



## **Innocents Aboard: New Fantasy Stories**

*Gene Wolfe*

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## **Innocents Aboard: New Fantasy Stories** Gene Wolfe

Gene Wolfe may be the single best writer in fantasy and SF today. His quotes and reviews certainly support that contention, and so does his impressive short fiction oeuvre. *Innocents Aboard* gathers fantasy and horror stories from the last decade that have never before been in a Wolfe collection. Highlights from the twenty-two stories include "The Tree is my Hat," adventure and horror in the South Seas, "The Night Chough," a Long Sun story, "The Walking Sticks," a darkly humorous tale of a supernatural inheritance, and "Houston, 1943," lurid adventures in a dream that has no end. This is fantastic fiction at its best.

## **Innocents Aboard: New Fantasy Stories Details**

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## **From Reader Review *Innocents Aboard: New Fantasy Stories* for online ebook**

### **David says**

Ursula K. Le Guin compared Wolfe to Melville. I've heard his praises sung multiple times on *The Geek's Guide to the Galaxy*, so when I saw this collection of his stories come into work, I thought I'd check it out. As with any short story collection, it's somewhat hit-and-miss. I would guess Wolfe's longer works are more effective than his stories. There were several times that I thought he did interesting things, but the ideas weren't fully explained or explored.

"The Monday Man" was my favorite story. It was part fantasy, part horror, with a quite strange premise that remains effective well after you finish it. In fact, a few nights ago, days after finishing the entire collection, I found myself thinking about the story and I had trouble getting to sleep.

Wolfe is a fine writer, but there were some stylistic choices I didn't like. One story was so chock-full of dialect that I could barely tell what the characters were saying half the time. I found myself just waiting for the story to be over so I could stop feeling like I was decoding fifth grade essays with terrible spelling. I also think Wolfe is overly fond of framing his stories. Most of them seemed to have one or two levels of framing, like my friend told me this, and I'm drunk so I'm going to tell you. Which is fine sometimes, but it got old and overly complicated the more it was used.

I'm not giving up on Wolfe, but I can't say I'd really recommend starting here. *The Book of the New Sun* seems to be his masterpiece from what I've heard, so that would probably be a better place to start.

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### **Palmyrah says**

I received this as an uncorrected proof, so the published version may differ from the one I've read. Wolfe has been one of my favourite authors all my adult life, but I prefer his science fiction to his fantasy and his novels to his short stories. The stories collected here show him at his worst, I'm afraid. Though that worst is still a lot better than the best of most authors, the characters in these tales are unlovable, the plots often clunky and contrived, and the endings are unsatisfactory or poorly resolved, leaving questions hanging.

Understand that I am an experienced reader of Wolfe, which means I scrutinize every word, sentence and paragraph closely, looking for inconsistencies that indicate a narrator's unreliability, an essential fact disguised as trivia, a character who is actually another character (possibly from a different work) in disguise, and so on. But these are short stories--very short, some of them--and the scope for auctorial shenanigans is limited. For all I know there's a lot under the surfaces of these stories that I've missed; my complaint is that the surfaces are ugly. Also, Wolfe's personal nastinesses--his smug conservatism, love of gratuitous violence and patronizing attitude towards his readers--seem to be intensifying as he grows older.

Still, there are a few gems in here: 'Wolfer', a werewolf story that isn't quite, and 'A Traveller in Desert Lands', which presents itself as fantasy but which, despite the author's protestations, is actually science fiction, and the uncategorizable 'Slow Children at Play', which I liked best of all.

Strangely enough, non-fans may enjoy this one better than Wolfe lovers.

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## **Amanda Patchin says**

Just fantastic. Wolfe assumes and almost casually illustrates what would, for lesser writers, be the central and explicit question of a labored work. His prose and plots are equally elegant and his subtlety, while it can frustrate, is stimulating.

The best of an excellent collection:

The Friendship Light

The Monday Man

The Eleventh City

A Traveler in Desert Lands

Queen

The Lost Pilgrim (my favorite)

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## **Carl says**

Just adding a brief note-- I see most reviewers on Goodreads have not enjoyed this collection as much, even if Wolfe is one of their favorite authors. I'll admit that I only have 3 stories fresh in my mind at the moment, and they are certainly not particularly accessible (but I think that could go for a lot of his work), but I still enjoyed them very much. He "does" things with his stories, in a way I find pleasurable. Suppose I'll leave it at that (having already written the monster review below...)

