



Peace

Gene Wolfe

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Mesmerizing sci-fi from the author the Denver Post calls "one of the literary giants of science fiction." The melancholy memoir of Alden Dennis Weer, an embittered old man living in a small midwestern town, reveals a miraculous dimension. For Weer's imagination has the power to obliterate time and reshape reality, transcending even death itself.

Peace Details

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Author : Gene Wolfe

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From Reader Review *Peace* for online ebook

Greg Bates says

Congratulations on your purchase/borrowing/piracy of "*Peace*" by Gene Wolfe! We who have come before you hope you will be very, very satisfied with your purchase, and will come back to it for years to come! Before you enjoy your copy for the first (or second) time, here are some helpful tips:

1. Persevere through the first chapter. Although the first few pages of *Peace* are some of the best in the novel, there's a scene that takes place in a garden near the beginning of the book that can be a doozy. There's lots of characters you haven't been introduced to yet, and most of them are coming up with nicknames for each other, anyway. Don't sweat it - this scene is designed to make more sense the second time you read it. Once the party ends and Weer and his doctor come back, you'll be on firmer ground.
2. Whenever Weer, or someone in one of Weer's flashbacks, tells a fairy tale, you should be paying attention. Stack the fairy tales end to end: they're the Weers' family album as seen through a dark mirror.
3. There's a lot of recurring imagery that crops up throughout the book: dragons, skulls, swords. I don't really have a point here, I just thought it was cool to notice how they show up in clever ways, like the recurring phrases in *Infinite Jest*.
4. If you get to around the halfway point of the book and start getting very creeped out, you're doing it right.
5. Once you're finished reading the book - read it again! Or, at least, read the first few pages again. Weer's going back to the beginning, why not you too? Pay attention to the **very, very** beginning: there's some fun stuff there. Maybe reread that dinner party scene you skimmed the first time.
6. If you didn't get it, found it overrated and pretentious, or even *boring*, don't worry: Neil Gaiman did too, the first time he read it. He came around. (Side note: if you're reading the 2012 paperback reissue with the Gaiman afterword, wait until you finish the novel to read it). Neil enjoyed his second reading of *Peace* much more than his first, so if you feel as if you understood most of the novel after a single reading, congratulations: you are smarter than Neil Gaiman. You probably already knew that.

We hope your experience with *Peace* will be a pleasant/unpleasant one. Tell your friends.

DeAnna Knippling says

Early Gene Wolfe, densely packed.

Review for non-Wolfe readers:

A pleasant, innocuous tale with some weird underpinnings that you may want to pay attention to, because they open up a doorway into a secret horror novel.

Wolfe's story structure goes like this: you have to read the book, and then you have to read the book at least

one more time. It's just not possible to sort everything out the first time, sorry. A Wolfe story is meant to be savored and pondered--there are actually (at least) two different stories going on at all times: the surface-level story, and the plot-twist story that you can only have a hope of getting once you pass the ending. Treat all Wolfe narrators as criminals writing a confession for the cops, and you've probably got the right idea.

I realized with this book that Gene Wolfe is kind of like the character Dworkin from Zelazny's Amber books: the apparently mad wizard who created the Primal Pattern.

Anyway, first pass: Picked up on the central conceit, which I think I heard somewhere, so I read the story in a kind of dim half-awareness. Caught a couple of shockers that I'll put together better when I go through the next time. I really liked it as a standalone novel, although I suspect it has world-ties to others of his books as well. The ending trailed off like smoke, but the story was still carrying itself out in my head, so that was all right.

Stuart says

Peace: Fragmented, deceptive memoir with dark undercurrents

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

Gene Wolfe's *Peace* (1975) is a book that both invites and defies analysis — to the point where there is a small cottage industry devoted to competing theories of the meaning of the literary allusions, offhand clues sprinkled throughout the text, and the recurring fairy tales embedded in this seemingly innocuous memoir of Alden Dennis Weer, who grows up in a small Midwestern town in the early 19th century.

Wolfe is notorious for his tricky, elusive, and symbol-laden stories, invariably featuring an unreliable narrator who may be confused, hiding facts, embellishing, or outright lying about the events of the story. In *Peace*, he takes this to the extreme by fragmenting Alden's memoirs into a non-linear jumble of memories from different stages of his life, stories he read as a child, stories he was told, and stories told by other characters. Not only that, but the perspective, characters, and time periods switch from paragraph to paragraph without the slightest warning.

Ostensibly, *Peace* is a series of memoirs told by Alden as an old man in an empty house. He awakes at the sound of a tree falling outside in winter, and wanders the house, dragging one leg, having trouble finding the room he is looking for. He makes a cryptic comment in the opening paragraph that immediately alerts the reader that things are not as they might appear:

I remember that my heart pounded and I was afraid I was going to have an attack, and then, fuzzily, thought that perhaps the heart attack had wakened me, and then that I might be dead.

He visits the doctor's office, casually mentioning, "There is this to be said for doctors: they may be consulted though dead, and I consult Doctors Black and Van Ness." This sentence, like so many in the book, can be interpreted several ways. Is Alden dead, the doctors, or everyone? The story then launches into a series of interlocking reminiscences, starting with his 5th birthday party at his grandmother's house. We meet a series of his family members, and as he looks at a portrait of his father's dead brother Joe in a Tuscan garden, painted when Joe was a sad little boy of four, the elder Alden muses:

Now, when I sit alone before my fire and look out at the wreck of the elm revealed by the lightning flashes, confused and ruinous as a ship gone aground, it seems to me that the garden — I mean Joe's garden,

basking forever in the sunshine of its Tyrrhenian afternoon — is the core and root of the real world, to which all this America is only a miniature in a locket in a forgotten drawer; and this reminds me (and is reinforced by the memory) of Dante's Paradiso, in which (because the wisdom of this world was the folly of the next) the earth stood physically central, surrounded by the limbus of the moon and all the other spheres, greater and greater, and at last by God, but in which this physical reality was, in the end, delusive, God standing central in the spiritual truth, and our poor earth cast out — peripheral to the concerns of Heaven save when the memory of it waked, with something not unlike an impure nostalgia, the great saints and the Christ from the contemplation of triune God.

