



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

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### CHAPTER

## 3 An Interview with Gene Wolfe

Melissa Mia Hall

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### Abstract

Reprinted from *Amazing Science Fiction Stories*, September 1981, Hall's interview takes place at the 1980 World Science Fiction Convention in Boston. Her conversation with Wolfe explores his development as a writer, his use of symbolism and intertextuality, his sense of humour, and his major themes. In a series of brief exchanges, Wolfe reflects on the state of fantasy and science fiction, his early fiction, his writing schedule, and his appreciation of the innovations of Ursula LeGuin, R. A. Lafferty, Ron Goulart and Somtow Sucharitkul.

**Keywords:** [Gene Wolfe](#), [Melissa Mia Hall](#), [Symbolism](#), [Humour](#), [Themes](#), [Ursula LeGuin](#), [R. A. Lafferty](#), [Ron Goulart](#), [Somtow Sucharitkul](#), [Amazing Science Fiction Stories](#)

**Subject:** [Literary Theory and Cultural Studies](#)

First published in *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* in September 1981, Melissa Mia Hall's interview follows the publication of *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days* (1981), his second short story collection, but predates the publication of *The Claw of the Conciliator*, volume two of *The Book of the New Sun*. Like Joan Gordon, she cannot resist asking for 'hints' to the contents of the rest of the tetralogy. Wolfe obliges – with further hints.

Boston, the second day of the 1980 World Science Fiction Convention and I'm going to meet Gene Wolfe and interview him. First, I have to make contact. I'm wandering past the cavernous huckster's room with a friend. I glimpse a middle-aged man with a receding hairline, and an amiable air about him, almost childlike, eyes glancing around brightly. I know it's Gene Wolfe although I've never seen him before. I nudge my friend. 'Is that Gene Wolfe?' He says he thinks so and I rush forward just as he starts moving away. 'Gene! Gene Wolfe!' I yell, knowing I must look frantic. He pauses politely, extends a hand. I introduce myself clumsily and compliment him so profusely that he must think I'm lying or insane.

We meet several times during the convention, mostly for short conversations, enough to get to the point about where the big interview set for Sunday noon will take place, but not enough for me to know who he is. He is still the Man who wrote the currently enfolding *Book of the New Sun*, *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories* and *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*.

When the hour arrives for the session with Gene, I am therefore a little scared, very much excited and tired. Like most convention goers, I stay up too late and consequently appear a bit bedraggled. Gene, on the other hand, although he was up late, too, appears wide awake and ready for anything. We sit down and soon the interview begins in earnest. I begin to know Gene Wolfe – a comfortable sort of man, deliberately thoughtful and wryly humorous, just as much a paradox as one of his stories.

*MMH:* You're noted for your elegantly crafted writing and you've been writing for sixteen years. What's the most important thing you've learned about the craft of writing?

p. 37 *GW:* I think the most important thing I ever learned was that you must write to be read rather than write what gives you pleasure to write. In other words, you should be attempting to create something for a reader, rather than indulging your whims.

*MMH:* Religion, spirit, magic, the pursuit of light, the analysis of darkness, all of these pervade your work. Do you consciously set out in search of them? Do you feel like you're a writer with a mission? What comes first, the message or the art?

*[There is a pause as Gene reflects on this loaded question, his brow appropriately furrowed.]*

*GW:* The art comes first or the message doesn't come at all. The message comes from me. I am a religious person (Roman Catholic). I am, I suppose, in a very, very minor way, something of a mystic and when you read my material, I think it comes through ... I don't believe in writing *with* a message unless that is what you're paid to do. I think a proper writer with a message is a propagandist or an advertising copywriter. He's paid to write with a message. A supposedly artistic and literary writer has no business in writing propaganda.

*MMH:* You use a large amount of cultural jumping, for example. Tommy Kirk, Mickey Mouse, etc. in 'Three Fingers' – the list is endless. There are constant asides throughout your short stories (Huck Finn, Little Nell, etc.). It's as if you've undertaken a holy cause to further engrave them upon the minds of your reader. Do you realize that you've been doing this?

*GW:* No, it just happens. I think you would say these things are symbols that have emotional power and a person who is doing literary writing must deal in emotion charged symbols – and so you end up writing about things like death and lions and sacramental meals, perhaps because those are emotional things that wake certain feelings in the deep spring of the individual. I'm using it as I have to, to engage and stir the reader's emotions. And if fiction doesn't do that, then it's failed. That's the purpose of fiction.

*MMH:* I've also noticed the rich reservoir of humour you tap into from time to time in your work. How important is humour to you?.