I've read more than 1/2 of the stories in here I believe, so I'll just list it as "read". I love Wolfe-- he gets a lot of hype, but it's hype from the greatest living authors in sci-fi and fantasy, and it's worth it IMHO. Just recently reread "The Legend of Xi Cygnus" and "The Sailor Who Sailed After the Sun". Beautiful, original and interesting. Working through the final story, "The Lost Pilgrim", right now. I love how interesting and unique these stories are. Usually takes a while to figure out what he's doing, and sometimes it takes several reads, but it's always worth it, and it's always different than what others have done. Fine but not flashy prose, high caliber even at the "level of the sentence", which one of the authors in "The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction" finds lacking in most sci-fi (excepting Wolfe and many New Wave writers). I think I agree with John Clute in the same volume that Wolfe may not be a game changer in sci-fi (ie, he is not "important", despite being the "greatest", in the opinion of so many), but he is the one who does it best (though I shouldn't label him just as a sci-fi author-- he does so much!). To quote Clute (p. 69): "Between 1980 and 2000 there is only one writer whose creative grasp and imprint and prolificacy-- and what might be called parental density, that density of creative being which generates the anxiety of influence in literary children, who may only be able to wrestle and come to terms with the parent after many years-- are so unmistakably manifest that one may plausibly use the word 'great' in describing his work. That writer is Gene Wolfe. He may be, as a creator of autonomous works of art, the greatest writer of sf in a century which saw many hundreds of writers do their work with high ambition and remarkable craft; he is, however, far from the most important sf writer of the century, and is by no means a writer of great significance in determining the nature of flow of his chosen genre during the years of his prime, which extend throughout the period under discussion."

Well, but maybe that's enough of my fan-boy-ness. Great collection of short stories, if you like short stories, and even if you don't, you'll probably enjoy a few of these. For the Christian readers out there, his "Legend..." and "Sailor..." short stories seem to me on my last reading to be the most beautiful, lyrical and unpreachy explorations of certain aspects of the Christian faith since Lewis and Tolkien. They probably only seem that way if you read them with an awareness of Wolfe's catholicism, and they are certainly not "Christian" works in the way we mean that today (both are actually fairly pagan-- but so is Lewis' "Til We Have Faces", in a similar way). Well, it's in the reading, of course (yay Reception Theory), but I think it's a valid reading. I enjoy finding authors who can explore their faith apart from the zealous, naive and unsubtle clunkiness of most of the "Christian Market" (CBA). Well, maybe that was a bit harsh, esp. as I know many people in that market personally (and think very well of them).

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### **Heather says**

In my opinion, Gene Wolfe is really a novelist at heart. I loved many of these stories, but was left irritated that there wasn't more. These weren't self contained stories that resolved themselves, they were the starts of novels ... or the middles of novels ... but they were certainly part of a larger narrative.

I was curious what Gene Wolfe would do with short stories, given that his novels are so very epic and enchanting. These stories were enchanting and unfinished. Not to say I didn't like them, four stars clearly indicates that it is good ... but I want the whole story!

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### **Mark says**

This may be blasphemy of a sort, but sometimes I think Gene Wolfe gets away with stuff simply because he's Gene Wolfe. If you or I had written some of these stories, they would never have been published.

That's not as big a complaint as it sounds, because I think most of these stories should be published, be available, even the ones that seem to me intentionally obscure or written with less than Wolfe's full attention. At his worst, he's amazing. But I do feel sometimes like I'm simply missing something and I do not believe it's all my fault. I think Wolfe is one of those writers who can suggest profound meaning without actually revealing it. In this he is much like the Latin American writers, who spin fabulous, fascinating tales that leave one wondering "Huh?"

But at his best, he can be riveting, terrifying, mesmerizing, and deeply satisfying. And occasionally pretty damn funny.

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### **LordOfDorkness says**

Hi,

Everything Gene Wolfe writes shines like a perfect golden pearl because Gene Wolfe is secretly Robot Jesus Wolverine. Gene Wolfe is an international treasure and if he were a missile, he'd be a missile of hot, well-craft lovin, reigning down destruction of the same.

Seriously though.

Guys.

Seriously.

