and Melville and Joyce for fun. Yes, I'm saying the Short Sun books are harder to understand and enjoy than *Moby-Dick* and *Ulysses*... and certainly harder than other science fiction novels deemed "difficult" like *Dhalgren*... really.

Returning to *Return to the Whorl*

In *Return to the Whorl* we learn many startling things, and un-learn some things we thought we knew after getting through *In Green's Jungles*.

A Shockingly Compressed Timeline

The first two Short Sun books gave me the impression that Horn's adventures, since leaving his home on Lizard, were taking decades. I thought we might learn, eventually, that he had been gone from his wife, Nettle for as long as twenty years.

But in the third book, we find that he has been away for less than two years. This is an echo of Severian's journey; as changed as he was, his journey from the Citadel as exile, back to the Citadel as Autarch, takes only two years.

In the New Sun books, this is startling but seems convincing; Severian has been swept along by events outside his control, but his restlessness, and the fact that he has to repeatedly flee from his accusers for his various transgressions, makes it convincing. But to me, it seems *impossible* that the protagonist of the Short Sun books accumulates as much experience as he has, winning two wars and traveling across three worlds, in only two years.

Flashes and Fragments

In *Return*, the events in Dorp take place in fragmentary flashback; we actually read only a few very brief scenes covering what happened. The most interesting parts of the text cover what happened in the Whorl, when our protagonist returned there. In some beautiful scenes, Horn encounters Olivine, daughter of Maytera Marble (who is partly Maytera Rose). He conducts a sacrifice, and as they have no animal, he sacrifices bread and wine. In this scene it seems that he is inventing, or perhaps rediscovering, the Eucharist, and the familiar is made strange again by its strange context. It's a startling and beautiful scene and, to me, the emotional high point and best part of this volume.

Meanwhile, the entire arc with Pig is concluded abruptly, with a single scene at the far end of the Whorl. It's a moving scene, but so brief; it sets up parallel sacrifices, of Olivine and our protagonist. We also get a scene where our protagonist's mission for Maytera Marble is concluded. Unlike the long visit in *On Blue's Waters*, this one is told very quickly. We learn what happened, but because of the brevity of the scene, it doesn't carry a whole lot of emotional weight.

Is it possible that Wolfe wanted to conclude the Short Sun arc in four books, not three, but was forced to cut the ending down into one volume? It almost feels as if that sort of forced amputation of the plot lines has taken place.

The Dropped Pen

Wolfe actually leaves our protagonist behind and the final chapters are written by other characters: by Hide and Daisy. It seems that he is emphasizing that life goes on; our protagonist will move beyond our knowledge, back to the Whorl, and his family on Blue will also go on without him. It seems that the broken pieces of his identity have finally come together and he accepts what has happened. But we don't hear about this from *him*, a finally-unified "him." That also feels unsatisfying. For three volumes I've hoped that the protagonist and narrator himself would say something clear about his whole arc, not just what it occurs to him to tell us about at any given moment, often jumping wildly back and forth through time and space. We don't ever get the satisfaction of reading the words written by a *healed* and *whole* protagonist.

Wolfe's technique, in the third series of the Solar Cycle, is experimental. It seems a bit like a relic of the New Wave science fiction experiments of the *Dangerous Visions* era. I find a lot of that stuff is still interesting to read, but often doesn't really *work*. In this case the experiment is not a failure, but in *In Green's Jungles* it starts to impede the storytelling, and in *Return to the Whorl* it raises the impedance to such a degree that I could not really feel the satisfaction I hoped from reading the conclusion of a vast, moving, profound, and well-told story.

Who is Wolfe serving, by sticking with this fragmentary style? In this volume, it starts to feel like sadism towards me, the reader; not a prodding towards a deeper reading, but a torment. When the story takes another crazy jump through time and space I want to yell, like Oreb, "No cut!"

Mysteries remain. There was another trip to the Red Sun Whorl, apparently traumatic, which is mentioned only briefly, but not detailed. What happened on that trip? There is something mysterious about Nettle. When Nettle helps Horn's "daughter" Jahlee, Jahlee refers to Nettle as "Rani." This is a clue of some kind. What the *hell* does it mean? The book is in its final pages, and as the reader at this point, I don't *want* to confront a new mystery that the story won't answer, because I've run out of story. This is an example of what I called Wolfe's sadism towards the reader; at this point, it feels like I'm being tormented by a bully.

Maybe I will figure it all out someday. But I am not too pleased that, in the final pages of this epic, Wolfe is still teasing me, still turning the kaleidoscope, introducing more puzzles, when he ought to be tying up loose ends.

In many ways I feel that Wolfe is “criticism-proof,” as far as evaluating how good a book such as *Return* is; it’s hard enough just to *understand* it, much less to judge it. But here I am, criticizing and judging. The third Short Sun book is disappointing, to the extent that it taints my enjoyment of the whole Short Sun trilogy. It’s a shame. Maybe I’ll change my mind one day after taking another crack at it, but I doubt it.

Scorecard

Completed since last time:

- *Nightside the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- *Lake of the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- *Caldé of the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe (unabridged audiobook from YouTube)
- *Return to the Whorl* by Gene Wolfe

In progress:

- *Exodus from the Long Sun* by Gene Wolfe
- *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle (bedtime story reading)
- *A Hat Full of Sky* by Terry Pratchett (bedtime story reading)
- *An Illustrated Book of Bad Arguments* by Ali Almosawi and Alejandro Giraldo (bedtime story reading)

Saginaw, Michigan
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