



The Land Across

Gene Wolfe

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A novel of the fantastic set in an imagined country in Europe

An American writer of travel guides in need of a new location chooses to travel to a small and obscure Eastern European country. The moment Grafton crosses the border he is in trouble, much more than he could have imagined. His passport is taken by guards, and then he is detained for not having it. He is released into the custody of a family, but is again detained. It becomes evident that there are supernatural agencies at work, but they are not in some ways as threatening as the brute forces of bureaucracy and corruption in that country. Is our hero in fact a spy for the CIA? Or is he an innocent citizen caught in a Kafkaesque trap?

Gene Wolfe keeps us guessing until the very end, and after.

The Land Across Details

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Author : Gene Wolfe

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From Reader Review *The Land Across* for online ebook

Alan says

The Land Across is not well-mapped, nor is it reachable by any normal means. Planes get rerouted; trains fail to stop; the roads are almost impassable...

All that is nothing, though, compared to how difficult it is to *leave*.

The Land is somewhere in Eastern Europe—definitely not as far east as one of the 'stans. That much we can tell. It's on the Orient Express' route somewhere between Vienna and Ankara. Probably. The spoken language sounds like an amalgam of Greek and Slavic, and its alphabet certainly isn't the Latin one we use for English—Gene Wolfe's narrator Grafton never makes much headway with the written language, although he eventually becomes able to hold his own in conversation.

"It is a great mistake, I find, to write a book, because everyone looks upon you as an expert."
—Papa Zenon, p.107

That may be true of nonfiction, or at least of many attempts at nonfiction, but Gene Wolfe's self-consciously Kafkaesque novel *The Land Across* seems unlikely to engender that kind of unwanted attention. Not that Wolfe isn't an expert at what he does—he is—it's just that the *Land Across* that Wolfe depicts isn't one that you can just go visit. There *are* no experts, in other words, other than Grafton and, by extension, Wolfe himself.

At the beginning of *The Land Across*, Grafton's already a seasoned travel writer, although he is oddly given to boyish diction... that is, gosh-darned expressions that would have been boyish at the turn of the *last* century. Gee whillikers. Grafton's worldly expertise does not help him when he actually reaches the Land Across, though. He is marched off the train at gunpoint. His passport is taken away, then he is imprisoned for obscure offenses—the lack of a passport figuring among them—and placed under house arrest with honest citizens Kleon and Martya in the town of Puraustays. He forges an immediate connection with Martya, which is problematic for Kleon since Grafton must sleep beneath Kleon's roof every night. If he does not, then Kleon will be shot.

The Land Across is like that. The rationalizations behind its legal system are at best murky, and at worst impenetrable.

"When the truth will serve, it is better than a thousand lies."
—JAKA operator Naala, p.160

Grafton's travails in the Land Across begin to ease when he becomes acquainted with the JAKA—the Land's not-so-secret police. I don't think we ever find out exactly what the acronym JAKA stands for, but it doesn't matter... this kind of shadowy law enforcement is already familiar to us from a hundred previous examples. Grafton himself actually turns out to have something of a knack for intelligence work—so he quickly ingratiates himself with the JAKA agent Naala, and uses that leverage to discover ever-more-interesting information about the Land Across and about his relationship to it.

That relationship changes subtly but significantly as Grafton becomes ever more deeply involved in the Land's politics, and as he discovers aspects of the country that aren't exactly part of the more mundane reality shared by the denizens of the Earth's other countries.

Grown men learn pretty soon to punch the soft parts.
—Grafton, p.274

The Land Across is replete with pithy aphorisms, coming across not so much as a straight travelogue as like a diary of Grafton's efforts to extract himself—an illiterate foreigner in a land whose rules are exceedingly strange, even by the standard of strangeness a travel writer will have come to expect—from the tangles of religious, political and even magical intrigue in which he has become trapped.

It's very difficult to find anything bad to say about The Land Across. It does seem to ramble, although perhaps that's as one should expect from a personal memoir... but it is an extremely unsettling journey, well worth the time taken to read Grafton's report from abroad...

Richard says

The blurb on the cover is what grabbed me. Up until the moment that I had this book in my hands, I'd never heard of the author, but the promise of a bizarre, supernatural story set in a fictional Warsaw Pact country seemed fascinating.