*GW:* I don't know. On a scale of 0–10, it's probably about a 6. Humour is a wonderful thing. It's very under-appreciated. One of the reasons that it is, is that it's no good when it's out of place and it's very frequently out of place.

*MMH:* Do you feel that there are major themes latent in your work or is that hogwash? What's more important – the plot, the characters –

p. 38 *GW:* Oh, certainly – again, if you want to do deep emotional things, you have to deal with major themes. Some traditionalists answer that all writing is about Love and Death, which is a title of a Woody Allen movie. But there's a certain layer of truth in it. There are things that are major for people. Living or dying is very fundamental. Getting love, losing love, those are very fundamental things. Exploring new territory is fundamental. Being imprisoned or breaking out of prison, all those are major themes. Major themes are the proper province of literature.

[We both take a breath and relax a little. The outside light pouring in from the large picture window make his features hard to read. I plunge onwards with an easy question for me but a hard one for Gene.]

MMH: Do you have any favourites among your stories?

[He mulls that one for a bit and replies, rubbing his mouth and stretching.]

GW: Well, I would say my topmost story would be 'The Detective of Dreams' in *Dark Forces*.

MMH: I loved it. (An eerie tale concerning dreams and Christ.)

GW: That's my own favourite of all my short stories. About one story out of twenty seems to come close to what I really wanted it to be when I started it ... Obviously, I may be wrong ... 'Westwind' is also a favourite. 'The Toy Theatre' is another.

MMH: What have been some of the major influences on your writing?

GW: Obviously, some things are more important than others. Probably the earliest influences I had that were of any significance, were the Oz books and the two *Alice* books which I read as a child. G. K. Chesterton has undoubtedly been a major influence. So has Borges, who was also influenced by Chesterton. So has Dickens ... H. G. Wells ... Bram Stoker ... Mervyn Peake. Modern writers. R. A. Lafferty, Ursula k. LeGuin. Damon Knight has influenced me, not so much as a writer, but as an editor. I think Knight is probably as good as editors ever get.

MMH: What are your primary goals?

[Gene seems stunned. It's wonderful to watch him truly consider the question before he answers.]

GW: Wow ... WOW. [Another heavy silence.] I would like to be a really, really good writer, a fine writer. One of the things that took me a quarter of my life to learn was that the only way to really succeed is to do the thing that you do best. I'm one of those unfortunate kids who were bright enough to be a second rate mathematician. It takes more than bright, it takes a real talent for mathematics, a certain genius. And writing is one thing and I've found I seem to do best. And of course, I enjoy it.

MMH: Could you talk a bit about how the Torturer series came into being?

[Gene sees right through the phrasing of my question and pounces.]

GW: Oh! My work – everybody always says – what was the idea that led to this story?

MMH: Right, it's a very common question....

p. 39 GW: I'm not sure now that I can even recall all of the things that came together to make the Torturer stories. One of them was a certain mystical or pseudo-religious element that I wanted to bring in. I was struck at some point by the realization that Jesus was crucified on a wooden cross and Jesus had been a carpenter. And a carpenter presumably had built that cross and that although the Gospel tells us that Jesus was a carpenter, he's only described as making one thing. The Gospel tells us one thing that Jesus Himself made. Do you know what it was?

[Gene leans forward, waiting for an answer, wagging a finger at a tongue-tied student who's forgotten to do her homework.]

MMH: No.

[Gene's voice rises with excitement; he claps his hands and sits back.]

GW: It was a whip! If you don't believe me, go back and read the New Testament. He made the whip that He used to drive the moneychangers from the temple. And all that stuff struck me in some half-witted way as *significant*. At the other end of the scale, at that time I was beginning to be worried about the idea that my work was insufficiently visual ... I've been tending to be too verbal, too cerebral ...

[As I let this sink in, I slump a little in my chair and realize I'm a lot sleepier than I want to be.]

MMH: Could you give us some hints about *The Claw of the Conciliator*? [An inadvertent yawn slips out that Gene seizes upon merrily.]

GW: I warn you, if you nod off during this interview! [We laugh. I sit up straighter.] Well, you know the Claw of the Conciliator is the miraculous gem Severian gets stuck with in the first book ... and it really isn't immediately involved in any strange happenings. There are some things that are ambiguously miraculous in the second book, subject to rational explanations, but the rational explanations are a little difficult to buy. The second book begins with Severian in a village which is fairly close to the gate where the first book ended. He spends a good deal of the book in the House Absolute which is the Monarch's palace and then closes with him again on the road to Thrax.

MMH: Why the 'Doctor Island' titles?

