

There Are Doors

by Gene Wolfe (*Gollancz, 1989, 313 pp, £12.95, hc*)

reviewed by Gwyneth Jones

Gene Wolfe's new novel might have been the book that a world has been waiting for. Of course there are many worlds, even within the microcosm of science fiction, and in many of them even a fairly minor new work from Gene Wolfe is going to cause a stir. To qualify further: this should have been an exciting event for anyone interested in the treatment of gender politics in fantasy and sf.

A man wakes up, to find that the beautiful woman with whom he has been enjoying a brief affair has abandoned him. The man, who proves to be an outpatient of a psychiatric hospital in an unnamed American city, sets out in pursuit. He soon finds himself visiting another world, not a different planet but a divergent reality in some way contiguous with our own. In this other world, a woman is President of the USA, women's heads appear on dollar bills; and men die "after making love" Companionate marriages are contracted whereby the male partner is assured a lease of life before the wife can insist on consummation, but the wives are not to be trusted and husbands often don't survive for long. Celibate males keep tiny female dolls (magically living, talking miniatures) as comfort objects, apparently their only safe sexual outlet. Ravening and devious women, who will be fertilised for life by a single act of intercourse, are continually on the prowl. The man becomes once more a psychiatric patient, is befriended by the manager of a champion boxer; escapes with another visitor from the "normal" USA, who is planning to "take over the government" He becomes involved in a secret resistance group of rebel males, makes an inadvertant debut in political theatre; is shot at, almost blown up. He has various elusive contacts with the beloved in which she proves herself a liar, a manipulator—a cock-teaser in a world where this vicious game invariably leads to the death of the unfortunate cock-owner: but he remains smitten, indeed the original fairly arbitrary sexual obsession (he's only known her for a few days) develops an almost theological dimension.

Utopian satire (in the classic sense of the term) is a familiar, even hackneyed device in the sub-genre of feminist sf, where female-ordered societies abound, as do variously contrived confrontations between these societies and the values of "our" world. Not infrequently the society organised by women, for women, is presented as neither good nor bad but simply a different kind of normality: in a world much like our own except in one respect, the reader is left to draw her or his own conclusions from the misadventures of a "normal" male visitor (compare *The New Gulliver* by Esmé Dodderidge). *There Are Doors*, at first, promises to present a welcome insight: how is the plight of a man in this situation perceived by a male writer? But problems soon arise if this reading of the novel is attempted. The "inversion" that Wolfe postulates is bizarre. A woman is President, many men die young: but men still fill the political, technical and military ranks of society; while women wear needle heels to wait at table, and French maid costumes in the snow. The males are deeply interested in each other, but no female encountered, in however minor a role, has anything to do but to serve or entice the male. Whosoever head it is on the banknotes, evidently the centre of the universe has not changed hands. Furthermore, it transpires that the woman Wolfe's protagonist pursues is in fact a goddess, or rather The

Goddess, of this world; and every female here is, finally, no more than an avatar of Her. In other words, Mr Wolfe presents a supposedly female ordered society in which individual human women do not exist. Meanwhile, on the technical side, the deadly nature of sexual contact with the female is never placed on a firm physiological footing. What does “making love” mean? Does masturbation do it? If not, why not? (Do salmon masturbate?) What about homosexual lovers? How are the subsequent pregnancies triggered? Or how are they suppressed, by those women who don’t wish to bear thirty children? These and many other practical questions are treated as simply not interesting, glossed over or never tackled at all.

With its “insane” protagonist and an “alternate world” that makes little claim to be treated as a fictional reality in its own right, *There Are Doors* invites comparison with Marge Piercy’s *Woman On The Edge Of Time*. In Piercy’s novel an idealised victim, the poverty-stricken chicana single mother who’s been labelled insane by an uncaring state, dreams of or visits a possible future. In this dream world she’s offered a solution to her problems. Wolfe’s protagonist is a lowly sales assistant without friends or prospects who, at thirty, already has the persona of dusty middle age: eventually he too will be offered a kind of solution to the problem of gender. But matters are complicated by the fact that “Mr Green” (who doesn’t even have a consistent name) seems to be a genuine depressive. The parallel world that he visits is not only curiously deficient in infrastructure, it is physically as murky as a depressive’s perception of any set of surroundings. Incoherent adventures are sketched on a recalcitrantly blurred, unseizable dream landscape, without coherent geography, population or time scale. The reader is left groping without guidance in an oneiric confusion that’s often barely distinguishable from malice at the printers. *Woman On The Edge Of Time* is intelligible both as political statement and story because Piercy’s visionary is *not* mad. Her sanity not only makes her a better witness, it declares the writer’s interest. By declining to make such a declaration—are we supposed to have *faith* in Mr Green and his visions or not?—Wolfe takes up a position of neutrality vis-à-vis his sour mock-up of a women’s world: a neutrality which is really quite untenable in this context.

