

INTERLIBRARY LOAN: WOLFE BORROWING SOME OF HIS FANS FOR PERMANENT LOAN

In Craig Brewer's analysis of Gene Wolfe's *Interlibrary Loan* he argues that the treasure, the green box, is something that allows characters means to keep their memories intact; it affords them integration which is otherwise ostensibly unavailable to them for being reclones who have only partial memories. (Integration is not only deemed important for reclones, as Brewer himself evidences in praising *Interlibrary Loan*—that is, the “uncloned” book itself—primarily for its united story, its unified theme.) I think this lends insight to how most treasures in Wolfe's works tend to operate. That is, beyond their specified magic abilities, they afford their protagonists, the readers vicariously living through them, and I think Wolfe himself, who is embodied in his protagonists, a felt sense of integrity to temporarily brush aside any felt sense of fragmentation or partiality. They are prized, not simply for what they will afford you in the like of what they might purchase or otherwise obtain for you, that is, as means to an end, but primarily for what they remain to you intact as an undisturbed whole. Indeed, it is revealing that one of the great treasures in Wolfe's works, Setr's hoards, remains basically untouched, even for having been thieved here and there, for being so enormous to be effectively and meaningfully almost immune to loss (there are many “dragon” “hordes”—note, not always of traditional wealth but sometimes just in, say, book collections—in Wolfe's fiction, which mean as much for each of the protagonist's holding them as much as the fully intact dwarf's horde meant for Tolkien's Smaug). In a sense they might afford you immortality — see for example that no matter how many people successfully seek out and assassinate the father in *Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Free, Live Free*, and *Interlibrary Loan*, they fail to access his treasure. It is for example the immortality of the story, the fact that nothing can stop it from repeating itself, from summoning itself anew, just by beginning it again, that makes “Tackie” of “Island of Dr. Death and other Stories” somewhat consoled when he can gain no self-integration otherwise for the chaos of his—living as he is with a depressed and insane mother and with his being subject to her boyfriend Jason, who so enjoys shaming and humiliating them both—real life realities to manage that.

Sometimes the treasure is taken from you, though, sometimes it doesn't prove immortal, and when it happens it is often devastating for the person who depended on it's being immune to all that you yourself feel vulnerable of being sundered to; you disintegrate. The great treasure for *Long Sun*'s Councillor Loris—his own true

physical body—is kept deep within hidden vaults and submerged deep under water, but when he is forced to cognate it as something absent protective magic, he becomes so untangled in mind, so rattled, he is apt for the immediate dispatch that is in fact served upon him. When Severian’s treasure, the treasured gold coin that he buried so no one would find it and that he spelled magic charms over, loses its substance as “magical,” that is, when it becomes despoiled as actually a measure of not how valuable he was to someone but how appallingly commonplace, he has had four novels of adventures to have prepared for it and he can now use it, not as a device to be clung to for a sense of secure being, but a device which could be dispensed with to obtain further and maybe a more secure sense of being whole, for it now making him feel fortified to so readily recognize its falsity. When the future knight’s sword Able, Able the American citizen, threw aside as if it were trash is redeemed by the great knight Ravd so that it seen by Able instead as an object of veneration, we might feel the sort of threat a “genuine American” who will be magicked to be the land’s greatest power might pose for the whole realm of Mythgarthr, if he wasn’t sufficiently made to subscribe to its reigning ethos. It would all seem something of a perverse joke, as it would for the Monty Python crew venturing into the Medieval, or for Alice as she ends up having enough with these things in Wonderland that are only after all a pack of cards, and the “cards” themselves might begin to sense it. If one wants to know why the attack against those revealing toxic masculinity is so energized right now, it’s likely because a lot of people sense that some “treasure,” some ideological treasure, is at risk of losing its sense of being a metaphysical real, a “real” you can go to collect oneself, like statues of great men in the park, or like the American flag itself, and left simply as an immature contrivance insecure people created to make themselves feel intact. Each one of us that had once benefited from this “truth” that gained its sense of immortality for being so broadly shared, would become the sons doomed to suffer the *WizardKnight’s* Five Fates: the sword that was to doom us that we’d protected with locks and unsurmountable isolation, has found its way to being nevertheless let loose, and we sense it.