GW: Well, the first one, as you probably know, was a Nebula nominee. That was 'The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories' and it was the only story, as far as I know, that lost to No Award. There were more votes for No Award than there were for that story. It was found afterwards that (this was fairly early in the history of the Nebula) some of the people that voted for No Award were under the impression that that meant they were abstaining in that category, and not voting for No Award to be given ... So, I was talking to Joe Hensley (who's a good friend of mine who I haven't seen now in years) and he said you ought to write one called 'The Death of Doctor Island' because everyone would say – hey, here's a second shot at it, right? I didn't believe him, but it sounded like such a cute idea that I started thinking about how I could turn the original story around and reverse a lot of the roles and have a different story that was sort of a mirror image of the first one. And I did it and it turned out Joe was right, it did win a Nebula. And then ... my wife said three's a good number, you know, so you ought to do a third story ... So, I wrote 'The Doctor of Death Island' and at that point I decided that the business of trying to turn the plot and themes of the original story inside and out again – well – I had come to the end of it.

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MMH: Are you in favour of continuing the Nebula Awards?

GW: Yes. Awards reflect their presenters. If SFWA'ans are corrupt, the Nebulas will be corrupt. If fans are, the Hugos will be, too. The value of any award is the value of the giver, which is why decorations bring little respect in the U.S. Armed Forces today.

MMH: What do you have to say about the state of the art, current literature?

GW: The most apparent thing to me in literature, in general – it seems to me that there are no living novelists of towering stature ... the other really strange thing that has happened quite recently is the near death of poetry. Poetry is mankind's oldest literature to retain popularity with a bulldog grip for about 5000 years and the grip has suddenly slipped. I've spent many hours trying to figure out why and there are some things that seem to have some bearing on the problem, but I'm not sure I really know why. It's very easy to blame things like the schools and television but I'm not sure those are valid ... you know, I'll bet you could go through this hotel and not find a person who could name five major living poets.

[Gene stops gloomily, his face a study in reflection and then resolutely brightens.]

GW: I think that we are entering now, the real Golden Age of Science Fiction and of modern fantasy. Fantasy is in better shape than it has been since the Middle Ages. Science fiction is in better shape than it has ever been, ever. There are more good writers and what's much more important than good writers, there are more good readers.

MMH: You don't feel we've gone past the boom?

GW: We're seeing a downward trend now that is part of a general economic cycle. The reader, who say, a couple of years ago wouldn't have been willing to spend \$8.95 for a hardcover science fiction book, today has less money and is being asked to spend \$12.95 for the same book ... that is the decline, but the decline is not that the person doesn't want to read it ... I think that the slump the publishing industry is talking about relates much more to publishing in general than it does to the science fiction genre, in the broad sense.

MMH: What was your first published story?

GW: My first published story was 'The Dead Man' which appeared in *Sir* in 1965.

p. 41 MMH: What was your first novel?

GW: Operation Ares. I wrote a short story and sent it to Damon Knight for *Orbit*. Damon, at the time, was acting as an acquisition editor for Berkley Books and he said, 'This isn't really a short story but it would be a pretty good first chapter for a novel and I'll get you a contract for a novel, if you want it.' And I was green enough that I took it. I say green enough because I wasn't really skilful enough to write a good novel at that time. I don't think *Operation Ares* is a very good novel but it was my first book. It came out in 1970. That was a book that was sold about three years before it was produced. Those were three long years...

MMH: Did you have a full-time job at that time?

GW: I've had a full-time job all the time. I have a full-time job now.

MMH: How do you do it?

GW: This is my current schedule ... it changes, depending on how things are going. I get up at 5:15 a.m., shave, wash my face and by about a quarter to six, I'm in the basement at the typewriter and I write till about a quarter to eight and then Rosemary has my breakfast ready. I write each morning. But when things get tight, and I'm up against a deadline, I also write in the evening ... now I'm a technical editor. I was an engineer for sixteen years. But I am now a senior editor on the staff of *Plant Engineering* magazine. Basically, my writing experience combined with the engineering degree, too, enabled me to get this job which is, frankly, a good job and a lot of fun.

MMH: Okay, I wanted to ask about *Peace*, your first mainstream novel and how it evolved. Did it grow organically? Did you plot it carefully?

GW: No, because it isn't a plotting book ... The basic idea is that a man has died and he is haunting his own mind, his own past. This is something very few people seem to understand about *Peace*. If you'll notice the opening line of the book is 'The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge's daughter, fell last night.' And, in the closing chapters of the book, Eleanor Bold comes to him and requests permission to plant an elm on his grave when he dies (she's on a reforestation kick or something) and of course, the old legend is – if there's a tree on a grave, when the tree falls, the falling of the tree releases a ghost on the Earth. In *Peace* that ghost prowls through his memories throughout the book.