It is possible to read Mr Green’s all-too-dream-like experiences as an investigation of what it may be like to visit another reality “in real life”: i.e., to be mad. In this context Wolfe’s depiction is something of a tour de force, and offers an interesting reflection on the popular genre convention. Streets that turn back on themselves like a möbius strip, buildings with impossibly convoluted topology: these are the images of a journey into inner space, a visit to the realm where myth and psychology are interchangeable codes. The mysterious “Lara” from the world next door soon becomes Ishtar, Aphrodite, Venus—with her other lover Mars taking the role of an impassive prize-fighter. One or two perfunctory stabs at science-fictional rationalisation can be safely ignored. Mr Green himself knows very well where he is when he has passed through one of those “doors” of the title. At one point he regrets his lost childhood. If he had reached this land before it was too late he would have seen not a vague distortion of the streets he knows, but ogres and elves and trolls. But Wolfe goes further. Having cut away the worldsmithing of modern fantasy until the mythological layer beneath shows through, he cuts again until the fantastic colour is stripped away too. Mr Green’s mythic version of his predicament shows signs of strain: he realises that the lost and elusive Goddess and his beloved mother, who recently abandoned him by dying, are actually one and the same. Why should a

thirty-year-old American of the 'eighties hark back to nineteenth-century Europe to clothe his own subconscious? Perhaps because Wolfe wants to signal the emptiness of his protagonist in every way. Mr Green has been abandoned by the mother-culture, by Mother in every possible guise. And as his beloved enemy becomes more and more a general distillation of Woman/Mother the same paradoxical condensation afflicts the man. Though Wolfe repeatedly invokes Kafka his protagonist is not an embattled *homme nu*, fighting to retain his sense of self amid all this disintegration. By the time the heart of the story is reached "Mr Green" has become "everyman" in a sense that strips him almost of humanity: a fate that resonates back through the text, in the disenfranchised, material role of the psychiatric patient; in his inconsistent name. At this level of magnification condensation is dilution, more means less. The unfortunate Mr Green apparently had some premonition of his eventual role the first time he woke up in this dreary wonderland and looked out at a hurrying crowd, blurred into one by winter rain.

And it came to him that this viscous ichor was perhaps the reality, that the faces and figures to which he was accustomed might be as false in essence as the photomicrographs printed in the newspapers on slow news days, pictures that showed human skin as a rocky desert, an ant or a fly as a bewhiskered monster. This was how God saw men and women.

For God, read the fantasist. Beware the riches of fantasy, Wolfe seems to say: they are fools' gold. Since human individuality is an illusion of scale the generalisations of myth and satire, if taken to their logical conclusion, can only dehumanise. Since myth and satire both arise out of the predicament they claim to explain, in the end they are hopelessly ineffective. Nothing can explain itself. Turn the knob once, and you get a super-hero: turn it again, and he and his world both dissolve into a grey blur.

There is a sense in which *There Are Doors*, which is filled with echoes of Wolfe's own massive fantasy, can be seen as an unmasking of the whole concept of the imagined world. The dull Mr Green has moments—his passion, for instance, for obscure technical terms for colour: viridian; cannon—when memories seem to spark across from another, richer life. It is tempting to view him as the everyday alter-ego of Severian: the sooty-robed Torturer divested of his fancy long underwear and revealed in shabby street clothes. But this reading makes the book's commentary on gender roles more disturbing, not less, especially when combined with the nature of the flimsy supernatural love-story that passes for a plot. For the stony-hearted epicurean temptress whom Mr Green pursues through a thousand disguises is presented to the reader as simply hateful. She has nothing of the stature of Rider Haggard's amoral but loving Ayesha, or of Eddison's numinous, inhuman Fiorinda. Lara/Lora is an Olympian on the model of Hesiod: power without *numen*. She plays with mortals for sport, and lies about it like a suburban housewife who has just dented her husband's car. When she can't lie anymore she has nothing to offer the still-adoring mortal love, as he hurries on to the symbolic self-annihilation of Attis, but a shallow, almost absentminded pity. We are left in no doubt that she'll go straight out and stick it to another poor sucker.

It has been observed, as an explanation of the kind of brutal violence against women so mysteriously general and acceptable in this "normal" world, that many men find it impossible to see any woman as a helpless victim. Woman is to them forever the giantess who ruled their first world: the all-powerful being whose perfidy, when she withheld the breast or brought a new baby home, remains the central betrayal of life. The argument of *There Are Doors* presents just this image of the gender roles: a man trapped eternally in

that first moment of outraged desolation, and every woman he meets helplessly cast in the role of absconding super-being. (It is noticeable as confirmation that as soon as he slips into the subconscious continuum Mr Green becomes prudishly coy and actual sex becomes impossible for him, even though he should reckon himself immune to the natives' sickness. Of course, he doesn't really want to fuck his mother, in any of her disguises). Wolfe stops short of showing the sinister conclusion that is so easily and so often drawn by sufferers from this psychosis "in real life"—that the wicked mother deserves any punishment she gets. Here Everyman remains an innocent victim to the end. But perhaps it may be fairly said that he has treated this part of his subject thoroughly elsewhere. Without a doubt Gene Wolfe is well aware that the "cold, coercive" treatment of women in his work has excited some comment. His response (if that's what this is) is not an apology but an apologia: a remorseless justification. Drink further down, said the wolf to the lamb; you're muddying my water. But upstream or down, she couldn't find any way to placate him: where might is right, the Torturer is always justified.

