

Review: Wolfe's _The Fifth Head of Cerberus_

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Paul S Jenkins — 15 Sep 1998, 19:43

The Fifth Head of Cerberus by Gene Wolfe

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Maybe I'm not a sophisticated reader. I enjoy books that operate on several levels, and in my opinion that's what can make a novel great - something for everyone: a good story, tackling important issues, with subtle nuances to delight those readers who catch them, and plenty of interest at the surface for those who don't. Any book whose deeper subtleties leave little to engage the less sophisticated reader goes down a notch or two on my scale.

Such a book, I'm sorry to say, is _The Fifth Head of Cerberus_. Gene Wolfe is often cited as a stylist of literary SF. Seeing a secondhand British paperback edition in a street market I therefore snapped it up.

The Fifth Head of Cerberus is the first Wolfe I've read, and though I'd have to agree about the use of the term 'stylist'; the three linked novellas that make up this book are superbly written - I had a hard time with the novel as a whole. There are obvious parallels with colonialism, slavery, subjugation of indigenous races, etc, but the direction of the three narratives remains unclear.

The first, eponymous novella, "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" is the first- person narrative of a boy on the human-colony planet Sainte Croix. He and his brother live with their father, a brothel-keeper, who performs repeated 'narco-therapeutic' experiments on the boy, evidently trying to force knowledge into him for some purpose. The brothers are looked after by a sentient robot known as Mr. Million, who, it turns out, is an expert- system based on their grandfather. Eventually the boy discovers why so many of the Sainte Croix inhabitants have similar facial features, and he decides to take matters into his own hands.

The novella is written in a mildly archaic, Victorian narrative style: nothing jars, and it's plainly the work of a master. The plot is simple and intriguing, but the use of a naive narrator means we never get a clear picture of what's happening.

The second novella is entitled "'A STORY,' by John V. Marsch." Dr. Marsch has already appeared in the first novella, but that's almost the only link with this piece of 'fiction' set on the sisterworld of Sainte Anne, where the shadow children or 'aboriginals' dwell.

Sandwalker dreams he is his twin brother Eastwind, from whom he was separated at birth. He sets out to see a priest, and while searching for a wild animal to hunt as a gift for the holy man he chances upon the shadow children, a strange tribe of old-but-young people. Drawn by their mind-songs, Sandwalker joins them but they are soon captured by marshmen. The shadow children tell Sandwalker of the origins of human life on the planet. The story ends in an unsatisfactory _deus ex machina_ denouement. Obscure, though stylishly written, this story draws parallels with the Australian aborigines and their songlines.

The third and last novella, entitled "V.R.T.," is a curiously framed story, told by Dr. Marsch of his fieldwork in the company of a youth (V.R.T.), interspersed with his journal of incarceration. The frame device is the narrative of the prison governor who is holding Marsch on suspicion of being an abo - a native of Sainte Anne. The governor is reading Marsch's journal, but the pages have become muddled, and we get wild and random jumps between the doctor's explorations of Sainte Anne and his subsequent imprisonment. It seems that the authorities of Sainte Croix cannot decide whether Marsch is a human from Earth as he claims, or a renegade native of Sainte Anne. It's an interesting but direction-less story, which remains unresolved. At the end we're not really any the wiser.

I've an unread copy of *Nightside the Long Sun*. Having finished *Cerberus* I find I'm reluctant to read more of Wolfe. The many-layered obscurity of *Cerberus* is fascinating, but nonetheless frustrating, and though I feel the novel may well repay a second reading, I'm fighting shy of it.

Author: Wolfe, Gene

Title: The Fifth Head of Cerberus

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City: London

Date: 1975 (copyright 1972)

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Comments: paperback (price of reviewed edition unknown, but Amazon.com Comments: lists the US edition as available)

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