I include the above passage at length to show both the narrative structure, complexity of thought, and spiritual themes of *Peace*, a novel that continuously cycles through the vagaries of Alden's life, always avoiding overt conclusions, skirting around key events, dovetailing into Gaelic and other fairy tales, only to veer away to a new thought before reaching the end. This stream-of-consciousness approach requires untiring concentration from the reader, so for those looking for a relaxing afternoon escape, this is the wrong book! There are so many themes lurking beneath Wolfe's narrative that the story really belies description. In Marc Aramini's analysis *Between Light and Shadow: An Exploration of the Fiction of Gene Wolfe*, 1951 to 1986, he describes *Peace* thus:

As I said, Wolfe often writes with absence foremost in his mind, but there is still a guiding principle that can be discerned by piecing together his symbols, clues, and syncretic habits. Wolfe has mastered structure through absence, where at times the didactic or symbolic meaning is clear but the real practical application is entirely opaque and difficult to discern. All of these fairy tales and the narrative stance of Weer indicates that somehow this small town rural American life undergoing the throes of extreme modernization is a fairy story, with the immigrants and characters actually becoming the sidhe, firbolg, and mythical creatures to a glimpsed but off screen future.

Before you decide that *Peace* sounds more like a painful literary exercise than a rewarding reading experience, let me say that Wolfe writes with great skill about the life of Alden, and once you get used to the sudden shifts in time and perspective, the story he tells is a fascinating one. There are many episodes in the novel that constitute mini-stories on their own, such as Julius Smart's sublimely horrifying story of his apprenticeship to the alchemist Mr. Tilly in Florida, including his encounters with some carnival freaks. At one point, Alden admits, "It has suddenly struck me, after scribbling for days here, that Julius Smart, who will scarcely appear in it again, is actually the central character of this book." This segment comes closest to horror, all the more effective for revealing key information in passing, meaning you have to pay close attention to the most innocuous-seeming details.

One of the other central figures in the book is Olivia Weer, Den's aunt who cares for him while his parents spend years traveling Europe. She is his surrogate mother, an attractive, sophisticated, and intellectual woman who is out of place in the small Midwestern town of Cassionsville. Because of her bold personality and inherited wealth, she attracts the attentions of four suitors: Professor Peacock, who takes her and young Alden on a drive to explore an ancient cave in the hills; wealthy banker Stewart Blaine; James Macafee, the owner of the local department store who pursues a singular Chinese porcelain egg with her in an extended humorous sequence, and finally Julius Smart, a pharmacist who courts Olivia and eventually wins her hand.

Alden's story is also interesting, as he eventually works for Julius Smart at an orange juice factory as an engineer. His encounter with librarian Lois Arbuthnot, bookseller Louis Gold, and Louis's daughter Sherry represents another major story arc that has some of the biggest shocks and surprises of the novel, all the more chilling for their subtle reveals. It's no wonder that Neil Gaiman describes *Peace* this way: "Peace really was a gentle Midwestern memoir the first time I read it. It only became a horror novel on the second or the third

reading.”

There are so many elements at play under the surface and implied in the absences of Alden’s memoirs that a single reading is not adequate to fully examine them. In addition to Marc Aramini’s extended essay quoted above, there are also essays such as Robert Borski’s “The Devil His Due: Gene Wolfe’s Peace” (Sirius Fiction), Damien Broderick’s “Thoughts on Gene Wolfe’s Peace” (New York Review of Science Fiction), Mordicai Knode’s “Gene Wolfe’s Peace Will Leave You Anything But Peaceful” (tor.com). Any book that creates such a dedicated and obsessive following indicates that Peace will appeal to readers who love riddles, literary allusions, twisted fairy tales, elements of horror, stories of small-town America, and a searing examination of the corrupting influence of temptation and evil that lurks beneath the surface of Alden’s unreliable and fragmented memories.

Chris Palmer says

Amazing book. I've read it three times in less than two months and I still haven't figured it all out yet, but I'm having a lot of fun searching.

I talked to Gene Wolfe last year and one of the things I asked him was whether he ever left anything deliberately ambiguous in his books or anything that was left to subjective speculation. He said that he always knew exactly what the "true" story was behind his books and stories, even if his narrators didn't or even if they chose to leave parts out.

Without that knowledge, I may not have been as patient with Peace as I have been. Knowing that (hopefully) all of the clues are there to understand it makes the pursuit of understanding fun.

One weird note. I'd also just re-read An Evil Guest and there is an aspect of that book about werewolves. I'm not implying that lycanthropy is involved in Peace, but someone else pointed out that much of Alden Weer's life parallels Wolfe's, which makes him a sort of "Weer" "Wolfe", a fairly multi-leveled pun and also a hint that some of the more unsavory aspects of his life are hidden and that he has a secret, more violent nature.

Time for read through number four...

Jay says

Subtle subtle subtle.

Some images I'll never shake out of my head.

This is the sort of book where...

You read a chapter,

you're like Huh interesting,

you go to bed,

then you sit bolt upright in bed and go No way!! He *didn't*! Did he???

But he did.

Joseph says

Alden Dennis Weir loses his knife and goes looking through his house for it. And sort of gets lost in some of the best prose of the late twentieth century. Everybody should read this book.