Unfortunately, while the concept is still quite interesting, I've made it about halfway into the book and I don't really want to go on. While the bizarre situations and sometimes flat characters aren't really an issue, I think I've just been worn down by the dialogue and the main character himself. A majority of the book seems to be dialogue at times and nearly every character isn't a native English speaker, except the main character, and speaks this oddly broken English that leaves you with no difficulty understanding the basics but it just hard to read. And the narrator, despite being American, comes off as someone who isn't too comfortable with English either.

It's enough of a problem that it tends to drag me out of the experience of the book and leaves me just not quite wanting to go on.

This is something I'd consider trying again later, only because I am curious where it goes, but not enough at the moment to drag myself through the last half.

Amanda says

In my mind Gene Wolfe will always be the best. I've adored all of his books that I've read so far and this one was no different. I'm always slightly worried when I begin a new Wolfe book that I will be let down somehow, but that has never happened. If anything I become a bigger fan with every book. This was a great novel with all the slightly unexplained and confusing layers you'd expect from Wolfe. One of the best novels I've read in awhile.

Liv says

A strange journey into a strange country. I really enjoyed the writing here. The book has notes of fantasy and horror but is set in a contemporary foreign country. It is the story of an American travel writer who decides to visit a little known country for his newest project. He is immediately arrested, his passport is taken, and he's placed in the home of man who will be shot if he doesn't spend every night there. There are some mysterious things that begin to happen as Grafton tries to figure out how he might get out. This book is in fact his retrospective on the ill fated journey, and Grafton seems almost foreign himself in his writing at this point.

Josh says

Wow! I personally had never read a book by Gene Wolfe, but I am very glad that I did now. While I had a fairly major problem with the ending of this novel, 7/8 of the book was out-of-sight. The mix of genres is mindbending. Travel novel, political diatribe, ghost story, vampire story, rolled into one with a bit of CSI-style crime investigation, *The Land Across* is a travelogue of one man's descent into spiritual limbo as waits out his sentence in an un-named European country. Somehow, our hero Grafton, a novelist/travel writer, gets himself on the wrong-side of a very authoritarian police state. He's committed to house arrest, then allowed to live in a disreputable home which may or may not have corpses/ghosts/treasure somewhere in the walls, and finally recruited by the secret police to help them investigate another American who "disappears" from prison. Oh, did I mention that that American sells do-it-yourself voodoo dolls which have spells that may or not actually work? That's about all of the plot that I'm willing to give away because half of the fun of the novel is discovering along with our hero all of the twists and turns that he experiences. The language that the author uses is exquisite. I've never read a book that so convincingly uses dialogue from a non-English speaker's point of view. Most of the interactions that Grafton has are with people who don't speak English. So, Mr. Wolfe has to translate. And it's very convincing. Hilarious too. The author has a great command of language and storytelling. I just wish that the ending of the story wasn't so disappointing. All things considered, though, I enjoyed every page.

Leni Iversen says

Young male American goes to Eastern European country that has kept up its own Iron Curtain. He immediately gets arrested in a strange dreamlike sequence. After that things get very weird indeed, with multiple factions and some ghosts and black magic thrown in. Young American implausibly takes it all in stride. I expect Wolfe to mess with my head and leave me with a dazed book hangover, but this didn't. It was just alright. Entertaining but it won't linger.

Martin Fossum says

As seen on Workadayreads.com - 16 Jan 2014

A travel writer arrives by train in a nameless Eastern European country, a mysterious remnant of the Soviet bloc and cast-off of Western civilization, in Gene Wolfe's new masterpiece, *The Land Across* (Tor Books).

To be sure, this place is no ale-toasting whistle stop on a Rick Steves European tour. Here, a dictator rules from a mountain retreat, the JAKA (the government's secret police) operates through extortion and intimidation, and the clergy is at war with a satanic cult sprung from its own ranks. This is a state with an unidentifiable language, where outsiders are regarded with suspicion and where rationality is left at the border. It is a dream world, the realm of allegory, and a world through which our narrator, Grafton, must navigate in order to find freedom and regain his life.

