

"The Fifth Head of Cerberus" (SPOILERS)

The SF-Lovers list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 13 Jun 1990

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Zorn of Zorna — 13 Jun 1990, 21:40

I finally read Gene Wolfe's "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" a week or so ago. I vaguely remember there being a full-length novel version, but this was a shorter version, in one of the Year's Best anthologies. And I just don't get it. Or rather, I followed the surface story without too much trouble, but when I got to the end I had a strong feeling that there was a lot going on that I was missing. The story seemed to be very straightforward in plot; as far as I could tell, it was mostly a mood piece. It did a good job of characterization and depiction of this future alien society, but I couldn't help feeling that that wasn't all there was to it. Can anyone help me out?

I couldn't even figure out if Veil's Hypothesis (I think that was what it was called) was supposed to be true, or exactly why the protagonist was imprisoned (there's an obvious reason for him to have been imprisoned (killing his father), but I thought there were implications that it WASN'T for the obvious reason).

Hm. Just realized that that story was what I was reminded of by the Prologue to *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (which I'm reading now). Interesting similarities.

Anyway, I tend to have that feeling about most of Wolfe's stuff that I've read. Haven't started on the Book of the New Sun (?) books yet, but the stories of his that I've read (and *Free Live Free*) have often left me wondering what I'm missing.

Jed

hartman at campus.swarthmore.edu
hartman at swarthmr.bitnet

Mike Godwin — 14 Jun 1990, 04:21 · follows Zorn of Zorna

hartman at cs.swarthmore.edu (Zorn of Zorna) writes:

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Well, since Wolfe was trying to create a certain amount of ambiguity in his story, you should be warned that there's no real "answer" to many of your questions. Nevertheless, you'd probably

enjoy the "novel" FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS, which is actually the story you read followed by two related stories. The book will give you a lot of background on the Hypothesis and other questions you may have about Wolfe's fictional society.

Wolfe can be troubling to those who read more traditional SF, since he feels no great need to wrap up his works with tidy solutions. Of course, this is part of his strength as a writer, since life itself has no great fondness for neat solutions.

Mike Godwin
UT Law School