Stephen Case says

This is one of my favorite books. I still don't completely understand this book. With Gene Wolfe this is not a problem (at least with his earlier works—for me, the jury is still out on some of his latest novels). His books are layered, and they always repay the slow, careful re-read. I've gone through this one at least three times now, and each time I pick up something new. Wolfe remains my favorite author, and *Peace* I think is an excellent introduction to his work, especially if you're not coming from a science fiction or fantasy background.

On the first level, *Peace* is the beautifully written memoir of Alden Dennis Weir and a paean to life in a Midwestern town from a childhood among horses and coaches to old age among factories. The language itself makes it worth the read. Wolfe is a craftsman, and his skill with description, dialogue, and the creation of characters is showcased in any of his works but especially shines throughout *Peace*. I would be interested to know how much of this work is biographical. (Though Wolfe grew up in Texas, he's stated that there's more of him in Weir than many critics recognize.) There's a richness to the memories that Weir relives throughout the novel—places and people and lost pocket-knives—that carries a deep reality, as I suppose is true with any great work of literature. Yet Wolfe is a “genre” author, so he can wrap this in surreality and twist it in strange ways. (One of my favorite passages is a story-within-a-story when Weir's childhood housekeeper is telling a story she heard as a child from her own housekeeper. Wolfe deftly telescopes the narrative until, like looking down a tunnel of mirrors, you realize that narrator narrating the story-within-the-story is perceiving *you*, the reader.)

On a second layer, *Peace* is a book about memory and death. Weir is writing at a time when all the characters in the novel are dead, and his narration moves back and forth seamlessly between memory and across years. He writes his story from various rooms in a house he claims to have had built to encapsulate various locations from his long life, and he seems to be haunting his own memories like a ghost. On this level, the novel is a tale about childhood and old age and all the memory and loss that goes with both and in many ways reminds me of “Forlesen,” one of my favorite Wolfe short stories.

On a third level, *Peace* is about storytelling. The novel is a patchwork of stories embedded within other stories, something characteristic of much of Wolfe's fractal-like writings. Some of the stories, such as the one Weir reads as a child about the princess in the tower, clearly relate to episodes from Weir's own life (in this case his Aunt Olivia's succession of suitors). Some are much more ambiguous, and some relate to the novel's overall story in ways I still don't perceive (such as the epistolary tale from the carnival near the novel's conclusion). There are ghost stories and there are stories left unfinished. There are threads I have not yet unwoven, one of the things that keeps me coming back to Wolfe's work and keeps internet listservs

humming with speculations.

And finally, *Peace* is a mystery and a horror novel. Yet it's subtle horror, buried so deep that upon first blush, much like Wolfe's short story, "A Solar Labyrinth," there doesn't seem to be much there at all. But by the end of the book you're left with the distinct impression that Weer has killed at least two characters and possibly more. Nothing is said directly, but the clues are there, the lack of direct acknowledgement making it all the more chilling. Other characters simply disappear. (Did Margaret Lorn's father ever make it in from the storm?) Things happen off-scene that carry significance the narrator only hints at. Is this because he's recalling things seen from the vantage point of childhood? Or because there are things he simply does not want us to know?

And then there is Weer's fate itself, again something that is never spelled out (far be it from Wolfe to have such a low estimate of his readers' astuteness) but that is made fairly clear from the clue of Eleanor Bold's tree and the vignette of the necromancers at the grave's edge (as well as the title of the novel itself).

Strange and dark things happen in *Peace*, but they are of the horror and wonder that is a large but unseen part of anyone's life. I think this is what makes *Peace* so effective: like Weer, we all have our secrets and memories of the ephemeral and the ghastly. *Peace* is a life story, which always eventually becomes a ghost story.

Darran McLaughlin says

Absolutely extraordinary. It amazes me that Gene Wolfe isn't better appreciated when he is so obviously one of the greatest writers of the last 50 years. He is head and shoulders above most of the critically acclaimed writers who are always reviewed and discussed in the literary section of the broadsheet newspapers and high-brow magazines. This book is published as part of the Fantasy Masterworks series, although whether this book is fantasy or not is up for debate. It is such an original work of art. To some extent it reminds me of Marquez, Faulkner and Bruno Schultz, but it doesn't owe anything to them. Wolfe's writing is so compressed and literary that it can be quite hard to read, and there are passages of this novel that I had to read two or three times. It should be a set text in Universities as it definitely rewards deep study and multiple readings. I feel sorry for Wolfe in that he hasn't been adopted by science fiction and fantasy readers because he is too literary and he hasn't been adapted by literary fiction readers because they assume that fantasy and science fiction aren't serious writing. The man deserves the Nobel prize for literature and should be boughed under with laurels and medals. Instead he is the ultimate writer's writer.

Zach says

For better or worse, *Peace* is a book that demands a re-reading. It starts off innocently enough, seeming to be a straight memoir of the aging, stroke-saddled Alden Dennis Weer. But as you read, certain things start to dawn on you, and by the end you're left with the urge to pick back through Weer's narratives to piece together the loose strands of the stories. I could only sustain re-reading for a few vital details before moving on to the next book, but even that brief return was worthwhile.

The book starts with the curious first chapter titled "Alden Dennis Weer". Here the narrative bounces

between an odd visit to the doctor (where Weer tells the doctor to prescribe treatment for a stroke he will have in 15 years), to boyhood memories of his role in the accidental death of a fellow boy, to impressions of his mother, aunt, and friends, to stories (including a whopper of a ghost story) his parent's cook Hannah told to him as a boy, to a Christmas trip he took with his mother to his maternal grandfather's house in the country.