From the first page, we realize how remote and forbidding this place is:

"Visitors who try to drive get into a tangle of unmarked mountain roads, roads with zits and potholes and lots of landslides. Most drivers who make it through (I talked about it with two of them in New York and another one in London) get turned back at the border. There is something wrong with their passports, or their cars, or their luggage. They have not got visas, which everybody told them they would not need. Some are arrested and their cars impounded. A few of the ones who are arrested never get out. Or anyhow, that is how it seems."

Accordingly, as he approaches the border to this isolated country, Grafton is jolted from his sleep; the next thing he knows he is escorted from his train by border guards who confiscate his passport, stuff him in a car, and place him under detention in a private home in the suburbs of the city of Puraustays. If he escapes, they tell him, Kleon, the owner of the house, will be shot. What follows can only be described as a voyage through an archetypal dreamscape, one inhabited by libidinous women, mystical priests and callous bureaucrats; a shadow world of haunted mansions, castles ruins, dark forests, and labyrinthine office buildings.

After a year of imprisonment in the capital, fellow inmate, Russ Rathaus, escapes and Grafton becomes a participant in the investigation to find his former cellmate. Joining forces with Naala, an assertive and attractive JAKA operative, Grafton rises in the JAKA's esteem until he becomes a JAKA operative himself (he is given his gun and badge.) He tracks down Rathaus, and later, in a final confrontation, dispatches with the Undead Dragon (the ringleader of the cult of the Unholy Way) thus ridding the capital of its former menace. In exchange for his help, the dictator returns Grafton's passport and he is granted free passage out of the country. It is back in America where our narrator safely writes down this harrowing account.

My skin crawls whenever I read about someone taken into police custody without charge. This is the hook here, and Wolfe exploits it expertly. *The Land Across* joins many novels in this tradition; the most famous among them may be Franz Kafka's *Der Process* (1915). In Kafka's story, Josef K is arrested and brought before a tribunal in an attic above an obscure tenement building. There are no rules in this court. There is no recourse. There is only procedure and advice and waiting and dread. This is the same territory that Wolfe's Grafton has stumbled into. "You have done nothing," Grafton's new friend Volitain says as they discuss his dilemma. "Damn straight! So why was I arrested?" Volitain answers, "They needed someone. That is all."

But where Kafka's protagonist turned the knife on himself in the end, in Wolfe's book, Grafton is rewarded for his complicity. In this sense, Wolfe's worldview (his *weltanschauung*) seems drawn toward redemption (and this could be seen in a religious context) and hope rather than Kafka's dark and cynical fatalism. And perhaps this is okay?

Of course, we, as readers, would never allow for Kafka's protagonist to join with his oppressors. It would

signify the failure of the individual...the loss of self. And perhaps this is where I'll hang my only criticism of Wolfe's book. When given the condition of the godless, oppressive irrationality of the modern bureaucratic state, what route does an individual take toward freedom? José Saramago's lead character in the novel *All the Names* found resistance native in the human spirit. Kafka felt that death was the only way out. But joining with one's persecutors, as Grafton does in Wolfe's novel, seems to me like too risky a bet. Yes, some good is done, but at what moral cost to Grafton? Of course, there is a higher level of complexity here, but this is a problem that needs attention.

I come late to the Gene Wolfe fan club, but I provide it with a new and dedicated member. I had no understanding, before reading this book and learning about Wolfe, of how revered he was in the field of speculative fiction, and I would certainly consider myself unauthorized to place this work in the broader context of his lauded and distinguished career. That said, this novel is mesmerizing and should stand on its own, independent of its predecessors, and further proof of Wolfe's mastery.

Bryan Alexander says

The Land Across is an entertaining, lighter Gene Wolfe novel. It's a contemporary adventure with fantasy and horror notes taking place in an unnamed, made-up Balkan nation (close to Greece).

The first half or so presents that classic Gene Wolfe feeling of creepiness just below the surface, a sense that something vast and mysterious is just beneath the words you think you understand. You work through symbols and names, hunting for allusions and cryptic references. The story proceeds, then suddenly lunges sideways. Monsters and shudder-worth objects obtrude. It's a weird tale. Dream contents cross into waking life.

