



***“You never learn how to write a novel.
You only learn how to write the novel you’re on.”
— Gene Wolfe****

Dear Faithful Reader,

Some days I wake up, look around, and think, “I don’t know how to do this!”

And it’s true. I really don’t.

I’m not speaking here just about writing; I’m speaking about living. I don’t know how I’m meant to compose my day — what to eat, what to think, who to be, how to proceed.

Don’t worry — I’m not having an existential crisis or suffering neurological meltdown. Of course, I know all those things, and of course, I’ll go ahead and live my day, as I do every day.

And yet, I truly *don’t* know. Not really.

I know my habits, my stock surround, the assembled elements and ingredients of my life. I know how this all goes, normally. Yet today isn’t yesterday, is it, nor any other day. It is something wholly new, a world never before inhabited, a blank page waiting on fresh narrative.

The brain has a bias for rhythm and rhyme. It’s hardwired into our neurology, this lilting pulse of pattern recognition. It is what enabled us to survive the ravages of prehistory. It’s what keeps us social and sane. Poetry is a survival mechanism. Repetition, to an enormous degree, is the fabric of our existence.

But isn’t the essence of life, the very thing that *makes* it “life,” the new and unpredicted, the unexpected variation, the disruption of pattern?

Writers wrestle with this paradox perhaps more than most, because when you sit down to face an actual blank page, you are being asked to reinvent the entire world from whole cloth. And yes, the templates of past writings offer whispers and nudges, hints and clues — but still, you’re really starting from scratch, aren’t you, like God on Day 1 of *Genesis*.

One of the toughest writing struggles I’ve ever gone through was with [*The Go-Giver Marriage*](#) in its earliest stages. I had a situation and two heroes — Tom, going in for the

job interview of his life, and Tess, wrestling with the juggling act of running a private consultancy while caring for a child with special needs. They were both about to encounter a cast of characters who would reveal the “5 secrets to lasting love” over the course of a week.

I knew how this was supposed to work.

In the original *Go-Giver*, Joe went through a series of meetings that started on a Monday and culminated in Friday revelations. In *The Go-Giver Leader*, Ben met with a different company leader every day, from Monday through Friday. In *The Go-Giver Influencer* (which I privately think of as *The Go-Giver Negotiator*) my two heroes, Jackson Hill and Gillian Waters, follow the same pattern, with meetings from Monday to Friday. Each book traced a path from problem to *Eureka!*, frustration to revelation, over the course of one week. That pattern just worked.

Except it wasn't working.

No matter how I played with the elements of the story, I could not find a way to plot Tom's journey over the course of a week. A job interview that lasted for five days? Too tedious. Four or five different interviews with a series of bosses? Clunky. And Tess meanwhile going off to meet four or five different mentors, on four or five different visits?

Weeks of my own went by, and I couldn't make the story work.

Or so I supposed. Until one morning, sitting in my Marty Crane chair, blank pad of paper on my lap, I thought, *What if we did the entire thing in a single day?*

Problem to *Eureka!*, frustration to revelation.

Turns out, it wasn't that it was hard to write this particular story. It was just hard to escape the gravitational pull of the previous stories. I wasn't struggling to make the book work — I was struggling with trying to make it work the way all the others had worked.

Which brings us to Gene Wolfe, the acclaimed master of science fiction.

When Neil Gaiman (one of my favorite writers — it was Neil who inspired the fairy tale of the princess and the young man in *The Go-Giver Marriage*) had just finished his first rough draft of what would become *American Gods*, he told Gene Wolfe that he thought he had finally learned how to write a novel.

Gene smiled kindly at him and said:

“You never learn how to write a novel, Neil. You only learn how to write the novel you're on.”

We human beings have a long wisdom tradition of confronting the world as a blank page. Of not taking things for granted or slipping into complacency. There is the famous phrase attributed to Socrates, “This I know: that I know nothing.” Jesus told his followers, the only way to the kingdom of heaven was to first “become like little children” (Matthew 18:3). The Zen Buddhists call it *soshin*, “beginner’s mind,” a total absence of preconception.