All of it is well told and simple enough, if not a little too loosely connected. But the chapter's end returns to Weer's doctor visit, and the doctor provides the rest of the novel's framing device: he engages Weer in some sort of psychological exam where Weer is to turn over a series of cards, and for each card "Tell me who the people are and what they are doing".

From there, the narrative stays focused for longer stretches, though the separate chapters themselves still seem disjointed in respect to each other. The second chapter, "Olivia", deals with Weer's aunt, who, after the death of Weer's boyhood friend, takes custody of the 6-year-old Weer while his parents travel overseas for an indefinite amount of years. Weer's memories focus primarily on Olivia's (or, Vi, as she prefers to be known) three suitors during his stay with her: a college professor, a well-off local merchant, and a banker who inherited his fortune and position and who would rather do anything else than banking. Much is revealed about Olivia through her relations with these men, and through the memories Weer has of spending time with his aunt the suitors.

Then, in the next chapter, "The Alchemist", the story moves on to Olivia's eventual husband, Julius Smart. This is the chapter that really hooked me. Weer recalls (to the doctor) a story Julius told at an informal gathering before he and Olivia had even become involved. The gathering included Smart, Olivia, one of Olivia's current suitors (the merchant), and Weer up past his bedtime. Smart, who has recently arrived in town as the new pharmacist, tells about his first pharmacy job out of college. The story involves his employer, Mister Tilly, an unusually tall, sickly man. He tells Julius he's haunted by the ghost of his dead wife who is poisoning his food with a substance that is slowly turning his skin to stone. He hires Julius as his store assistant and offers room & board if Julius will take care of him and allow him to work on pharmaceutical experiments he hopes will cure his skin condition. The whole chapter takes on the vibe of a first-rate ghost story in the hands of Julius, and grabs with you the creeps until the very end (which of course is pretty anticlimactic).

Plus, in the midst of the story, Julius lays frightened awake in his first night in Mister Tilly's house, and he has a vision of bright moon as a big orange (the orange playing a role in his bizarre interactions with Tilly during the day). In the fourth chapter, "Gold", you realize how important that vision of the orange would prove. Weer tells how after Olivia and Julius married, Julius founded a company that manufactured an orange-flavored juice. You also piece together that Weer made a decent living working in his now-uncle's highly successful company. Aha- Julius the alchemist forged the orange into gold. Right?

Well, "Gold" veers pretty drastically from any extended treatment of Julius the entrepreneur. Instead, Weer recalls his affair (in his mid-to-late 30s) with a local librarian, who in turn draws Weer in contact with the eccentric local bookdealer Louis Gold. So, if Gold is "Gold", then is Julius really the alchemist? Who forged Louis Gold (and his offspring, Aaron and Sherry Gold, both of whom play a part in Weer's memories)? Weer, the storyteller?

Further layers stack up as the plot of "Gold" culminates in Weer's realization that Gold is forging (ha!) rare books and selling them to the highest bidder. At first ashamed, once he realizes Weer will not turn in him in, Gold declares himself an artist and in the process delivers some interesting insights into history. The spectre of the ghostworld darts around the edges of this chapter too, because Gold is especially interested in rare

books on necromancy.

This is also the only chapter that contains the word "peace" (so far as I could tell), which is cited as a quote from the ludicrously alliterative rare romance novel (and likely Gold forgery) *The Lusty Lawyer*. Fittingly the use of the word "peace" in this silly context provides little clue on how I might interpret the novel's title.

The final chapter "The President", much shorter than the first 4, gives the reader a glimpse of Weer's life as president of the orange-drink company. No obvious narrative arc appears, no surprise ending to tie up the loose ends-- rather, the Weer memories of this chapter focus on a rather off-hand account of he and his company's PR director escorting a journalist through the company's factory. Again, a ghost story is related (this time to the journalist, told by the PR director to distract the journalist from any substantive reporting). The factory tour ends, and after Weer learns of his secretary's sudden death (the enigmatic Miss Birkhead), the novel ends quietly and without any obvious revelations.

But, then the itch to re-read pops up. In lieu of an comprehensive review, I settled for remembering (as who could forget?) that the novel peppers little details throughout the novel, such as Weer's (post-stroke) house and its bizarre design. As he tells it, the house is comprised of all the rooms he remembers most fondly from his life. He wanders around the house as his stroke will allow him, looking for his scout knife. Each room has something to do with the stories that have been told throughout the book.

And, I did manage to track down the passages toward the end of "Alden Dennis Weer" where Weer tells the doctor (who, recall, is supposed to be treating a stroke Weer will have 15 years in the future) that he could "wipe out" the doctor if he wanted-- that, in effect, he was in complete control of the world they were both in now. It was an odd exchange the first time around, but after the accumulation of details about Weer's strange house and the countless ghost stories and books of the dead, I could think of one of two explanations for Weer's boast: 1) either he's capable of time-travel, or 2) everything below the narrative layer told by the stroke victim Weer is completely made up, and could be altered as he pleases.

Both possibilities seems plausible after reading *Peace*, and are perhaps not mutually exclusive.

The way the common experiences of memory sit so unassumingly next to the supernatural in this novel could be its best trait. In fact, on the surface the book has little to do with anything out-of-the-ordinary, and the ghost stories always have a rational explanation. But that doesn't stop the atmosphere of the stories of the dead from slowly pervading the memories of Weer's unexceptional life, until the atmosphere and memories become inextricable (upon re-reading), and new ways of approaching the novel's narratives (and how they connect with each other) begin to emerge.

Chris Hawks says

Peace is the memoir of Alden Dennis Weer, chronicling his life growing up in the town of Cassionsville. It's a rambling narrative prone to go off on tangents, where one story can and will invoke another, entirely separate memory—transitioning into it without warning—and so the text jumps back forth in time, blurring the boundaries between one passage and the next. But Gene Wolfe is such a great writer that, after a few pages to get acclimated to these shifts, not only does it become easy to follow, but the seemingly-unrelated stories end up tying back to each other in often unexpected ways.

