

The Death of Dr. Island (SPOILERS)

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 14 Mar 2002

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Michael Straight — 14 Mar 2002, 15:24

One of my favorite pleasures in reading science fiction short stories is being dropped /in medias res/, not knowing where or when the story takes place, not knowing if the protagonist is human, alien, robot, a ghost, and getting to slowly figure it out from clues in the story as it progresses. The weirder the situation, the better.

But there's no cliché more disappointing than finding out that the real explanation for it all is that the protagonist is insane and in a mental institution. Leave it to Wolfe to turn yet another science fiction cliché completely on its head.

The first four pages of "The Death of Dr. Island" are a full force mind-blowing example of that pleasure described above. In the first few paragraphs you start to form a hypothesis about the setting and the protagonist, but you have to revise it every few paragraphs as new details drastically change what you think is going on. Admittedly, in order to do this, Wolfe has come up with a very odd protagonist, situation, and environment. In fact, it's the old "insane in a mental institution" plot. The twist is that, while that is the explanation for all the weirdness, the weird stuff is all real, not an insane delusion or a subjective mindscape.

(Incidentally, it can't be a coincidence that this story comes right after "Three Fingers" in the collection The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories. Any chance that's a clue that the ending of "Three Fingers" isn't quite what it appears to be?)

The rest of the story is not quite as amazing as the first few pages, but it is quite good. The ending is nicely unexpected. Unfortunately, Wolfe couldn't resist pointing out to the reader how unexpected it was. The sentence where Dr. Island explains the title of the story falls flat; it would have been much better to let the reader figure out why the title still fits (we might have had a nice little discussion about it). And you certainly don't need one of the characters saying, "This isn't ending the way I thought." Yes, Gene, the death of Dr. Island is not what I thought it would be. I geddit.

On the other hand, the place where Nicholas gently nudges the fourth wall, with his "Don't you know how a machine is supposed to talk?" is quite funny and well done.

Surely we're meant to be horrified by Ignacio's "cure"? Are there any real-world insane people who, after killing (raping?) someone, get better because they find out it wasn't as much fun as they thought it would be? I'm guessing that the big expensive Dr. Island is really for the benefit of rich, important people like Ignacio; if Nicholas or Diane get better, that's fine, but they're really only there because they might be useful for curing Ignacio.

By the way, it seems to me that the collection The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories might be the right choice for a book to recommend for someone who has never tried Wolfe before. It has some very excellent stories and doesn't require reading 4+ books to get an entire story.

-Rostrum