But the second half shakes off the fantasy and sets the narrative squarely in daylight. The plot leaves the weird behind and becomes a suspense thriller. Mysteries slide from ontology to crime, and the stumbling narrator becomes a detective, actually a police agent (or "operator"). This is very strange for a Wolfe novel. I'm not sure I approve, but it was an interesting change of pace. Seeing all plot threads neatly dealt with was kind of refreshing.

Concerning that plot: the narrator travels to a very hard-to-get-to nation in order to write a travel book about it. Instead, things happen, and this book is about his adventures. (view spoiler)

S.T. Joshi observes that it's very hard to maintain a weir vibe successfully through an entire novel. A short story's length allows a good balance between surrealism, fantasy, reality, and suspension of disbelief. But after 150 pages or so the reader really wonders how come the police have never raided the haunted house, or how the monsters manage to stay fed all these years. This novel seems to have deliberately defused that tension.

Miscellaneous observations:

The religious element is pretty clear. The narrator grows increasingly religious, while the villains are Satanists.

A bunch of horror references, starting with *Dracula* (the title nearly turns into Transylvania), and including

Algernon Blackwood ("The Willows").

Narrator seems unreliable, but that doesn't get the reader very far. He plays a lot of fourth-wall games (my favorite being accusing the reader of not paying attention), and they all resolve by the end. Grafton is a pretty simple guy, compared with the usual Wolfe protagonist. Ultimately, I want to think he's... wrong, somehow.

Problems:

1. The politics become weirdly conservative, even reactionary. A cult espouses an extreme conservative position; later, a far-seeing and sympathetic character expresses agreement with them. The country's political system begins as scary, but becomes ultimately familiar and even decent, with a very sympathetic dictator. As this review points out, Grafton ends up quite happy in a very scary place.
2. The treasure's ultimate location is way too easy. (view spoiler)
3. The magical plot becomes too realistic. (view spoiler)

Overall, an enjoyable, engaging, entertaining Wolfe novel. Not the titanic work of art that was *Book of the New Sun*, nor the complex novel that is *Peace*, but a pleasure nonetheless.

Christopher says

Wolfe does Kafka and does it well.

Some people read Gene Wolfe for the intricate puzzles/references he includes in locations, character names, etc. I prefer his wonderful facility with language and ability to cut right to the bone in his writing.

His earlier novels were more meandering in their wordplay while his latter novels are more direct (as direct as any Wolfe book can be). Both are extremely rewarding but in different ways. Where Wolfe's earlier works would have a lot more "flowery" language, his latter works (and especially characters) are positively laconic.

"The Land Across" is one of those later works (2013) and is a great little excursion into an unnamed Eastern European oppressive police state where an American travel writer quickly runs afoul of local authorities, has his passport withheld, is arrested, and finds himself essentially unable to leave (but still free to mostly wander about).

The undercurrents of political discontent are present as our travel writer becomes captured and recruited by one such revolutionary group (like any good police state, there are several). But because this is a Wolfe novel, there are also rumblings of things unnatural...so we also get suggestions of witchcraft, old-world gypsy magic, disembodied (yet animated) hands, and mysterious figures dressed all in black.

Nietzsche said that "if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." Here it could be said that "if you gaze long into a bureaucracy, the bureaucracy also gazes into you" as our intrepid travel writer goes from being political prisoner, to unwitting revolutionary propaganda mouthpiece, to actual member of the secret police. It's a very strange trip that still works and feels both natural and unnatural at the same time.

Like every Wolfe novel, the ending sneaks up on you and wallops you over the head with a usually confusing revelation that makes you say "Damn it, now I have to read it again." Same rules apply here.

Jason says

2 Stars

This is a very strange novel that really was not my cup of tea. It is an unusual tale almost folk lore like, about a photographer that gets caught up in a strange land.

I skim read through most of it but never connected with it. This was not the type of novel for me to read while I am too busy to stay focused on it.

Maybe I will try again another day.

Daniel says

Those even slightly familiar with Gene Wolfe's prolific work may recognize its persistence in theme and style. Critics, colleagues, and readers in general praise his unique voice, which is often challenging to penetrate with its unconventionality, but usually end up making his stories hugely rewarding experiences. Despite the now conventional expectation of idiosyncrasy in Wolfe's prose and plots, he somehow manages to keep stories inventively unpredictable and engrossing.

