

An Evening with Gene Wolfe

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I first became acquainted with Gene Wolfe in the mid-1980s when I first discovered *The Book of the New Sun* and took my first stab at *The Shadow of the Torturer*. It didn't take me very long to realize that I had not clue one as to what was happening and that the author's prose was not anything like what I had ever tried to read before. But, I had heard good (no, great) things about the books and I struggled onward, gaining an appreciation for the work as I went.

The first time I met Gene Wolfe was at Rivercon XXI in 1996. In my age-addled mind, I recall being on a panel with him, but when I checked the program book, I discovered that I was not a program participant at the con that year, so that probably says something about my memory. In any event, I introduced myself to Gene at one of the panels, only a few quick words.

A couple of months later, I enrolled in a class being offered on writing science fiction by Columbia College in Chicago, actually the suburbs of Chicago. In the years immediately prior to my enrollment, the class had been taught by Phyllis Eisenstein or Jody Lynn Nye. The year I took it, the class was being taught by Gene Wolfe.

I think the word that came to mind when I realized Gene would be teaching the class was "intimidating." Of course, Gene is an excellent writer and teacher and even as we all got to know him a certain amount of the intimidation factor remained throughout the class.

A couple of years later, I was speaking on the phone to Gene, most likely about Windycon programming, and he suddenly stopped and said, "Is there something you forgot to tell me?" I ran our conversation through and couldn't think of anything. I had hit all the topics I had planned to. 'I hear crying in the background.'" Right, Since the last time I spoke to Gene, my wife had given birth to our first daughter.

When I had heard that Gene was going to be honored as the recipient of the first Fuller Award by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, I knew that I wanted to be there to share the evening with him.

The Fuller Award is named after Henry Blake Fuller (1857-1929). His most famous novel is *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893), for which a literary society has been named since 1907, although Fuller was never a member. Many of his works used literary realism to detail the lives of the citizens of Chicago, and Theodore Dreiser described him as the "Father of realism." Since the Hall of Fame is only open to authors who have shuffled off this mortal coil, the Fuller Award has been established to let author's enjoy their accolades while there is still time. As I mentioned to Valya Dudycz Lupescu, who organized the extravaganza, it is wonderful to see Gene being recognized by the literary establishment outside of science fiction.

The event took place at a private estate located in the suburbs of Chicago. The owner purchased the estate in the 1980s, and as his personal collection of coin operated nickelodeons, stereoscopes, gramophones, slot machines, and other toys from an earlier era grew, so also grew the house. Prior to the start of the ceremonies, attendees were able to walk around and look at portions of his home.

When I arrived, I almost immediately bumped into Michael Swanwick, who had already performed cursory reconnaissance of the house. He suggested that the downstairs was the place to go, a fact that was lamented by Betty Anne Hull, who had joined us, but for whom stairs present something of an issue. I headed downstairs and was pleasantly surprised to see Michael

and Betty walking through a collection of gramophones a few minutes later. Yes, the enormous cage elevator does work and Betty was able to use it to more fully explore the house.

My meager powers of description really can't do justice to the house and its contents. The walls are lined with old movie posters from the earliest days of cinema through the 1950s (I think the most recent poster I saw was for Charles Chaplin's 1957 film *A King in New York*). In front of the posters is a row of coin operated machines which, when activated, play music and have scenes enacted by moving slats. Gramophones are lined up in tidy rows with only Nipper missing. The gramophones were among those things which were not running, so we couldn't hear the delightful scratchiness of old 78s.

Heading deeper into the maze of rooms, Michael, Betty and I came to a room filled with slot machines, scales, stereoscopes, and nickelodeons. Prior to coming to the event, I had emptied the change from my pockets, but Michael had some nickels and quarters and dropped one into an old nickelodeon, so we were able to watch the images from a bygone era flicker by. After examining a fortune telling machine similar to the one in *Big*, I helped Betty back to the elevator and continued to poke around before climbing the stairs into the turret which houses a pendulum and a theodolite.