Brewer argues that *Interlibrary Loan* should be read as a slave narrative. This feels right, and I’ll use it to describe this work, but there nonetheless remains a problem in obliging him. Slave narratives are not supposed to be about, well, not quite utopias, but scenarios one actually wants to situate yourself in, but rather episodes that draw you into situations so grotesque you are supposed to learn from your experience “there” to further seek out their elimination in the worlds you exist in outside the narrative—they are supposed to be like the dungeons Severian commits all his torturers to so they would know what the prisoners knew—and this is not what this text is. Wolfe in maybe all of his final novels basically is contriving slave

narratives, that is, narratives where the protagonists begin in situations of powerless or that recall the relative powerless of many juveniles. They're usually forced into this situation. They're puppets, played by others. *Sorcerer's House's* Bax never grows up. He's been at school his whole life. That's what he's done in his away time. And now he's back fixing up his dad's place, mowing lawns and obliging his mother: he's the mother's boy that for example Silk in *Long Sun* thought he was on path towards being on before he chose to identify himself for awhile as criminal—as mother-antagonist, in essence, for the crime he engages in, invading homes, is exactly the one that his mother lashed out at him for in his youth—as protective skein while he adapted to an identity that felt closer to his true being. The villain, his brother, is the one who got away and who took on adult responsibilities. *Home Fires* has Skip who has tended the home fires, that is, who has stayed home. There is a lot of talk about him being a hawk-lawyer who surveys his city, but he too is the false man of Truman of the Truman Show. That is, he is the boy who didn't leave home but clung to it. It's so shameful a situation that he'll risk everything — his life, his wife — just to see if he can redeem himself later in life. *Land Across* also has a lot of talk about the main protagonist being a great man, a sure and true man confident enough about his status he'd grow fruit trees rather than more sedate ones even as it would draw onto him others who'd try and crush him out of envy, but he's actually a man stripped of status and is a slave of his owner, Naala, whose bodily needs he services, who is so much older than him people assume she's his mother. *Evil Guest* has as a main a pretend Cinderella character, Cassie—pretend, for never actually realizing the genuine worth that only needs to be finally seen of the actual fairy-tale Cinderella—who ventures about as if she is a character in a Pynchon novel, with thousands of conspiracies occurring around her that she'll never penetrate. She has in reality no significant charms, no atypical star-quality charms, that is, but is told she has an abundance of them and is what makes her an ostensible goddess, and so seems ripe for takedown when a perspicacious “stepmother” actant villain finally appears and confirms her own suspicion that others are massively projecting and she remains basically common and, outside of what her body... a body which is spiralling out into fatness anyway, still offers men, course, brutal, and toss-away worthless. It's what her stepfather, who molested her, thought of her, and she's confirmed his assessment in her adult life by being not art but trash.

Why would Wolfe situate himself in protagonists like this? Why would he dedicate several hours of every day he's alive, basically, to inhabiting protagonists who if they aren't literally spit-upon in their texts, are framed so that the reader is almost motioned to supply the lack (think for example of the ridiculous titles Ern... and the other tossed-aside authors, afflicts upon all their books, ridiculous for carrying