At one point Mr Green, wondering if he is now in Hell or in Purgatory, views the innards of an otherworldly hotel from the liftshaft, and sees a body as the surgeon sees it:

At every level, empty veins and silent nerves. This was what a scalpel saw as it sliced flesh, this sectioned view that could not live.

There is no suggestion that Wolfe offers his bleak and specious commentary on the sex war as anything other than just such a dead (and deadly) "sectioned view", that cannot live. Moreover given the state of play in the real world, and given the trenchant bitterness of some feminist sf, it would be absurd to complain that a male writer's deep down dirty revelations make unpalatable reading. But by presenting these images as deep magic from the depths of the human subconscious, rather than from the *male* human subconscious: by insisting on presenting *There Are Doors* as mythic truth rather than an unbalanced dystopian vision, Wolfe (not unlike Everyman himself, poor chap) manages to do himself and his project a great deal of unnecessary damage. It is hard to escape from the conclusion that the dull fog that clouds the whole narrative, muddying its powerful dissection of contemporary fantasy, reflects some degree of latent uneasiness about the opinions here presented as cosmic truth. An expression of this uncertainty in the text would have strengthened the book immeasurably. *There Are Doors* would then have become a strong and welcome contribution to that fraction of the gender debate that's going on within the microcosm of sf. And yes, that even includes such really sicko touches as the tiny living dolls.

Beneath the hair was a piquant face, at once beautiful and impertinent: a woman—a girl—with long legs and a slender waist, jutting breasts, rounded hips, and staring hazel eyes. She wore a belted sleeveless smock of metallic green; it was her only garment, as he determined by an embarrassed glance.

Later, when she bathes in his washbasin, he discovers that his dolly has no pubic hair "but her breasts were tipped with minute pink nipples" Well, of course a man to whom any adult woman presents a threat has to get his pleasure somehow.

But never mind: be thankful. Nobody's asking you to leave your toddler alone with Mr Green. And how many male writers, besides John Norman, would even consider such a project as this interesting? The sad thing about *There Are Doors* is not that what it has to say is unpalatable, but rather that so few people are likely to notice what's happening in here at all. This is not going to go down as Gene Wolfe's penetrating study of sexual

politics. This is going to go down as merely a surprisingly slight and muted fantasy from the author of the *The Urth Of The New Sun*: not one of his best.

Islands in the Net

by Bruce Sterling (*Arbor House, 1988, 348pp, \$18.95*)

reviewed by Brian Stableford

“Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth,” as St Paul is reported (by the Authorized Version, in one of its rare moments of linguistio buffoonery) to have written to the Corinthians, in order to chide them for their Gnostic tendencies. As if to prove that there is nothing new under the sun, even among the zealots of cyberpunk, Bruce Sterling—the St Paul of the Movement—has written *Islands in the Net* to deliver the same message to any proud heretics who have strayed from the True Path which leads to the Technocratic Millennium.

Not that the Technocratic Millennium is going to be the Land of Cokayne, of course: all we can really hope for, Sterling assumes, is that we might be able to make the best of a bad job instead of the worst. Nevertheless, the fact remains that if the best is to be done, it will not be knowledge that does it, but charity.

The Net of Sterling’s novel is the network formed by the twenty-first century’s communications systems and information technology, insofar as that system is regulated. In the absence of a formally-constituted World State the Net is the brain and nervous system of world society, upon whose relatively smooth working the political health of the world depends. In such a world social stability is (virtually by definition) the controlled flow of information; disruptive influences—here dignified by the name of “data piracy”—constitute a blight which threatens social breakdown. The Net’s islands are neo-entrepreneurial states which will not subscribe to the system of leasing rights and paying royalties which regulates the wealth of information, preferring instead to become software black-marketeers organised after the time-honoured fashion of outlaw gangs. Most of them are islands in the commonplace sense too; the ones which feature prominently in the plot are Grenada and Singapore.

The plot of *Islands in the Net* revolves around the question of how best to cope with the disruptive data pirates, and it is in addressing this issue that moral and political prescriptions are tried, compared and judged with Pauline sententiousness. The novel’s heroine, Laura Webster, is a young married woman with a baby who helps to run an eccentric guest-house for a multinational corporation which thrives on democratic principles and aspires to the condition of an extended family. The guest-house is selected as the location for a secret conference which attracts representatives from three rival data havens, whose intention is to begin a process of gradual legitimation which will ultimately bind the pirates with enervating bureaucratic red tape. Alas, the plan is smashed by an assassination, which sparks off (misdirected) revenge killings on a large scale and drags Laura into an uncomfortable appointment as the ambassador who must protest and prove the corporation’s innocence. This mission allows her to discover who really was responsible for kicking off the series of small wars, but that is the beginning rather than the end of her real troubles, which inexorably dismantle the apparatus of her former life, without much in the way of conventional recompense.