You never learn how to live your life. You only learn how to live the day you’re living.

When I was involved in public speaking, I set a discipline for myself: to begin every single talk differently, never repeating myself once. It was a challenge but I stuck to it. The result: I was guaranteed never to find myself “going through the motions.”

The familiar is comfortable, the ultimate safe space. But consider this: the root word of “familiar,” *famulus*, is the Latin word for “slave.”

A question: In what areas of your life have you ever felt yourself at risk of becoming complacent, of taking things for granted, of becoming enslaved to the familiar? (If you trust me enough to share this, [REPLY HERE](#) — I would love to read your answer!)

I’ve noticed how Ana and I constantly reinvent what we like to cook for dinner. How we approach the challenge of staying fit and whole as we age. How we tell each other “I love you.”

Habit — rhyme and rhythm — are useful in all these areas, but they can also settle into stagnation, that process through which anything and everything, no matter how inspired, can become stale and lose its flavor.

The bored marriage.
The bland dinner meal.
The formulaic writing.

So, reinvent! Make something for dinner you’ve never had before. Brush your teeth with the wrong hand. Find a way to tell your partner that you love them without using the word “love.”

Figure out how to write the novel you’re on . . . and then turn the page and start a new novel tomorrow.

My November wish for you: that you spend a little time every day doing something you love — but doing it completely differently than you’ve ever done it before.

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to be 'Jed' with a horizontal line to the left.

* ABOUT THE WRITER

Gene Wolfe may be the most famous author you've never heard of.

The prolific author of 30 novels, numerous short stories and collections, Wolfe won a slew of awards throughout his career, including two Nebulas, four World Fantasy Awards, and a World Fantasy Award for Life Achievement. He was named a Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America Grand Master (one of the field's most prestigious titles) and in 2007, twelve years before his death, was Inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame.

When Neil Gaiman related the Gene Wolfe story that provides this month's quote, in his introduction to the tenth anniversary edition of *American Gods*, he described Wolfe as "the wisest writer I know ... [he] has written more excellent novels than any man I've met."

Born in New York in 1931, Wolfe was an only child, frequently ill (he contracted polio early on); he describes his young self as "an introverted kid who spent a lot of time in his imagination."

The boy loved to read, gobbling up Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers comic strips, all the sci-fi paperback anthologies he could find, and authors such as Frank Baum, Kipling and Poe. Neither parent had gone to college, but they were avid readers who passed that love on to their son.

"I had a mother who read to me [Gene once told an interviewer], which is a great blessing I suppose just about everyone who writes has had."

His grandmother, too, would save the Sunday funnies for her grandson, and whenever Gene came over to visit there would be a stack waiting for him. As an adult, he corresponded with J.R.R. Tolkien.

Enrolled at Texas A&M to study engineering, Wolfe began dabbling in short stories, just to give an artist friend something to illustrate. After dropping out in his junior year, he was drafted into the Army and sent to Korea, where he served as a combat engineer.

He returned from Korea "a mess," as he later described it. "I'd hit the floor at the slightest noise." His marriage in 1956 to Rosemary Dietsch helped him find the stability he'd lost on the battlefield. As he put it, "Rosemary saved me."

After going through college (successfully, this time) on the GI Bill, Wolfe took a job as an R&D engineer at Procter & Gamble, where he developed the machine used to fry the dough for Pringles. The job paid a decent wage, but not enough to meet the demands of a growing family. As he later told the *Washington Post*:

"If you have a wife and four children, as I do, you tend to be scraping around for ways to make a bit of additional income."

That “scraping around” led him back to dabble in short stories again. After the typical eon of send-outs and rejection slips, he finally sold a story in 1965 to a “one of those skin magazines, a poor man’s *Playboy*.” More stories sold, first to “adult” magazines and soon to sci-fi magazines. In 1970 he put out a first novel, *Operation Ares*, and then, in 1972, a novella (soon expanded to a trilogy) titled *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*.