the essence of someone who doesn't know enough to try for true sophistication but is unaware of their failure); to be the parent many of them had, who was clearly never on their side? I think out of desire. We know for instance that as much as Wolfe's main protagonists inform us again and again that they are fundamentally bad people who are trying to be good that each within these specific environments feel quite justified in lambasting others for their crimes and speaking for their own need, not to be punished, but to finally gain a moment of triumphant redemption; to imagine themselves as not those with rotten cores but those who should feel good, integrated, when they speak in defence of themselves in a speech where all that should have long ago already been said, finally is said, for things having become just that unfair and intolerable. If Wolfe thought his whole life he was a bad man trying to be good, how great it must have felt for him to conceive of a situation where the protagonist he is living through, Ern, is fully justified to take down the "mad Queen" Adah who is subjecting him to abuse after abuse, neglect after neglect. If we go back to what may not appear to be a slave narrative but which might also be usefully and meaningfully conceived as one, the *WizardKnight*, we might decide that Able's full-out denunciation of Arnthur is so enabling for him, and for Wolfe, who is living through him, that the curse afflicted on him to be a puppet who would find himself helplessly driven to serve his purpose and deliver a message to the king, is something he might have sought out for himself in any case, for it meant wiping out for a moment that who he was was the sort of son his mother and brother would be right to have abandoned as they did; more than annoyance: an irredeemable bad boy.

The benefit of spending so many hours within people who are forced back into being children may be a way of persuading yourself that what the re clones are due for, that is, to be dispatched into a fire, but not before being humiliated from the hanging of "Sale: ten cents for the whole worthless batch" signs around their necks by indifferent, that is, by Maytera Rose-cold, woman librarians, is something you may not actually now deserve. Whatever "tolokosche," that infamous revengeful spirit in *New Sun*, has been pursuing you your whole life, whatever voice inside you that hates you that Severian says is universal for all people and is what the dreaded torturer device the Revolutionary gives life to, that Diane in "Death of Dr. Island" identifies as the voice of her parents that she can never get away from and which as we know is responsible for her drive for self-annihilation, for her suicide, that Auk argues is the voice of his mother-substitute, Mint, that is sometimes so averse in him he legit contemplates killing her so it might also hopefully then leave his head, might surely be abated by the fact that you are not someone who is indulging in women, wine, great food and other assorted pleasures, à la Dr. Fevre,

but some poor sod suffering in freezing-cold ice caves, whilst others pleasure themselves to the *really* crime-worthy sins.

But if this was enough of a hedge, you might not be desperate to show that you've also left aside your desire for, say, the bodies of young women for the bodies of women more your age, you might just let yourself just simply indulge what you clearly think of as bodies in their best plumage, as Virginia Woolf would call it, and this is what I think actually is motivating Ern in his efforts towards getting back "the captain" Audrey into his life as much as anything else is. Brewer argues Wolfe had her come back to him absent the memories that Ern still maintains so that it's mimetic of his real-life situation of tending to a beloved wife with alzheimers. But I think the history of Wolfe's stories shows that if his protagonist is to remain life-bound to someone, he'd better have something over her or he won't feel comfortable, and indeed would be forced to leave her. Ern already had revealed he had an intense need to show how battle, how war, would show that he in fact was more captain than she was, a Nietzschean motive for the anticipation for war that resembles how delighted rightwingers in Ukraine were by the fact of war because they say it made this ostensible reveal of actual fundamental truths of differences between the sexes, now incontrovertible, for it being proved when shit hit the fan and people no longer could afford the luxury of fidelity to what might just be fakery. Elsewhere, in other novels, one has of course Silk who is vastly more adult than his bride Hyacinth, one has Able who only unites, for good, to his child-minded bride-to-be once he is captain over her—can call and demand her, and she'd naturally oblige him for his finally finding what was natural to him, "authority"—and one has for example Skip, who, as mentioned, refuses to be back with his Chelle until he not only has wealth over his wife but is her equal or better in terms of military service. If this was Wolfe thinking of his wife, Rose, it would spell the sort of disquiet about their relationship that should arise upon anyone's reading of the *Short Sun* series, where it really looks like a science-fictionized autobiographical novel is in play where a man seeks adventures, a space where he can engage them outside his wife, to stage a catastrophic example of revenge on his wife for switching love and attention off him onto a first-born child. Was this what Wolfe was doing when, like Nettle would know from reading all her own husband's accounts, he wrote novel after novel where his wife would witness her husband's having spent all his time alone from her inscribing himself in male protagonists who lust after and usually "achieve" sublimely beautiful, immature child-women as bed partners? Did he write these knowing his wife would read them and keep some memory of them? Were they less about a man slowly finding his wife being taken from him, but about a wife finding her husband was slowly

detaching himself from her and onto his unending fictional Seawracks? If so, these novels—what sea-wrecks!