Recently released in trade paperback format by Tor Books, Wolfe's 2013 novel, *The Land Across*, is typical Wolfe: a young, possibly unreliable narrator, evocative descriptions, shifting plots that play with expectations, sophisticated incorporation of the political and religious, and beneath it all a perpetual sense of foreboding.

An American travel guide writer named Grafton enters an isolated, enigmatic country in Eastern Europe by train and quickly finds himself experiencing the whispered rumors about the secretive nation and the difficulty of getting safely in — and out. His passport confiscated by national police who immediately proceed to detain him for failure to have documentation is just the start to Grafton's orientation into the corruption and bureaucracy of this strange land and culture. Under house arrest in the care of a local couple, Grafton slowly begins to learn more about the powerful forces at play in the country for the daily existence of its native population and the fate of its visitors.

Grafton's journey by train into the mountains of Eastern Europe at first evokes the tones of *Dracula*, and the underlying horror that creeps from the opening pages continue through the novel. Wolfe writes *The Land Across* in a very interesting way. The language is straightforward, alternating between a more evocative formality (not unlike a travel guide) in parts and a simple conversational tone in others. Perhaps more approachable to readers compared to Wolfe's frequently dense prose, the simplicity here in sentence construction hides the more convoluted and shifting tones and plot of the novel. Even beneath the straightforward words, readers quickly discern something very inexplicable and apprehensive lurking. Regarding Grafton's initial run-in with the national police force, Wolfe has his protagonist recount:

I got my passport out of my jacket and showed it to him. He passed it to the third border guard without looking at it. After that, they made me stand up, patted me down, took my iPhone, and tied my hands behind

me. I guess I was scared, but mostly I was stunned.

The boss border guard marched along the upper deck of the observation car, motioning for me to follow. I did, noticing that the railing (which I knew darn well had been there when I had climbed to the upper deck) had been taken down. Steep little steps led from the upper deck to the main floor. The boss border guard trotted down them and I did my best to follow him. I was about halfway down when somebody pushed me. I fell, bumping into the boss border guard. I believe he must have landed on the lower steps. I rolled over him all the way to the bottom. He got up cursing and kicking. I could not understand his curses, but I knew what they were all right. I had never been kicked before and had not really known how bad it is. I think I must have blacked out.

The next thing I remember is being taken off the train, trying to walk and stumbling a lot while someone with strong hands held my arm.

The train had not slowed down but was roaring along beside a narrow black conveyer belt that was going even faster than it was, so that the shiny steel bands the sections were joined with looked like they were crawling slowly past us. We were waiting for the other two, or that was what it seemed like.

Wolfe, through Grafton's point of view, gives the information matter-of-factly, but loaded with the uncertainty of memory: 'I think', 'I guess', 'I believe'. What starts out as an unremarkable description of train travel in the previous pages suddenly shifts into the realms of the unexpected, almost supernatural. A railing suddenly vanishes; a strange black conveyer belt appears next to a moving train. The physical crossing over the border into this land is accompanied by crossing the border into the world of the surreal.

The underlying horror to *The Land Across*, in the sense of unease, is particularly fitting for anyone who has ever experienced culture shock, of trying to manage routine activities normally taken for granted, now in a foreign culture and unknown tongue. This classic, gothic vibe to the novel continues as Wolfe takes the story into a direction that could resemble something from Poe or a story by Albert E. Cowdrey, with talk of hidden treasures and specters. But then Wolfe throws a curve at these expectations and the novel goes into another direction that (while still with hints of the supernatural) more closely resembles a spy novel, or something that would fit into the *Hard Case Crime* series in plot and conventions. Amazingly, Wolfe keeps the novel as a whole coherent amid these shifts, and the mystery of what exactly is going on here, what is this land, who is Grafton, who are these people he has met keeps the reader engaged.

