

FIFTH HEAD

The Urth list — 9 messages, 4 voices, 15 Feb 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1369>

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Roy C. Lackey — 15 Feb 1999, 00:28

Greetings,

My name is Roy C. Lackey. I only recently stumbled upon this list, downloaded the archives and spent nearly two weeks reading them. About 4.5 megs. I was delighted to find such a group, although I confess that the two SUN series are not my favorites among Wolfe's work. I have been impressed by the depth of some insights, amazed and sometimes amused by others and, taken all together, generally enlightened. That said, a couple of points:

The consensus seems to be that the name of the narrator of `_Fifth_Head_` is "Gene Wolfe". I understand how this conclusion is arrived at, with regards to the surname. What I don't understand is how the given name can be reconciled with the "roll call" scene two pages after the definitive library shelf scene among the Ws. The impromptu class is begun by calling roll. The unnamed narrator is called first, then David. It's been a long time since I was in school, but I distinctly remember "D" coming before "G". Have you ever known of a roll call that wasn't alphabetical? The scene is silly, anachronistic and irrelevant to the progress of the plot. Yet it is there. Why? It must serve some purpose, in the Wolfean scheme of things.

Secondly, the name of Lafferty has only come up four times in the archives, three of those just in passing, and none in any depth. I find that strange, given Wolfe's affinity for the man and his works, not to mention their similar Weltanschauung. Is there a reason for this? Are those on the list unfamiliar with Lafferty, or is his influence deemed irrelevant?

Enough for now, but why so little activity of late? And where's Mr. Borski?

Roy

William H. Ansley — 15 Feb 1999, 23:17 · follows Roy C. Lackey

The consensus seems to be that the name of the narrator of `_Fifth_Head_` is "Gene Wolfe". I understand how this conclusion is arrived at, with regards to the surname. What I don't understand is how the given name can be reconciled with the "roll call" scene two pages after the definitive library shelf scene among the Ws. The impromptu class is begun by calling roll. The unnamed narrator is called first, then David. It's been a long time since I was in school, but I distinctly remember "D" coming before "G". Have you ever known of a roll call that wasn't alphabetical? The scene is silly, anachronistic and irrelevant to the progress of the plot. Yet it is there. Why? It must serve some purpose, in the Wolfean scheme of things.

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do know of a roll call that is not alphabetical. In my family, when my mother wanted to make sure that I and all my brothers and sisters were present, she used to call our names in age order, mine first, since I was the eldest.

Since the narrator is supposed to be older than David, this could explain the order of the roll call. It could also be in order of social rank: the narrator is the clone of Maitre and his heir, while David is a mere natural son, really little more than an experimental control.

The scene may be silly, although that is not quite the word I would use to describe it, but I don't

see how you can call it anachronistic; surely we don't know enough of the history and educational methods of Sainte Croix.

The roll call itself may be irrelevant to the plot, but the lesson that follows is one of the major sources of information about the aborigines of Sainte Anne. How reliable this information is, is quite another question, of course. I don't agree that every detail Wolfe puts in his stories is of equal significance. Perhaps the roll call was included just to add verisimilitude. (Obviously it didn't do so for you.)

William Ansley

Roy C. Lackey — 16 Feb 1999, 01:31 · follows William H. Ansley

mantis:

Point taken; but it was only a scratch. <g>

From: "William H. Ansley" <wansley at warwick.net>Subject: Re: (urth) FIFTH HEAD
Date: Mon, 15 Feb 1999 23:17:31

Since the narrator is supposed to be older than David, this could explain the order of the roll call. It could also be in order of social rank: the narrator is the clone of Maitre and his heir, while David is a mere natural son, really little more than an experimental control.

True, but at the time of the incident the narrator is only seven. It isn't until several years later, at about the age of puberty, that he learns he is the older brother. Also, he doesn't know he's a clone at that point. From the narrators point of view there would be no rationale for anything other than a traditional, alphabetical roll call. Admittedly, it is a small point. Perhaps it means nothing. A Wolfe by any other name is still a Wolfe.

The scene may be silly, although that is not quite the word I would use to describe it, but I don't see how you can call it anachronistic; surely we don't know enough of the history and educational methods of Sainte Croix.