Seriously, guys.

Read his books. They're genuinely really good. Astonishingly good. Gene Wolfe is one of the most talented authors I've ever had the pleasure of reading. I can't say enough good things about him. This is deep stuff. Complicated and often difficult to read stuff, but very rewarding.

I avoided reading two stories in this book. One is 1943. The other, I don't remember. Now you know my little secret.

Hugs

-Bdog

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## **Ed says**

Another superb collection of short stories from Gene Wolfe. This one focuses on fantasy and horror. I loved it from start to finish, but it's not the best introduction to Wolfe's short fiction. For that, I recommend Wolfe's collection, *The Island of Dr. Death and Other Stories and Other Stories*. For the experienced Wolfe reader, however, there's a lot to love in this collection.

Here are my notes on the individual stories:

"The Tree Is My Hat" is in the same "universe" as Wolfe's novel, *An Evil Guest*, and his chapbook, *Christmas Inn*. Not my favorite story, but it fits in nicely with those other two stories while standing on its own.

"The Old Woman Whose Rolling Pin Is the Sun" is Wolfe at his best. This story is perhaps best described as alternate mythology. It's a fable told by an old man to his granddaughter. It has just the right amount of sentiment and symbolism, which warmed my heart and tickled my fancy.

"The Friendship Light" is a tale of horror and well done. Creepy and effective.

"Slow Children at Play" is a clever inversion of the tale of the Wise Men and the Nativity. This time the birth that is foretold is the Antichrist's, I think. Accompanied by a couple fallen angels who have been kicked out of Hell for not being evil enough, the not-so-wise guy gets to the birth too soon and is turned back by Lucifer. Most of this isn't obvious on first reading, and that illustrates in my mind what makes Wolfe so great. His best writing works on multiple levels. Most authors just try to tell an entertaining story, but Wolfe aspires to something greater. I think he often achieves that greatness.

"Under Hill" is a fun story about a knight on a quest to rescue a princess. Of course, it's Wolfe, so that cliché is twisted. Expect the unexpected.

"The Monday Man" would be right at home in a modern Lovecraftian collection, and it would be better than most of the stories in the collection. Seeing as how I recently read *New Cthulhu: The Recent Weird*, I can say that with certainty. Nicely done.

"The Waif" is about a backwards community who is contacted by aliens (of a sort). Surprising and effective.

"The Legend of Xi Cygnus" is another fable or alternate mythology. As with many of Wolfe's stories, there's some Christian symbolism underneath the entertaining surface.

"The Sailor Who Sailed After the Sun" is absolutely brilliant, one of the very best short stories I've read by Wolfe. The prose is gorgeous, a real pleasure to read. It came about when Wolfe was doing research in Egyptology, possibly for his novel *Soldier of Sidon*. He came across a pictograph showing a monkey on Ra's barge. How did a monkey get on Ra's barge? This tale of alternate mythology gives the answer.

"How the Bishop Sailed to Inniskeen" is part ghost story, part Christmas story. An unusual combination, but it somehow works.

"Houston, 1943" has some tantalizing autobiographical details from Wolfe's childhood, but it's mixed with voodoo, characters from a child's storybook, and murder.

"A Fish Story" is another ghost story, but not a particularly good one.

"Wolfer" is an intriguing story about a woman who finds a purpose in rescuing wolves.

"The Eleventh City" is part of a series of short stories with the same central character. This one relates to an exorcism from the Gospels. Creepy and full of meaning.

"The Night Cough" is set on Blue, one of the worlds from Wolfe's *The Book of the Short Sun*, and it features Oreb, a talking bird and a fan favorite. Oreb tries to help a man whose fiancée has been raped and murdered. Poignant.

"The Wrapper" is about a man who can see into another world. Or he's going crazy. You decide.

"A Traveler in Desert Lands" is an enthralling tale set in the Middle East. Wonderful attention to detail, delicious prose.

"The Walking Sticks" nicely employs Wolfe's trope of an unreliable narrator to horrific effect.

"Queen" tells the story of messengers who have been sent to bring an old woman to the coronation of her son. Surprisingly overt for Wolfe.

"Pocketsful of Diamonds" is about the loss of innocence. It's beautifully evokes childhood. A strong piece.

"Copperhead" is perhaps the weakest effort in the collection. The President ill-advisedly uses an alien artifact which can transform things into evil or good analogs.