Cerberus was his breakout work. As one critic put it, “*The Fifth Head of Cerberus* ... earned him a place among the small band of accomplished stylists in science fiction.” The book was nominated for both a Nebula and a Hugo. (He lost out to Arthur C. Clark and Ursula K. Le Guin, not too shabby as competition goes.)

More novels and more acclaim followed — yet writing remained a sideline, and for the next decade he held onto his day job as an editor for the trade journal *Plant Engineering*.

“I was the robot editor; I was the screws editor, the glue editor, the welding editor. I was in charge of power transmission belts, and gears, and bearings, and shafts, and all sorts of stuff like that.”

Then, in 1980, at the age of 49, he published *The Shadow of the Torturer*, a novel set in the distant future that follows the wanderings of Severian, an apprentice torturer who violates his professional code by showing mercy to a prisoner.

For the next three years, *The Shadow of the Torturer* was followed by annual sequels, the four novels forming a tetralogy called *The Book of the New Sun* — which became Wolfe’s most acclaimed work, his *magnus opus*.

With the success of *New Sun* he left his job at *Plant Engineering* and became a full-time writer. His career was secured, and his legacy with it.

So . . . why not more famous?

I suppose the simplest answer is, his writing isn’t *easy*.

Wolfe’s stories are thick with riddles, mysteries, and puzzles that are not always entirely explained (or explained at all). Entering the thicket of a Wolfe novel, the reader plunges into an often intricate web of symbolism, literary allusion, mysteries within mysteries, and unreliable narrators that keep readers guessing about what is true and what isn’t, or isn’t *quite*. He writes about grand themes of moral, social, and epistemological weight, threaded over looms of byzantine plotlines and fantastic settings.

The title of [an excellent New Yorker profile](#) sums it up in three words:

“Sci-Fi’s Difficult Genius.”

And his vocabulary is . . . dizzying. As that *New Yorker* piece put it:

“A wise reader will keep a dictionary nearby, but it won’t always prove useful. Though Wolfe relies merely on the strangeness of English—rather than creating a new language, like Elven or Klingon—he nonetheless dredges up some truly obscure words: cataphract, fuligin, metamynodon, cacogens.” [All of them actual English words.]

His stories can be bleak, but are also shot through with dashes of comedy. In his introduction to the story collection *Castle of Days*, he wrote:

“I have been told often enough that I have a sense of humor that makes strong men faint and women reach for weapons.”

Although he was never a mega-bestselling author, Wolfe has earned the highest praise and regard from both critics and fellow writers. He has routinely been ranked as not simply one of the greatest science fiction authors, but one of the best American writers, period.

Here is award-winning science fiction author Michael Swanwick writing in 2003:

“Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English language alive today. Let me repeat that: Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer in the English language alive today! Shakespeare was a better stylist, Melville was more important to American letters, and Charles Dickens had a defter hand at creating characters. But among living writers, there is nobody who can even approach Gene Wolfe for brilliance of prose, clarity of thought, and depth in meaning.”

Or Harlan Ellison, in a review of *The Shadow of the Torturer*:

“Gene Wolfe is engaged in the holy chore of writing every other author under the table. He is no less than one of the finest, most original writers in the world today. His work is singular, hypnotizing, startlingly above comparison.”

Or Pulitzer Prize–winning columnist Michael Dirda, writing about *Book of the New Sun*:

“If Proust, while listening to late Beethoven string quartets, wrote *I, Claudius* and set it in the future, the result might resemble this measured, autumnal masterpiece.”

And finally, here is Neil Gaiman again, writing about his friend and mentor in 2011 for the “My Hero” feature in *The Guardian*:

“Gene Wolfe remains a hero to me. He’s just turned 80, looks after his wife Rosemary [by then afflicted with Alzheimer’s], and is still writing deep, complex, brilliant fiction that slips between genres. He’s my hero because he keeps trying new ways of writing and because he remains as kind and as patient with me as he was when I was almost a boy. He’s the finest living male American writer of SF and fantasy — possibly the finest living American writer. Most people haven’t

heard of him. And that doesn't bother Gene in the slightest. He just gets on with writing the next book."

Now he's one of my heroes, too.

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