I only said silly because, unlike the case of your family, there are just the two of them; and anachronistic because this is, minimally, several centuries in our future. The likelihood of such a quaint custom surviving that span of time seems, to me, improbable. But then, why what we see of St. Croix should be on a par with 19th century Europe (gas lights, carriages, etc.), rather than the hi-tech society it would take to get there, is no less improbable. But I won't belabor the point.

BTW, did anyone else think that "The Last Thrilling Wonder Story", besides being a parody of pulp-genre SF, was a dig at Heinlein particularly? That's what I thought when I first read it. My imagination, or is there a story there?

Roy

Tony Ellis — 16 Feb 1999, 11:39 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Roy wrote:
William H. Ansley wrote

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True, but at the time of the incident the narrator is only seven. It isn't until several years later, at about the age of puberty, that he learns he is the older brother.

Actually, we don't have any reason to believe that the narrator -is- older than David. He -thinks- he's older because his father tells him that he's the heir.

The likelihood of such a quaint custom surviving that span of time seems, to me, improbable. But then, why what we see of St. Croix should be on a par with 19th century Europe (gas lights, carriages, etc.), rather than the hi-tech society it would take to get there, is no less improbable.

Not so. One of the things I've always liked about The Fifth Head of Cerberus is precisely this up-yours to the stereotypical SF colony where the buildings are all new, the level of technology is high, and the dominant culture is American. You need an awful lot of resources to establish and maintain a "hi-tech society", and the only resource St. Croix seems to have in any abundance is slave labour. Everything else has to be shipped from Earth, taking twenty years and costing a fortune. Easier to pull your carts with oxen. Don't forget too that St Croix has fought a war and lost. Whatever was achieved by the original French colonists has been blown to pieces, while the new regime is corrupt, decadent and bureaucratic, and governs a steadily declining population - hardly the circumstances under which a new society is likely to flourish.

Mark Millman — 16 Feb 1999, 08:51 · follows Tony Ellis

On Tuesday 16 February 1999 at 07:31am GMT, Roy C. Lackey wrote:
But then, why what we see of St. Croix should be on a par with 19th century Europe (gas lights, carriages, etc.), rather than the hi-tech society it would take to get there, is no less improbable.

And at 8:32 am, Tony Ellis replied:

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If I recall correctly, some of the "low-tech" features of Ste. Croix and Ste. Anne are presented as secondary simplifications. For example, I seem to remember that Dr. Marsch recalls traveling by sailing ship--but that the sailing ships are safe, efficient, and regularly scheduled because there's a working system of weather control that makes the fuelless sailing ship a workable and economical solution for water transport. Of course, we also know that Gene Wolfe just likes sail.

We also don't know whether one of the goals in settling Ste. Croix might have been to go back

to a simulacrum of an earlier, simpler way of life. I just read Cordwainer Smith's Instrumentality of Mankind stories (in the excellent NEFSA collected edition, which I highly recommend), and one of the devices Smith used was that of a return to earlier social patterns (or, more accurately, to an approximation of them). The lure of "the good old days" is a persistent one.

Mark Millman

Mark Millman — 16 Feb 1999, 08:56 · follows Mark Millman

On Monday 15 February 1999 at 6:28 am GMT, Roy C. Lackey wrote:
And where's Mr. Borski?

He had been experiencing operating difficulties--his browser would crash and bring down his computer every time he tried to do extensive research in the archives--and I suppose he wasn't ever able to resolve the problem. I certainly tried to help and failed miserably.

If you're out there, Robert, send up a flag!

And, as I forgot to say in my last note (for which I hope you'll forgive me), welcome to the list, Mr. Lackey.

Mark Millman

William H. Ansley — 17 Feb 1999, 00:17 · follows Mark Millman

Roy wrote:

William H. Ansley wrote

Since the narrator is supposed to be older than David, this could explain the order of the roll call. It could also be in order of social rank: the narrator is the clone of Maitre and his heir, while David is a mere natural son, really little more than an experimental control.

True, but at the time of the incident the narrator is only seven. It isn't until several years later, at about the age of puberty, that he learns he is the older brother.

