

FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS (Wolfe)

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Peter Cash — 07 Sep 1995, 16:26

THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS, by Gene Wolfe

A book review by Peter Cash

Spoiler warning: The following discussion of THE FIFTH HEAD of CERBERUS contains spoilers.

THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS is copyright in 1972, but has apparently been out of print for some time; the Orb edition was published in 1994. This book deserves a place not only among science fiction/fantasy masterpieces, but among the best literary works written in English during this century.

This book is composed of three novellas. The novellas are related but, how they are related, and how much they are related, is not easy to judge. FIFTH HEAD is ambiguous, complex, and puzzling; it will leave you wondering what really went on long after you have finished it. Don't let me mislead you - this isn't a book that will leave you unsatisfied with its loose ends and unresolved puzzles; instead, it will leave you feeling that you have read something far richer than you are accustomed to. The impression FIFTH HEAD left on me was that it was simply so complex, so multi-layered, that I couldn't hope to ever understand all of it. I'll be thinking about it for a long time.

The first novella, itself called "The Fifth Head of Cerberus," tells the story of a young man's coming of age in a rather sinister and completely odd family. The young man, who is never named but narrates the story in the first person, has a very peculiar relationship with his father - they are very, very much alike. Eventually, the son ostensibly kills his father, is sent to prison, and after some years in prison is released to resume his father's career as pimp in the family house on Saltimbanque street.

I say "ostensibly," for the killing scene is written so elliptically that it's hard to tell what really happened. Did the "father" kill the "son," and take his place? (If so, why?) Did the mysterious anthropologist Prof. Marsch, who is apparently a shape-changing alien, take over one of the other's roles, and kill the remaining one? I don't know. And whatever happened to the father's "normal" son, David? And what was the connection between Marsch and the aunt?

The middle novella - "A Story," by John V. Marsch, doesn't seem to have any direct connection with the other two, except it gives us some hints about the nature of the shape-changers and about how the twin planets St. Anne and St. Croix on which all three novelettes take place became colonized. It's told in third person, mostly from the viewpoint of what is either a human or a shape-changer (everyone seems rather confused about who they are - a theme never far from the surface in any of the three novellas) named Sandwalker. In the end, Sandwalker may, or may not, change places with his twin brother. The main connection between the second novella and the other two seems to be in the title - it's attributed to the anthropologist, Prof. Marsch. But then again, things are not necessarily what they seem in the universe of Wolfe.

The third novella - "V.R.T" is partly a cleverly disguised first-person narrative. Usually, it's difficult for an author to mystify his audience with a first-person account the way Gene Wolfe likes to mystify us; since the narrator usually knows too much, tension is hard to maintain. (Unless you resort to making him an amnesiac, as Wolfe does in his SOLDIER series.) In this case, Wolfe has an anonymous "officer" go through the recordings and papeers pertaining to the interrogation of Prof. Marsch, who it seems has been placed in Kafkaesque arrest after the murder on Saltimbanque street (but he is not charged with murder). Some of the records are first-person memoirs which may, or may not, indicate that while on the planet St. Anne, the real Prof. Marsch died and had his place taken by one "V.R.T.", allegedly a shape-changer. Again, connections to the other two novellas are indirect, and quite mysterious. There is some indication that the officer's slave may be one of a clone of the narrator in the first novella.

As you can see, the questions are many. I would welcome net discussion on all the things I missed! (A net correspondent has already pointed out to me that it is possible to deduce the name of the family in the first novella, and has provided me with some clues but, I have not yet figured it out.

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