Ultimately a reader will try to come to some kind of conclusion as to what the meaning is behind *The Land Across*. The back cover description for the novel states: "Gene Wolfe keeps us guessing until the very end, and after." Whether Wolfe has any particular meaning in mind, or many, is irrelevant. I certainly have my interpretations, but I don't think by any means that they are the only ones possible. The strength of Wolfe is his ambiguity, of trusting readers to manage building their own realm answers from what he has provided. Not all readers look for this in a book, but it surely is what art is meant to engender. And Wolfe is a genius at constructing a world for readers to practice this joy, and to discover things new upon rereading.

From one solitary read (mostly while traveling at airports, with which this goes well) I was personally struck by how the character of Grafton is particularly passive, accepting of his predicaments. Starting the novel as one kind of person who is suspected and accused of being other kinds of people, he ends up something entirely new by the novel's close. It is almost as if the nature of the land has molded Grafton into something else, the politics and culture of where one finds oneself shaping who you are more than any intrinsic part of yourself.

This is just one of many tracks that a reader's thinking may go down through Grafton's surreal, sinister journey. This may not be the best Gene Wolfe book to try out if you are completely new to him. But if you're willing to see where a journey into *The Land Across* may take you and have any prior appreciation of Wolfe, you shouldn't regret stepping through its borders.

Disclaimer: I received a free copy of this from Tor Books via Skiffy & Fanty in exchange for an honest review that was originally posted at www.skiffyandfanty.com

Al says

There's something about Gene Wolfe novels that makes them hard to access, and this one is harder than most--without the reward. Something about the pacing, the characters and the tone leaves the reader isolated and therefore bored. It's like watching a muffled TV from across the room rather than being onstage in a play. The thick, rich writing makes you think there is another level, but there isn't. This book reads more like tedious rambling than intriguing alternative fantasy.

Christopher says

Gene Wolfe's 2013 novel *The Land Across* is an unusual combination of a Kafkaesque struggle with inexplicable bureaucracy and the witch-hunting horror genre. The narrator Grafton is a young American who has established a career as a travel writer, and for his next destination he has chosen a fictional Eastern European country reputed to be difficult to travel in. Indeed, he is pulled off his train by border guards, his passport confiscated, and he is brought to the home of a local man. "Stay here," the police tell him, "for if you escape, your host will be shot." Soon, the plot expands from the strangeness of this foreign country to ghosts and a Satanist coven.

Wolfe has always written his books as puzzles, and this is no exception. All kinds of strange things happen as the characters try to answer a few questions, and only in the end does it all come together. However, the mystery plot plays out in a dry, mechanical fashion, with Wolfe trying to tie everything together with the least effort possible, that is, without crafting memorable descriptions or believable dialogue.

What really turns this book into a chore is the narrator. Grafton has supposedly written a number of travelogues already and gained respect in the business, but the prose of this book is at the level of a teenager. It appears that Wolfe, already in his eighties when writing this, wanted to represent the speech of typical educated Americans in their twenties, but he badly miscalculated. The narration sounds like a vacuous young man of the "bro" stereotype, and Wolfe liberally sprinkles his dialogue with "Hell, no!" and "No shit?" as if this lends it authenticity.

Perhaps this could have succeeded as something for a younger audience. Indeed, while reading this I was often reminded of *The Westing Game*, Ellen Raskin's classic juvenile mystery. However, this is one of Wolfe's more sexually explicit books, with Grafton expressing his desire of (or success in) getting in the sack with several female characters. There seems to be no audience this book will connect with.

I rank Wolfe's early work (namely *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, *Peace* and *The Book of the New Sun*) as some of the best novels in the English language, utterly transcending the limitations of genre and featuring

prose just as complex and powerful as Proust or Nabokov. Unfortunately, his powers have declined greatly in the decades since, and I'm finding every new book by him to be the same half-hearted effort of hobbled writing and limp revelations. Even if you are a fan of golden-age Wolfe, I would not recommend reading this.

J.P. Lantern says

So more than anything probably you should know that I am a big Gene Wolfe fan. I have read pretty much everything of his that I've gotten my hands on, and some of it more than once. Everything that I haven't read more than once, I plan to at some point.

So, *The Land Across*. Here there be spoilers.