And yet, as Weer weaves his stories, something sinister begins to take shape underneath the main narrative,

hinting at some horrific secret underlying Weer's tale. Is this simply an old man recording his life story? Or is Weer somehow projecting his consciousness back through time to revisit (or revise) these memories? Or (even worse) is he somehow recreating events as he describes them—conjuring up the dead to reenact his tale for him? There's a sense of unease and dread that mounts as the pages fly by, an anticipation that builds, waiting for the terrible revelation that will totally alter the context of all that has come before. And then, once that final page has turned...

The book just kind of ends. Or doesn't. Depending how you look at it.

And I confess that I don't get it. I found it captivating and entertaining and beautifully written, but it comes as no surprise (I guess) that Wolfe has outsmarted me. From the little I had read about it (to keep from spoiling myself) I expected this big reveal at the end that would turn the entire book on its head. Didn't happen. In fact, I found the fifth and final chapter to be the least interesting—and the least relevant—by far. Wolfe is a man whose work demands to be read very closely and carefully, and this book might be Exhibit A. I've looked at a couple of interpretations online, and, okay, I guess that makes some sense, but if that's true then man! is this stuff obtuse.

I'm trying not to let it bother me though. I still loved every minute that I spent reading it. And if I was rather disappointed by the outcome, I consider myself at least as much to blame as Wolfe. Someday I'll reread it for the tenth time, and it will all make sense. Until then, I give **Peace** 4 out of 5 stars.

Kate Sherrod says

SIX STARS. MAYBE SEVEN.

That this is the first novel I ever read twice in a row should tell you everything. Well, this is Gene Wolfe, so not everything, but lots. Full reaction over at my blog.

Daniel Polansky says

A new favorite. Shit, do I love Gene Wolfe. Full review <http://www.tor.com/2015/10/20/the-mys....>

Update 2017: Yeah, I read it again.

Christopher says

"Great kid, don't get cocky."

This was my second thought after finishing "Peace." My first was "I need to read it again." I needed to read it again because it was clear that my theory as to what was going on (because one **MUST** have a theory with a Wolfe book because nothing is ever as it seems), turned out to be only about 30% right.

That I was so wrong made the experience all the better. I've a fair number of Wolfe's novels. And I think I was getting cocky. Unreliable narrator? Check. Subtle clues in the text? Check. Peace? I got this.

Then Wolfe comes with the Peace-hammer and says: "WRONG MOTHERFUCKER! TRY AGAIN!"

It's presented as a semi-memoir of Alden Dennis Weer, an old man who tells various, rambling tales. It is NOT that. It is so much more (and less).

This is a goosebump novel. I.E. it starts out normal, a bit pedestrian, but then VERY subtle things are said/expressed and you find yourself noticing them and wondering "wait, what?" And because it's Wolfe, he doesn't address them again until much later, and then only tangentially. As those "wait, what?" moments stack on one another, the creepy factor multiplies and you know something is just WRONG here. You can't quite lock it down, but it's there.

So you (I) need to read it again.

Sandy says

Although virtually unclassifiable, Gene Wolfe's 1975 novel, "Peace," was chosen for inclusion in both David Pringle's "Modern Fantasy: The Hundred Best Novels" AND Jones & Newman's "Horror: Another 100 Best Books." While the novel certainly does have shadings of both the horrific and the fantastic, it will most likely strike the casual reader--on the surface, at least--as more of an autobiography, telling, as it does, the story of Alden Dennis Weer, in the first person. Weer, a 60-something bachelor who has suffered a stroke shortly before he begins his tale, and who may or may not be a ghostly spirit, gives us the story of his life, in piecemeal fashion, withholding much and skipping about in accordance with the vagaries of his consciousness. A product of small-town America, somewhere in the Midwest (the fictitious burg of Cassionsville) of the early 20th century, Weer has many interesting incidents to think back on and ponder. The town where he spent his entire life, and his relatives, friends and coworkers, are revealed to us, "Our Town" fashion, but with innumerable digressions and tangents of tangents. I should mention right here that "Peace" is hardly an easy read. Its story is certainly nonlinear, its anecdotes always interrupted by Weer's side thoughts (he constantly leaves his tales unfinished, in favor of some other tale that has just popped into his head), his side thoughts seemingly inconsequential and meaningless. He is just as likely to ramble off into the telling of a fairy tale that he read as a boy, in the middle of one of his narratives, as not. Even Pringle has to admit that it is "definitely not a book for the impatient," and Roz Kaveney, writing about "Peace" in the Jones & Newman volume, tells us that the book "hops back and forth through [Weer's] life without resolution and without any clear sense of who ultimately he is." And that last statement is absolutely true. Weer, we get the feeling, is holding much back from the reader, and though we come to like and admire the man, we never get a clear picture, with all his circumlocutions, of who he is. His pinball consciousness may be hard to follow (but still, isn't this representative of how most of us really think...nonsequentially, with other thoughts and snatches of song and extraneous images constantly intruding?), and the man/ghost remains a cipher by the novel's end, but still, we sure do learn a lot about Cassionsville by the telling.