The room where the awards were to be given was an enormous room designed to hold the owner's pipe organ. The organ was originally built by the Wurlitzer Organ Company for the Riviera Theatre in Omaha, Nebraska in the 1927. You've heard of the Mighty Wurlitzer... This is it (number 1571, in fact). When the owner bought the organ, it had 2,400 pipes, which sounds impressive

until you realize that he has since expanded it to contain 8,000 pipes, making it the largest pipe organ in the world. It stands on a stage at one end of the room, in front of a large blue drapery which is filled with tiny holes. Behind the scrim are the majority of the organ's pipes, although there are plenty in the music room itself, including pipes that stretch 37 feet up the walls. Trumpets in the back of the room are also controlled from the organ, as are a piano, various drums, symbols, bells, and other instruments in the rooms behind the curtain. Various parts of the organ were originally taken from Wurlitzers in the Nile Theatre in Mesa, Arizona, the Hub Roller Rink in Chicago, the Paramount and Egyptian Theatres in Los Angeles, and many others.

The room is huge, and ornate, and the organ, dwarfed by the space around it, draws all of your attention.

When the organ was first brought to the estate, it was located in a more modest room, however when the owners son decided to get married, the current room was designed and built in a ten month period to accommodate the organ and the wedding. In addition to the organ, the room also contains a couple of calliopes located at the back of the balcony.

When I entered the room after my excursion up the turret, I noticed that Gene had arrived. I tried to make my way over to him, but was unsuccessful. The property's manager was about to start on a tour of the back of the organ for Gene, his family, and a select few. Jennifer Stevenson suggested that if they didn't want us to join the tour, they would turn us away, and so we traipsed along with the group, which also included David Hartwell, Lawrence Santoro, and Gene's daughter Terry, and three of his granddaughters.



The rooms behind the scrim took up three stories of varying heights and contained numerous tubes and instruments. Even as I took pictures of the rooms, filled with the various instruments connected to the organ, I knew that I couldn't do them justice. As with everything else in the house, I just couldn't back away enough to get the scope of everything.

Eventually, it was time for the main event to begin and I found that Betty had saved a seat for me (unfortunately, Fred Pohl, her husband who bought Gene's first science fiction story, was unable to attend).

The first part of the evening was emceed by Gary K. Wolfe, who made sure that everyone knew he was no relation to Gene, although whenever Gary made that statement, Gene would announce that he was going to tell their mother. After Gary spoke, he introduced Neil Gaiman, Gene's one-time collaborator, who proceeded to regale the assembled with stories of Gene, as well as a reading of "A Solar Labyrinth," a Gene Wolfe story that first appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in April, 1983 and has been reprinted in *Storeys from the Old Hotel*.

Gene came up to receive the award and give his acceptance speech, a good deal of which was spent roasting some of the friends he new were in the audience, and demonstrating his sense of humor with all the self-deprecation he could be expected to manage at an event designed to make sure he knew how important, loved, and even revered, he is.

Following Gene's speech was a production of a live radio play adaptation of his story "The Toy Theatre" by Chicago author Lawrence Santoro, performed by Terra Mysterium. The actors were accompanied by R. Jelani Eddington on the Mighty Wurlitzer, mostly incidental music, but the play did include the song "Coin Operated Boy," written by Amanda Palmer (who was not present) and originally performed by The Dresden Dolls on their debut album in 2004. As a radio play the staging was minimal, but there was movement and the actors even went so far as to interact with each other in appropriate ways. Santoro's adaptation worked quite well, maintaining Gene's style and dialogue while, in Santoro's words, "cutting away the paper."

Once the play ended, it was time for Eddington to perform a solo concert on the Mighty Wurlitzer. There was no set play list circulated, and Eddington provided a brief introduction before each piece, talking about the composer, about the organ, about music in general. He played a reprise of "Coin Operated Boy" without the vocal accompaniment, as well as "Londonderry Air" (after all it was St. Patrick's Day). Eddington explained that the finale would be a piece which would show of the versatility of the organ and show how it could replicate the sound of a full orchestra. Long before he revealed the composer as John Williams or the piece as *Star Wars*, it was clear what we would be hearing. He did, also, warn the people in the balcony that the trumpets would be sounding behind them. After the finale, Eddington offered up an encore: a medley of patriotic music as the Wurlitzer was first lifted above the stage on its rising platform, and then sunk below the stage until only the top half of the organ was showing.