Actually, we don't have any reason to believe that the narrator -is- older than

David. He -thinks- he's older because his father tells him that he's the heir.

I mostly agree. That is why I used the word "supposed" above, but it would have been more accurate if I had said: "Since the narrator supposes himself to be older than David..." However, just because the narrator makes an unwarranted assumption doesn't mean it's wrong.

In any case, I think it is going too far to say that "we don't have *any* reason to believe that the narrator -is- older than David." [*Emphasis* added.] It is fairly clear that producing Number Five was a difficult process for Maitre whereas producing David would have been relatively simple. Surely, if any part of David's reason for being was to be a control for Number Five, Maitre would want them to be as close to the same age as possible. And surely the easiest way to accomplish this would be for Maitre to wait until he had a clone he was satisfied with and then cause David to be conceived, making Number Five of necessity older than David.

William Ansley

William H. Ansley — 16 Feb 1999, 23:58 · follows William H. Ansley

Since the narrator is supposed to be older than David, this could explain the order of the roll call. It could also be in order of social rank: the narrator is the clone of Maitre and his heir, while David is a mere natural son, really little more than an experimental control.

True, but at the time of the incident the narrator is only seven. It isn't until several years later, at about the age of puberty, that he learns he is the older brother. Also, he doesn't know he's a clone at that point.

From the narrators point of view there would be no rationale for anything other than a traditional, alphabetical roll call. Admittedly, it is a small point. Perhaps it means nothing. A Wolfe by any other name is still a Wolfe.

I really don't understand your argument here. How is what the narrator of TFHoC knows about his and David's relative ages or social status controlling the order of the roll?

Mr. Million is the one taking the roll and surely he would know (even if the narrator didn't, at that point) that the narrator was older than David (if he is) and that the narrator was a clone of Maitre and would inherit _Maison du Chien_.

If you are saying that if the order of the roll wasn't alphabetical the narrator would have noticed this and commented on it as an oddity, I disagree. I think it is just as likely (in fact, more likely) that the narrator would have just accepted the order in which Mr. Million called their names, especially considering that he must have been quite young when the lessons started. Also that fact that there were only two names to be called makes the order of the names much less noticeable; after all there are only two possibilities.

I think that the narrator, David and Mr. Million, in this scene, should be considered at least as much a family group (albeit a very nontraditional one) as a teacher and students who are tied together by no other relationship. In my experience, family groups sometimes use non-alphabetical orders for calling roll.

You seem to feel that the only way to interpret the roll call in TFHoC is alphabetical. I think I have shown quite clearly an alternative roll call order is at least equally plausible. It seems only reasonable to me that you should now accept my arguments. But, the contentious history of debate over TFHoC in this list leads me to expect that you won't.

Well, I suppose that's why they call this a "discussion" group.

William Ansley

Tony Ellis — 17 Feb 1999, 10:28 · follows William H. Ansley

William H. Ansley wrote:

I mostly agree. That is why I used the word "supposed" above, but it would have been more accurate if I had said:

"Since the narrator supposes himself to be older than David..."

However, just because the narrator makes an unwarranted assumption doesn't mean it's wrong.

Of course, but on the other hand Wolfe does like to have his characters make the wrong assumption for the right reason (like Number Five mistaking the sepia tint of an old photograph for a novelty artistic process, or Vodalus' disbelief that our word for the present could be the same as our word for gift). This biases me a little toward the David-is-older camp.

In any case, I think it is going too far to say that "we don't have *any* reason to believe that the narrator *-is-* older than David." [**Emphasis**

added.] It is fairly clear that producing Number Five was a difficult process for Maitre whereas producing David would have been relatively simple. Surely, if any part of David's reason for being was to be a control for Number Five, Maitre would want them to be as close to the same age as possible. And surely the easiest way to accomplish this would be for Maitre to wait until he had a clone he was satisfied with and then cause David to be conceived, making Number Five of necessity older than David.

I like your reasoning. But is David a "control"? As I recall, all Maitre says is "I hoped to learn something from an outcrossing." It seems to me just as arguable that whatever Maitre hoped to learn required him to have David on hand first.