Brewer argues that *Interlibrary Loan* was about a desire for connections, about Ern and other characters making meaningful connections with others. This point deserves to be taken seriously. But I think it might not be too troll to argue that what also needs to be taken seriously is the possibility that by his final book Wolfe had decided there was nothing for it, that there was no way he could present himself, nothing he could do, that would earn him some deeply felt sense that he had succeeded in not in the end being simply a bad man, a bad man who wouldn't try suicide, to sign himself up for the fire, not for the reasons Brewer argues Ern does, that is, out of being abused by a horrendous Adah or indifferent woman librarians, but because this abuse confirmed a self-estimation he'd been living with his whole life: "I am actually no good; such is no less than I deserved." Wolfe might have thought that that fire, that fire that, if are making assumptions of what his last novels must mean for him owing to his closeness to death, which seems to be the thing to do with this novel even as he wrote *WizardKnight* while he was in his seventies and it's about someone everyone mistakes as a mature adult but who insists is really a boy, is a metaphor for hell, that looms as inevitable for all the reclones, was not really going to be abated as something he deserved by any tactical manoeuvre, by some masochistic manoeuvre where he aims, as Brewer argues Ern is aiming, for small accomplishments, for some small "salvic hope" where for example even as he would never make make "complete sense" of his life he could still forge a "narrative of release in an otherwise strange and fallen situation." For, like all tolokosches, they, the judging fire, know deep down the truth about you, and that in his final gesture towards his end fate, hell, he might as well forge some connections for himself so at least he won't be so alone while down there.

Like Severian had a bower with Thecla, even while in wilds, Wolfe might have with him fan-readers he might visit now and then, if he managed his last book just right. Why else forge a narrative where readers might find themselves giving a thumbs-up to that most grossly antifeminist presentation of why women shouldn't vote, shouldn't rule, should never be trusted with power, namely, that they are ruled by cycles that make them so unruly emotional at certain times at the month they might as automatic response for a small upset, murder people? I mean, oh my god. (Yes, textually it gets the retort, though especially extreme in her, this cycle is in everyone, but Adah is so representative of the stereotypical presentation of the dangers of woman rule that I'd bet it nevertheless plays untainted to those still holding antifeminist inclinations, that is, to a still very large portion of humanity.)

This isn't Wolfe in the 1980s giving account as to why he was always conscious to be fair to both men and women, show them as equal, even if someone showed to him how his own texts showed he did still, despite his perhaps earnest efforts, nevertheless skew, with one sex losing out, but someone consciously and conspicuously in regress of Mary Wollstonecraft, that is, of progressives and their arguments of two and a half centuries ago, that even Republicans would now... or at least in the moments before just now, feel obliged to salute canon. Why else other than to lure some of his readers into damnation does he forge a narrative where readers, experiencing themselves perhaps as in a deprived "slave" state, might give themselves the ok to indulge in vicarious participation of their avatar's lusty examinations of girls' full breasts, and of their avatar's delight in their sitting on his lap on a sleigh ride while he imagines what it would be like to have sex with each of them, and as he plots to obtain one of them for purposes of sex—a not-impossible venture for the in-demand, much-needed expert treasure-finder—all while thinking himself oh-so-fine a gentleman for having seen himself spontaneously rise up, Will Smith-like, in defence of them previously? Why have them situate themselves in an avatar who thinks of himself as their protectors, who admires himself for it, all while thinking nothing averse in arranging to have them as replacements for some other girl who used to give him sex but who is now frustratingly absent, other than that it might invite trouble for it inspiring envy in others?