Or do we? In a key statement early on, Weer tells us that some of his remembered events "never occurred at all, but only should have, and that others had not the shades and flavors" that he has chosen to give them. He is an unreliable narrator at best. Still, the tales he tells us are fascinating ones. We learn of his eccentric Aunt Olivia, a lover of all things Chinese, and her three suitors; of Weer's job at a synthetic orange drink factory; of the local druggist's experiences with a man who is slowly turning to stone; of the local bookseller who is

engaged in a very peculiar sideline; of Christmas at his grandfather's house; of Olivia's quest to obtain a rare porcelain egg. Many of Weer's tales seem to lack a payoff, although that payoff may come 100 pages later, while he is telling another tale. Other stories are seemingly the pointless ramblings of a meandering mind. Still, Wolfe writes beautifully, in this, a change from his usual sci-fi/fantasy epic format. "Peace" (that title is a troubling one...if Weer really is at peace when he writes his life story, that peace certainly does not seem to bring him any real solace) is a book that almost demands to be read slowly, and then reread in parts. Many casual statements and even characters that at first blush appeared unimportant acquire a greater significance at second glance. I'm not sure that I agree with Pringle when he declares the book to be "a masterpiece," but have no problem with his declaration that it is "moving and delicately written." It certainly is different, and, as I suggested up top, a completely sui generis experience. Mysterious, atmospheric and tinged with nostalgia and the grotesque, it is a book not easily shaken off.

Joseph says

Peace is an amazing, labyrinthian, American novel. The subtle implications laid out in this book are crazy and somewhat terrifying. I love an author who trusts their reader enough to not have to spell everything out for them; Gene Wolfe is definitely that kind of author. I'm not going to sit here and tell you I understood every little thing Wolfe was throwing at me; certainly not. And I'm not a big fan of having to read a book twice or more to receive its full merits, but I could see how fruitful it would be to do so with this book. After reading this novel and *The Sorcerer's House*, it seems that is just Wolfe's style; to write a novel so complex, with so many layers, it can't possibly all be ingested in one go.

Even so, my first pass through this meandering tale full of stories within stories was such a great and memorable experience. I shall throw it onto the re-read pile.

I'm not going to give plot or interpretation here but I would like to say that Alden Dennis Weer leaves out a lot when recounting events. These interpretations were pretty interesting:
<http://ofblog.blogspot.com/2007/12/ge...>

Next Wolfe: *The Island of Dr. Death and Other Stories* and *Other Stories*

Christopher says

Gene Wolfe's 1975 novel *Peace* seems to be the scattered recollections of Alden Dennis Weer, an old man who has lived all his life in a small Midwestern town. But as the novel unfolds, we feel that he's not being entirely honest with us. Furthermore, in a fantastical twist, the old man sometimes seems to take an active role in the history that he reminisces on.

Peace was originally published by Harper & Row in an utterly anonymous plain tan dustcover and went unnoticed by most of the reading public. This Orb reprint in 1995 is also getting hard to find, unless you're content with a used copy. But don't let the difficulty of obtaining the novel put you off, for *Peace* deserves to rank among the literary classics of all time. Wolfe has created an intricate narrative that offers something

new every time you read it. On an initial reading, the book may seem a certain kind of story, satisfying in itself. Upon re-reading *Peace*, you'll think "Aha, now I think I've got it". A third reading will present still another expanded insight, and so on. I must have read *Peace* six or seven times over the last 13 years, and on my last re-reading I still discovered new aspects to Weer's story. And all this in just 250 pages; how many other novels offer such well-nigh infinite pleasures?

Part of why *Peace* is such a powerful book is the unreliable narrator, as well as the way that mysteries raised early on are solved much later in the book by revelations so casual that an unattentive reader may well miss them. These are a perennial feature of Wolfe's writing. But Wolfe's output in the 1970s was also adorned with an excellent prose style, where we find such lovely passages as these:

"It may be that the only reason childhood memories act on us so strongly is that, being the most remote we possess, they are the worst remembered and so offer the least resistance to that process by which we mold them nearer and nearer to an ideal which is fundamentally artistic, or at least nonfactual."

"If I had been older, I would have told her I did, and I would -- after the fashion of older people -- have been telling the truth. I had sensed that cutting the rope was only a joke; I had also sensed that beneath the joke there was a strain of earnestness, and I was not mature enough yet to subscribe fully to that convention by which such underlying, embarrassing thoughts are ignored -- as we ignore the dead trees in a garden because they have been overgrown with morning-glories or climbing roses at the urging of the clever gardener."

Such mediations are reminiscent of Proust, and in fact there's a direct allusion to Proust late in the novel. Comparisons with Nabokov are also easy to draw as well. If you like those two authors, then I implore you to read *Peace*. I feel like my encounter with these melancholy memoirs of Alden Dennis Weer has been lifechanging.

Thewhitewhale says

Hell is to live in constant regret and, if this be true, then no other person is more damned than Alden Dennis Weer. The failures of life seem to outweigh the moments of triumph, and for Wolfe's main character of this most extraordinary of novels, the failures and, more importantly, the sins, of Weer haunt him (sometimes literally). *Peace* is, in my opinion, Wolfe's most accomplished work. As grand and beautiful as *The Book of the New Sun* is, *Peace* achieves the same ends in a significantly shorter amount of time. This is a laser focused book, and if the reader isn't reading with the same intense attention which the writer took in penning it, it may seem as nothing more than the somber ramblings of an old and dying man. Yet for those readers who are paying close attention, *Peace* transforms itself from a seemingly charming (if not entirely heart-breaking) memoir into a hellish horror novel with incredibly poignant and acute moral and spiritual sensibilities.

Alden Dennis Weer is an old man. Having suffered what he believes to be a stroke, he visits his doctor. What follows from there is hard to review in a scant few paragraphs. This is not a conventional novel. It meanders and shifts and disjoins. Weer moves from memory to memory at a moment's notice. Casual readers may find this frustrating, and simply continue on with the narrative assuming that it's just how the story is being told by Weer. Astute readers would do well to take special note of when the narrative shifts and why it's shifting, for therein lies the true narrative of *Peace*.