It would be awesome to see a silent movie accompanied by that organ. I think the closest I've come was as a student at Indiana University when Dennis James would accompany silent films on their 4,543 pipe Schantz organ.

Following the concert, it was time to head over to the Carousel Pavilion for dinner...except that Gary K. (no relation) Wolfe realized that for all of Neil's introduction of Gene and Gene's stories, Neil never actually presented the award to Gene. The two performed a quick hand off and posed for pictures and we walked up to the Carousel Pavilion.

The Carousel Pavilion was a large, cavernous room in a building finished in 1997. Tables were sprinkled throughout and two railway cars lined one side of the room. An enormous

clock stood in the center of the room and there was an ornate barrier to the back half. Walking through the barrier revealed a large carousel. Around the walls of the rooms were organs purchased from dance halls and fairgrounds.

Dinner was provided by Wild Asparagus and I found myself at a table with Tina Jens, Jody Lynn Nye, Bill Fawcett, and Lawrence Santoro. During the meal, Toastmaster Peter Sagal, who hosts the NPR news show *Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me!* and who had been announced as a Special Guest at Chicon 7 the day before, introduced family, friends, and colleagues of Gene's to make a toast. Peter explained that although he was a long-time science fiction fan, and noted his attendance at Noreascon III in 1980, where he met Pohl and Isaac Asimov, he didn't really know everyone he would be introducing that night and, following a cursory exploration of Wikipedia, decided it would be better if he just made stuff up, proceeding, for instance, to introduce Gene's daughter Terry, who rebelled against her father to become a motorcycle mechanic in the Pacific Northwest.

Most of the toasts were short, enough that when the third toast ended, Sagal asked the toasters to speak for longer period so he could finish his salad, which was a poached pear salad.

After dinner, they announced that the carousel would be open for rides.

The Eden Palais Carousel is an 89 foot wide, 42 foot tall structure that was built in 1890 with 36 hand carved life-sized horses created by Josef Hübner and four gondolas. The center is covered in seven paintings by Andre-Charles Coppier. Despite its size, the carousel was designed to be toured rather than remain in one place and it traveled throughout from 1890 until 1959, when it was purchased from the Caron family by Magic Mountain, an amusement park in Golden, Colorado, which opened in 1957. Unfortunately, around the time the carousel arrived, Magic Mountain declared bankruptcy. The carousel was left outdoors for the winter before it was purchased and rescued by Charles and Sue Bovary, who put it into storage in Great Falls, Montana. It remained in Great Falls until it was purchased and moved to its present location.



The assembled masses moved towards the carousel like theoretical lemmings towards a cliff.¹ I rode the first wave on one of the horses, which bucked very much like a real horse. I found myself wondering how long it was going to last and thinking about how embarrassing it would be to explain to my wife that I threw my back out on a carousel. The big surprise was that not only did the horses move, but the gondolas also moved.

While the second group rode the carousel, I took the opportunity to explore the tremendously lush railroad cars, one a Pullman Palace Car, the other a Victorian Station Caboose, which were in the room. Both spoke of an elegance in travel which is lacking these days. Of course, when travel took so much longer, comfort was much more important.

¹ Lemmings don't actually do that...it is all a canard perpetrated by Disney who pushed the lemmings off.

Shortly before I left, I was able to corral Peter Sagal, with whom I had been in touch for Chicon 7, and whom I saw at a taping of *Wait, Wait...Don't Tell Me!* several years ago, and discuss some ideas we had for his schedule at this year's Worldcon. Then, business, pleasure, and celebration of a friend behind me, I climbed into my car and drove home, wondering how I could get back onto the estate to share its marvels with my wife and children.

And from the program book for *An Evening to Honor Gene Wolfe*:

I was first introduced to Gene in the pages of *The Shadow of the Torturer* and was blown away by his prose. I next met him when we were on a panel together at Rivercon in the mid-90s and despite the sense of awe, I think I even said a few words. A month later, I found myself taking a writing class with Gene as my instructor, an experience all should be able to have, but an opportunity afforded to too few. I'm proud to call Gene my teacher, and grateful to call Gene a friend.

Congratulations, Gene!