It's sort of hard for me to collect my thoughts on any given piece of fiction that Gene Wolfe writes directly after I read it because everything that he writes is rather dense (in the sense of "loaded with conflicts, themes, and symbols," not "dull.") On the face of it, this is a story about a would-be travelogue gone horribly wrong, with the writer/narrator getting arrested when traveling into an odd, hard-to-enter Eastern European country, and then is promptly pulled into a complex plot involving a treasure hunt, secret police, dark magic, disembodied hands, femme fatales, and lots of talking in cafes.

Oh man, there is a lot of talking in cafes. Purely as a device of moving narrative, Wolfe relies a lot on dialogue. This is great, because he is probably one of the best ever to write conversations and magically inundate the audience with information without ever giving them the impression (at least in my case) that he is handing out exposition. Even so, by the fifteenth or sixteenth stop in a cafe comes around, you're probably saying, "Again? Well, all right, but only because the last time, it was so good."

So, when you're reading a Wolfe book, you're dealing a lot with perception and how it shapes the narratives we create for ourselves. You get the sense from reading a lot of Wolfe that he's of the belief that even our own perceptions aren't to be trusted--that we are all in the business of crafting the stories of ourselves, and in this, we have a lot of bias.

As such, there is a lot of Grafton's story that I enjoyed. But, there is so much that resembles a white man's power trip that we have to consider what parts are subtly making fun of white men and power trips. Consider: Grafton, a seemingly normal man with no special education or skills, is able to be locked in a country where he is relatively well-off with his small amount of money and immediately starts sleeping with women (all of whom are described as beautiful in one way or another), and he is enraveled in a mystery of which he is the most perfect person to possibly solve.

He looks death in the face (I presume) and death is all, "It's cool, bro. Lemme make you a fire." He solves a mystery, largely by himself, and is able to impress even the most secret of the secret police. The magic disembodied hand that follows him around? It's a female hand, furiously attached to sitting in his pocket next to his junk. He's given a gun, and the ability to beat people up with impunity (which he takes advantage of), and saves the day. One dude beats him up--but it's cool, he gets his win back. The woman he says he loves? Leaves her--too complicated and chatty. Instead, he finds a nice pretty girl immediately after that, seemingly just because he wants to. To top it off, he is constantly monitored by a father figure who, in the end, gives him an award that everyone is envious of.

When you're listing plot points like this, it's hard not to think, "Well, yeah, that all happens. It wouldn't be a story if Grafton wasn't special in some way or another." But I think the big points on there--the father figure, the ability to have a gun and do what the law can't do, the incredible effects he has on every woman he encounters--these all point to some kind of power fantasy. And because they fit so well with our ideas of power fantasies, we have to start wondering what in the hell Grafton is really up to. I mean, how well do travelogues really sell? Doesn't it make sense to just start making a little bit of shit up and then get caught in the story?

A good, entertaining book on the surface of things, and a lot more to explore with future reads.
Recommended.

Keith A. Walker says

The Land Across is Gene Wolfe at his Gene Wolfeiest. Those who have been put off by his style in the past won't find much here to change their minds. Wolfe is particularly fond of unreliable narrators, dialects and plot lines that only rarely stray into the realm of the fully understood. A book by Gene Wolfe is almost sure to leave the reader questioning everything, and this is no exception.

Ostensibly a political thriller and spy novel, The Land Across is also a fantasy novel in which voodoo and black magic are more than mere superstition for the peasants who populate the Eastern Bloc dictatorship in which the book takes place. In this country, magic and black magic are real; however, as our narrator doesn't understand how, neither do we. Somewhat uncharacteristically for Wolfe, however, the identity of the book's major villain is revealed with no uncertainty whatsoever, though just how pressing a threat the villain was remains vague.

Think The Third Man as directed by Alejandro Jodorowski, and you've got a good idea of what you are in for: political intrigue laced with supernatural symbolism instead of dread and tension.

It is difficult to know whether or not to recommend this book, as I can see why it would be very polarizing. Those looking for clear answers should probably steer away, but those familiar with Gene Wolfe should already know this.

I will readily admit that the voice of the narrator makes the book something of a slog. It simply doesn't read as easily as most of Wolfe's books do. Nevertheless, I chose to interpret this as being more savory than Wolfe has generally been in the past. This book forces you to take time and consider. I loved every second and rate it as one of Wolfe's best. Your mileage may vary.