Filled to the brim with delightful and revealing inset narratives, the surface level plot is never the true story (as is true for all of Wolfe's fiction). Parsing the details of what's really happening in *Peace* reveals something far more sinister, and most importantly, it reveals the true character of the novels seemingly

innocent and melancholic narrator. What the reader is left with is an examination of isolation, sin, redemption, and (perhaps most importantly) reconciliation. Make no mistake, this is a deeply Catholic novel. Please do not misunderstand this statement, Wolfe does not proselytize. For Wolfe, like so many of his fellow Catholic writers, salvation and redemption are found only when a character accepts his reality and the crushing revelation of Grace under pressure. For Weer, at least in this go-around through his own personal purgatory, he cannot bear this reality. He denies it. Hides and runs from it at every turn. He lies to himself and to us, the readers, not because he is trying to deceive us, but rather to deceive himself, as so many of us do to ourselves. And this is where the genius and power of *Peace* truly shine. Weer, like so many of his readers, runs from regret, seeking solace in memories and distractions which seem to comfort him. But these regrets, these sins, are gnawing at his sub-conscious constantly, and like a certain Chinese Pillow, they will fill his head with comforting and beautiful visions, only for him to awaken from the dream world and into a real-world nightmare. They haunt Weer in the most pure sense of the word, creeping in his sub-conscious and in his most repressed of memories. For how much Weer tries to avoid confessing his sins—and there are many of them—they always seem to return, like the ghost of a long lost love or an alcohol preserved corpse in a room in a haunted house, an ever present reminder that death holds ultimate power over our lives. Or rather like the sound of boxes slamming against a locked coldhouse, forever echoing down the corridors of time and space.

Many readers of Wolfe are often left unsatisfied, confused, or otherwise frustrated by Wolfe's enigmatic and cryptic techniques. They have heard people heap praise upon praise on Wolfe and his works and yet they just can't seem to get it. To these readers who are looking for a nice relaxing read, I would suggest steering clear of Wolfe. He is not a writer who wants his readers to escape. An all too common critique of Wolfe is that he constructs literary puzzles which ultimately mean nothing except to put together the puzzle. That for all of his literary skill, he is a writer who ultimately writes about nothing. This critique is unfounded and unfair, as Wolfe does not write simply to challenge his readers, but rather to edify the reader's conscience towards higher truth. Self-examination is at the core of his fiction, whether it be his characters, his readers, and, yes, even Gene Wolfe himself. For all of his speculative tendencies, his stories of fantasy and sci-fi and horror, he is a writer that is intensely concerned with the reality of human consciousness, memory, morality, and spirituality. No matter how many ghosts or torturers or knights or wizards may appear in his fiction, they are all and always fully human characters, dealing with human failings and flaws, and ultimately dealing with how humanity atones itself to itself. As Weer recalls in the story of the sidhe, 'Why did you suppose your father, who could not save himself, could save you? The time of the sidhe is long past, and the time of geese is passing. And in time men, too, will pass, as every man who lives long learns in his own body. But Jesus Christ saves all'. For Weer and Wolfe, the attempt to escape death, to run from your sins and deny the reality of death, is the core of the human conflict.

Wolfe has often been compared to writers such as Dickens, Proust, and Chesterton and this amalgamation of creative geniuses is ever present in his fiction. It's hard to draw comparisons to Wolfe, for he is entirely his own writer, possibly more so than any other writer in the last century. This is a lofty claim but it's also demonstrably true. I could make comparisons to the aforementioned authors, and in regards to *Peace*, I detect a distinctly Faulknerian influence (Stream-of-consciousness, disjointed chronology, grotesque characters, complex and failed genealogies, a sharp attention to regional authenticity, etc. etc. etc.). But all of this is beside the point. *Peace* is its own gem and one which deserves to be dug from the earth and polished to reveal its true shine. If you are looking for a quick reference point, you could say that *Peace* is a subtle horror story if penned by Faulkner and edited by Borges.

For those few who have heeded previous reviewer's warnings and are about to embark on their first quest through the memory house of Alden Dennis Weer, I offer only these tips for penetrating the mysteries of *Peace*. Always remember that Wolfe is a symbolist, and recurring symbols do not appear in vain. In

particular, pay close attention to:

1. Names: As with any Wolfe work, onomastics are incredibly important. The names of characters in his fiction ALWAYS reveal some hint into the characters background, character, or intent. In *Peace* in particular, names are changed almost on a page-by-page basis, with most characters having nicknames, maiden names, married names, and altered names. You'd be wise to keep track of who's who and what they do, who they married, and who their parents are (this is an on-going process and keeping some solid notes on every characters is a very smart idea).
2. Colors: Many characters and incidents correspond to matching colors. Pay close attention whenever Weer makes a point to mention color. This does not, however, exclude color associations with other words. The Gold family, for example, obviously is associated with the color Gold.
3. Ghosts and spirits: There are many ghosts in *Peace*. There are also many other supernatural creatures such as Banshees, goblins and gnomes. They don't appear for no reason
4. Fruits: Particularly Apples and Oranges. That's all I'll say about this subject.

If you're venturing into Wolfe for the first time, I can think of no better place to start. You'd do well to save yourself from spoilers and in writing this review, I fear I may have given too much away already. Ultimately, be prepared to revisit the text at least twice, you'll be greatly rewarded.

A.D. Jansen says

So Neil Gaiman wasn't lying, Gene Wolfe really can write. (Better than Neil Gaiman, in fact!) I was about ready to give up on him after losing interest halfway through his *Long Sun* books, and then losing interest halfway through his *New Sun* books, when I read the opening pages of this novel in an Amazon preview and was immediately drawn in. I decided to give him another chance.