Surely this could be Wolfe operating as he has shown heroes can act towards their followers, namely, chain them into hero-worship so total so they can be yanked in to take your own place in hell, if possible, or to at least make hell alleviated somewhat for it being shared, if unavoidable. "Trust me, guys. Everything you've been told is not ok to believe *is* actually ok, to think... to maybe yourself do—label women as beautiful but too moody to be trusted with power; get them when they're really young, go for girls, so there's less demon in them and you can believe you're serving as their protector--so long as I give you ground to justify yourself. And look, I've just given you one! Situate yourself as someone who is living analogously to Ern, that is, think of yourself as similarly forsaken and enslaved, think of yourself as a slave, and you will without guilt accost back to anyone who points fingers at you: 'Are you targeting me when I'm amongst the enslaved mass of the population you and your entitled friends have made into your servants? Aren't the crimes you are responsible for, this wasteland of what had been a proud country, vastly more worthy of attention than my comparative wee?'"

Such we know is how Silk performed with Horn in that famous, totally shocking,

airship moment in *Long Sun*. “If you actually love me as you say, Horn, something I suspect might may not be true, that you might be a fraud, that your ostensible love for me the great saviour of the whorl might be fraudulent, then you’ll suicide yourself for me to demonstrate it. If you pull back, if you don’t oblige me, you’re showing you think me someone so much a devil he’d sacrifice you, that he’d draw you to your death, and are therefore worthless in my own eyes and surely as you’ll know, the eyes of all the whorl, including that of your lover, your lover, Nettle, who so hero-worships me she’ll worship you only if you seem prized by me.” It’s how *Peace*’s Aunt Olivia’s lover, professor Peacock, behaves in that shocking moment where he as one of his father-replacements tells the boy Alden, the boy who’d been abandoned by his parents as they flew off for a year to Europe for his innocently killing a boy his mother had dispatched to beat him up, to cut the rope Olivia is hanging on that keeps her from plummeting down a cliff. “Don’t you trust me? I’m a university professor, and I am in earnest?” Or when Olivia demands of Alden the same. “Don’t you trust me? I am, for your other one having flown, your mother.” Aren’t each of these senior, adult protagonists, to relieve themselves of tensions, playing to that part of Alden that suspects that who he is is the kind of boy parents would abandon for having selfish murderous tendencies within him? Didn’t they pick up on his vibes and devilishly play to it—“Why not at least have the pleasure of owning up to it for good, Alden? Your parents judged you wise and left you alone for many months into the care of someone indifferent to you while they fled to Europe because you were a murderer and not because they were cruel; spare yourself your placing blame on them rather than yourself by substantiating their version as gospel. That’s the only way if you go visit their house again hoping they might have arrived back that if they were in fact there, they’d actually receive you. Kill this person I’ve directed you to kill”—to put their own emotionally conflicted state—I love my partner, but also hate him/her--into him and thereby be partially relieved of it?

And what happens to the reader who finds themselves agreeing with antifeminist sentiments from three centuries ago and that thinks so little of Ern’s predations on girls they don’t even get a mention when they explore the novel? Isn’t it reasonable to conclude that Wolfe knew a certain level of hell certain types are accorded to, and supposed that they might be available enough to him on whatever plane he rested on that he might that he might on occasion swing by and say “hello,” like Severian does the Thecla sequestered in his mind, and like the Autarch does the Cumaean in her swamp? It wouldn’t be so bad, hell might not be, if he had at least some of his fans around to accord him always the perfect gentleman, as such as we know is always their wont, to temporarily counteract the demons around him constantly shaming him that he was, all his miserable life, the opposite.

[Link to Craig Brewer's essay on Interlibrary Loan:](#)