MMH: Of all your characters, who do you love the most?

GW: Boy, that is tough. That is tough. I suppose I would have to say Severian.

[Gene is totally absorbed in thinking about Severian and absolutely unprepared for the next question I've been waiting to ask. I launch into it slyly, trying not to grin.]

MMH: When you dream at night, do your characters ever come and talk to you or when your characters dream, do you come and talk to them?

p. 42 [Gene jumps forward breaking into a wide smile.]

GW: Oh, aren't you getting fancy! I really wish I had an answer that is equal to that question. In honesty, I have to say no. But what *does* happen to me, and this is to me very frightening (the first time it happened it scared the pants off of me) is, I actually meet characters in real life!

MMH: Oh, no – !

GW: I wrote a book one time that's never been published. In it, I had a girl who was kind of a liar and a tramp, but she was also sympathetic in a number of respects ... and I was driving my car and looked up in the rearview mirror and she was driving the car behind me, exactly as I had visualized her – *exactly* – and that was scary and the same thing happened in a couple of other instances. I will look around and there is that character ... talking, breathing. Really, to strip this of any supernatural pretensions, which I don't think it deserves, what I think this really means is that I have the ability to envision characters who are sufficiently realistic that people like that can actually exist.

MMH: You haven't met Severian yet?

GW: No, no, I have not. That would be frightening. Severian – you see him in the book from the inside, but the people in the book see him as a rather grim and frightening figure. Towards the end of the book, Dorcas wakes up with Severian bending over her (in *The Shadow of the Torturer*) and he's been eating pomegranates so his lips and chin are stained with red juice. She gets quite a start out of it. There are other tip-offs in the book as well. He is a large man physically. He is hatchet-faced with piercing eyes. Rather inexpressive and although he is a very decent individual by his own lights, he really isn't very bothered by other people's pain and suffering. And he isn't very bothered by his own ... pain has been a part of his life, all of his life.

[When Gene finishes I find that I've been almost hypnotized. It's difficult to remember what my next question is; I'm still full of thoughts concerning the mysterious Severian.]

MMH: He's almost a trance-like character, like he's walking in a waking dream. Okay, your contribution to raising the level of sf and fantasy is incalculable. [A yawn escapes before I can hide it.] Who do you feel is doing exciting, innovative work in that field?

[Gene almost jumps out of his chair acting dramatic, points a finger at me.]

GW: You're dropping off again, Melissa!

He laughs and laughs, repeating, 'Yes, you are!' several times to my hopeless protestations. Finally he concedes to sit back and reply.

GW: Ursula LeGuin, absolutely. R. A. Lafferty has been doing it for years now and has not gotten anything like the recognition he serves ... If I had to pick the most underrated writer in sf, I think Ron Goulart would be the one. New Writers? Somtow Sucharitkul.

p. 43 MMH: Did you know that there is now a field called Gene Wolfe fiction and that no one but Gene Wolfe can write it? How would you describe the fiction of Gene Wolfe?

GW: This is something that I got from Harlan Ellison, who, all kidding aside (and nobody kids Harlan more than I, believe me) who is first of all, a fine person and is secondly, a fine writer – I heard Harlan say one

time, and as soon as he said it, realized it was absolutely true, that every writer who's worth a damn has a unique product ... I don't think there's anybody else who writes Gene Wolfe stories or Ursula K. LeGuin stories ... people always tend to say that old so-and-so is another – and then they name some famous writer. H. G. Wells, in the latter half of his career, was called the second Dickens. There never will be a second of any writer that's really worth a damn.

*MMH*: That's right. Your next books are....

*GW*: The third volume of *The Book of the New Sun* is *The Sword of the Lictor*. The fourth volume is *The Citadel of the Autarch*. You see, before I marketed *The Shadow of the Torturer*, I had all four volumes in second draft because I didn't want to get in a situation where the first volume was set and then I couldn't make changes to make the series end the way that I thought it should end and so I went through two drafts on all the books. This kind of thing is the great advantage of writing on the side as opposed to writing for a living.

*MMH*: And you'd describe yourself as a part-time writer. [*I want to get this down; to memorise it for posterity.*]

*GW*: I am a part-time writer.

*MMH*: Astounding.

*GW*: I'm holding a full-time job. I work forty hours a week. Sometimes more.

*MMH*: Well, that makes me feel a lot better.