

Forlesen -- Thoughts?

The Urth list — 5 messages, 5 voices, 12 Jan 1999

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Jack Redelfs — 12 Jan 1999, 00:24

Wow...I just finished reading Forlesen. Amazing. I think it might be my favorite Wolfe story so far. One of the things I liked most about it was the subtle humor, almost Dilbertian (ok, so Dilbert is not very subtle...you know what I mean) in effect. The ending was pure Wolfe...we don't _really_ expect him to spill the beans in the end like an Agatha Christie novel (though he likes doing odd things to keep his readers wary...maybe he'll try that one of these days). I don't know where to begin to ask questions. I'm sure you've all talked about this story before, but how about some general opinions.

Off the top of my head,

1. Is Forlesen a computer program?
2. Is he a ghost?
3. Are the other people computer programs?
4. What about the hitchhiker?
5. What about the red book?
6. And the sudden deaths?
7. Why does every surname start with an F...
8. What about those shifting columns that he saw, just before the cop came...does that mean it was all an illusion?

anyway...

William H. Ansley — 12 Jan 1999, 00:06 · follows Jack Redelfs

8. What about those shifting columns that he saw, just before the cop came...does that mean it was all an illusion?

I have a new theory about these shadows. (And that is all Forlesen saw, after all, the shadows of whatever was holding up the road. And can we even be sure of that?)

They were the shadows of beanstalks. Forlesen was up in the land of the giants in the clouds. That's why all the distances were so vast and it took him so long to drive to work!

And I don't care beans if anyone disagrees with me. <g>

One of the things I liked most about it was the subtle humor, almost Dilbertian (ok, so Dilbert is not very subtle...you know what I mean) in effect.

Actually, it took me a moment to realize what you meant, but I got it and I think you have a point here that I am not sure has been made before in this list. This story is, among many other things, a satire on the late-twentieth-century job in the industrialized world and specifically in United States of America and a pointed reminder of what is wrong with it. Or as Matt Groening put it, _Work is Hell_.

Now, I don't claim this isn't obvious, but I am not sure the importance of this aspect of the story has been adequately recognized on this list. After all, Wolfe does make this his Labor Day story in Gene Wolfe's Book of Days. And Wolfe has repeatedly said that he felt very lucky to have a job he enjoyed, implying, at least, that most people do not.

And now for another fun Gene Wolfe activity.

Gene Wolfe left some perfectly good holidays out of Gene Wolfe's Book of Days. I suggest that we all pick a missing holiday and suggest a story for it. I'll start: Groundhog's Day - "Feather Tigers".

William Ansley

Tony Ellis — 12 Jan 1999, 10:21 · follows William H. Ansley

Jack Redelfs wrote:

1. Is Forlesen a computer program?
2. Is he a ghost?
3. Are the other people computer programs?

The computer theory was raised a while ago, but I could argue any one of a dozen different explanations just as convincingly. I don't believe there is supposed to be any one "real" explanation of where Forlesen is or what is going on, and that's much to Gene Wolfe's credit. The story is a satire on working life, and to tie it down to any one pat explanation ("Surprise! It was a computer simulation all along!") is greatly to reduce its power.

4. What about the hitchhiker?

He's (amongst other things) emblematic of an earlier, disenfranchised generation, who did real work rather than the meaningless paperchasing of Forlesen's colleagues.

5. What about the red book?

It's the Bible, or any religious book, or for that matter any text which purports to tell us how to live and what life is really all about. Notice how it loses something in translation?

6. And the sudden deaths?

They're not sudden. 240 ours is a working lifetime in this world.

7. Why does every surname start with an F...

Uh-uh. The surnames of Forlesen's generation begin with F, just as the first names begin with an E, but the initials of the generation they are replacing were all C.D. And the generation before that, Adam Beale's generation, were all A.B.'s. For the purposes of satire, it's a nice way of delineating the generations while at the same time robbing people of their individuality.

8. What about those shifting columns that he saw, just before the cop came...does that mean it was all an illusion?

Dammed if I know. It may just be a way of suggesting the general unreality of this world (ie: nothing holds it up), but I've always felt there's a more concrete explanation that I'm just missing.

Alex David Groce — 12 Jan 1999, 11:11 · follows Tony Ellis

On Jan 12, 12:06am, William H. Ansley wrote:

Subject: Re: (urth) Forlesen -- Thoughts?

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Yes, I think this is the heart of the story. I convinced a friend who's a financial analyst at a bank to read the BOTNS, and he loved it. He bought *Castle of Days* at a used book store and read it. I asked what he thought of Forlesen, and he just grimaced and said "It hits very close to home."

Are the shifting columns (I don't have my copy with me) where Forlesen sees the demon shapes or monsters or whatever? I always thought that was simply part of the hell imagery, if so...

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Easter would be *_Seven American Nights_*, I think. Or perhaps *_The Detective of Dreams_*, but the first is my choice...

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." - John 8:32

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Kevin J. Maroney — 12 Jan 1999, 11:29 · follows Alex David Groce

At 11:11 AM 1/12/99 -0500, Alex wrote:

Easter would be *_Seven American Nights_*, I think. Or perhaps *_The Detective of Dreams_*, but the first is my choice...

"Seven American Nights" hands-down. "Detective of Dreams" is a Christian story, but "Seven American Nights" actually has an Easter procession in it.

Wombat, a.k.a. Kevin Maroney kmaroney at crossover.com Kitchen Staff Supervisor, New York
Review of Science Fiction <http://ebbs.english.vt.edu/olp/nyrsf/nyrsf.html>