Here is evidence that Gene Wolfe actually deserves a degree of the praise heaped upon him:

"And as if by magic—and it may have been magic, for I believe America is the land of magic, and that we, we now past Americans, were once the magical people of it, waiting now to stand to some unguessable generation of the future as the nameless pre-Mycenean tribes did to the Greeks, ready, at a word, each of us now, to flit piping through groves ungrown, our women ready to haunt as lamiae the rose-red ruins of Chicago and Indianapolis when they are little more than earthen mounds, when the heads of the trees are higher than the hundred-and-twenty-fifth floor—it seemed to me that I found myself in bed again, the old house swaying in silence as though it were moored to the universe by only the thread of smoke from the stove."

Peace is a pretty short book, but it's full of sentences like that. *The Book of the New Sun* is very long, and contains (at least as far as I read) no sentences like that. What happened, Gene?

But *Peace* is more than just beautifully written. The unusual structure is pulled off very well, and there are fun stories within stories, and there are memorable characters, and there are layers of symbolism to unravel, and little mysteries to solve. Everyone says that Gene Wolfe should be read more than once, but I'm not about to read a novel twice that I didn't enjoy the first time around. This is the only novel of Wolfe's I would read again, and it's the book his reputation should rest on.

Szplug says

Read for the second time during (and second favourite read of) this past summer. While he's not flashy, I find Wolfe to be a writer of considerably beautiful form and grace and pace, and this, one of his very first novels, displays that form to masterful effect. I originally read this in the mid-nineties, and partook of it for a second time this past August, when the endless sunshine and sultry heat seemed appropriate companions for the beguiling way in which Wolfe works his memes of mnemonic trespass and betrayal—and shrouds his tale with tricky maneuvers and misdirection. The reader had damned well better be on her guard from the very moment the words *The elm tree planted by Eleanor Bold, the judge's daughter, fell last night* set this subtly brilliant theater of one slippery individual's mind into motion. *Peace* comprises, ostensibly, the memoirs of Alden Dennis Weer, a Midwestern man aged and alone and set to wandering the labyrinthine halls and chambers of his manse—quarters partially of this earth, partially of the shrouded and misdirecting dimensions of his lived-in memory. Time, in our seamless understanding, is seldom a manifold element of Weer's recollection—but rather an inventive rendering and blend of disparate and disjointed panels of anamnestic sleight-of-hand. Much of what the elder man dredges forth from sedimentary objects or events espied upon his hearth-bound traipsing opens a window upon episodes that transpired in his childhood—and it is through the collected assemblage of these *stories-containing-myths-containing stories* that the narrator leads the reader, bemused and beguiled, through the passage of his life and unto his present condition—senescent, embittered, and of uncertain essence—for the reader cannot but contemplate that these words are reaching out from beyond the merely historically factual, or that these chambered haunts of memory have the capacity for extension unto the spiritual when their material foundations have foundered.

What to make of Weer's childhood, its brief glimpses of parental figures ere they abandon their son with paternal relative and abscond themselves beyond oceanic barriers for what comes to seem an interminably-extended sabbatical? What of his captivating Aunt Olivia, island-ensconced princess with her train of courtiers whose masculine presence so abruptly terminates when the narrator has made that leap beyond the innocence of youth and into fields mired with guilt, falsehood, and even uglier human verities? What of that incident upon the stairs? At the bath? Ere and after the horrific screech of tires? What medical benediction is Weer *really* seeking when he decides to intrude upon the dreamily busy waiting room of select practitioners? Where exactly are we once the recollection has advanced to that of overseeing the process of crafting synthetic orange juice, and we are regaled with a stream of metafictional philosophies, urban discomforts, biblio-succubinal synergies, lot carnival grotesqueries, and the Miskatonic horrors of Frankenfiber southern comfort? What of Cassionsville, that pseudo-sleepy Anytown, Midwestern USA, wrenched from the natives whose artistic leanings are fabricated that it might be dressed up to impress? Of this Horatio Alger success hymn wherein all of the notes are oddly threnodic, their timber speaking more of Eugene O'Neill? When you peel away the surface layers of what Wolfe has so gorgeously written; recollect quick, brief phrases from fifty pages back; note how often two and two are not approaching within a misplaced pocketknife—perhaps even a slipped porcelain egg—of four; that is, when you endeavor to puzzle together what Alden Dennis Weer has striven so valiantly to veil—though offering up the very means by which such occlusions be rent—you'll perhaps come to perceive there's very little in the way of *peace* to be found.

Simon says

This is going to be one of those books that are exceedingly difficult to review and there's a danger that this could turn into a bit of a ramble. How do I even classify this book? It is alledgedly fantasy but if it is, it is only in the loosest possible sense of the word. This doesn't have much in common with any other works of

fantasy I've ever read (except Wolfe's other works of fantasy such as *The Book of the new Sun*).

This is about a old man called Weer who is pondering, reliving or perhaps even reinventing his past whilst he is close to (or perhaps even beyond) death. It is a non-linear, fragmentary and unreliable account of his his life. There are many stories within the main text, relayed either by the protagonist or one of his friends or family that give clues and hints to how you should makes sense of the book. All of these stories, even the book itself, is incomplete and the truth underlying all this is not clearly spelled out.

Trying to make sense of this book was like trying to solve a cryptic crossword. I don't think I was able to give it the effort it required to piece all the clues together. Probably a re-read or two would help. Ultimately, one must be prepared to be constantly looking below the surface, taking nothing at face value. On the surface this isn't a particularly interesting story although it is written in beautiful prose that makes it a pleasure to read.

No, I wouldn't call this fantasy. It is literary fiction that is trying to be very clever indeed, perhaps too clever. I didn't have the time or energy it required to get the most out of it but that's my failing as much as anything else.