"The Lost Pilgrim" is a charming tale of a lost time traveler who joins the heroic crew of a fabled ship. Fantastic, and a great way to finish the collection. Fans of Wolfe's "Latro" books will especially enjoy this one!

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## Claire says

As much as I love short stories, I just couldn't get into this collection. It felt like a jumble of stories that were either too simple and much too muddled for comprehension.

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## Pinkyivan says

A very nice read. The stories are very varied in what they do. Many are the standard what the fuck Gene type, a lot are his well loved young boy themed ones, a few religious ones about Ireland, some horror, but overall most were very good.

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## Chris says

Some cool ideas and good writing, but little in it really grabbed me or excited my imagination. I'd hoped for more, as Wolfe is touted as this amazing Fantasy writer, but I didn't find anything in this book to justify that description. Maybe his novels hold more than this collection of short stories?

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## Perry Whitford says

Twenty two fantasy short stories from Wolfe written between 1988 and 2002. Surprisingly few of them have Faerie as the inspiration, his primary source material for the most part coming from myth, folklore and the Bible.

I like him most when he takes on a mythic narrative with suitable prose, which he does here to fine effect in the brooding 'A Traveller in Desert Lands' and 'The Lost Pilgrim, where a time jumper makes a mistake and ends up with the Argonauts.

For the religious stuff, 'Queen' seems to be about Mary at the end of her life, 'Copperhead' summons the avatar of Lilith into a contemporary, troubled America and 'Slow Children at Play' has the writer himself befriend two angels

'The Waif' is classic Wolfe, it reminded me of aspects of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, a colonists and aborigines tale with some sad truths. 'Wolfer' is perhaps the writers strongest show of solidarity for the animals from which his name derives, with onomastics central to the story of a woman tasked with a mission of freedom.

I really enjoyed a couple of the stories that may have been written for children. 'The Old Woman Whose Rolling Pin is the Sun' is a great way to get a kid interested in the wonders of the sky, then 'The Sailor Who Sailed After the Sun' has an ambitious and delightful monkey who goes astray but re-finds his way.

In his own short introduction to this collection Wolfe acknowledges that it contains fantasy stories, but in



addition he alludes to horror stories. I'm not sure myself that Wolfe really writes horror stories, being too obtuse to offer up any legitimate chills.

'The Tree is My Hat' features a malevolent Polynesian shark spirit, 'Houston, 1943' is a haunting child's voodoo nightmare, and 'The Walking Sticks' has some brutal murders committed by a cane carrying Jekyll and Hyde, but the barrage of obscurities contained in each leave you too baffled to be frightened on first reading.

Not his best collection, but still excellent.

p.s. I can't believe I didn't mention 'The Night Chough'! My favorite character in Wolfe's epic *The Book of the Long Sun* series was the talking bird, Oreb, and Wolfe proves that he must have liked the little chap too by giving him his own story, as he helps a young man avenge the violent murder of his girlfriend.

"Good bird!"

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### **Casey West says**

This was my first intro to Gene Wolfe. Obviously a very talented writer, and a few of these stories made lasting impressions. All fantasy and horror. Some of these stories however I just didn't get. I'm guessing that his strength is in his dense epic novel storytelling. I'll be checking those out soon.

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### **Nicholas says**

Perhaps I would rate this more highly if I were more familiar with Wolfe going in. As it is, there are absolutely flashes of the genius he is known for in this collection, but as a collection the stories failed to blow me away. I'm not sure whether that would change on a reread, as I've often heard of Wolfe.

By no means has this deterred me from reading more of Wolfe--in fact, the flashes of brilliance have convinced me more than ever to give some of his long fiction a serious read. But to those who were interested in him, I would not recommend this collection as an introduction. I don't think I'm qualified to answer to how a long-time fan of Wolfe would receive these stories, on the other hand. It's quite possible they would have a very different experience with them than I.

Highlights included: "Houston, 1943," "A Fish Story," and "The Lost Pilgrim."

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### **Paul Tortora says**

This collection of short stories probably deserves 5 stars, but my tiny brain can only muster 4 stars. I suspect there's more going on in each story that I missed which would be appreciated with repeated reading and scrutiny.

I'm a bit reminded of reading short stories by Flannery O'Connor.

