

5HC a good introduction to wolfe? (was Washington Post article)

The Urth list — 31 messages, 14 voices, 12 Apr 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3145>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

Grant Peacock — 12 Apr 2002, 16:28

My introduction to Wolfe was the first novella in Fifth Head. At the end I felt I'd been knocked on my ass, and I strongly suspected that I had experienced a work of real genius even though nothing had made an ounce of sense. One thing I did know was that I was going to read it again, and look for more Wolfe.

FWIW, I'll risk ruining my credibility by telling you I had the same feeling as the credits rolled after Vanilla Sky. I strongly suspected that a major plot twist had eluded me entirely, but I had no idea what it was or where to look. What I did know was that film was beautiful and that I was going to watch it again ASAP, even if I had to go to the movies alone. The second time, I formed a coherent plot theory, but still knew I had missed a lot of clues, many of which I located the third time. Sound like a familiar experience for Wolfe fans?

There are many forms of art that I, at the tender age of 25, appreciate not at all, or appreciate only at the background music/wallpaper/landscaping level of enjoyment. "Art" is there only because a blank wall would be too, well, blank.

Others I enjoy on the rock and roll/sit-com/die hard level. By this I mean it at least commands my attention for a certain amount of time, and this time is fun, but afterwards the experience is over and I'm not enriched or changed or thoughtful because of it. Thirdly, there are the rare masterpieces that really have something to say. These are the ones you read/watch/look at/listen to once, and discern little but nonsense, but the second or third or tenth time, something starts to click and all you can say is wow. How little we understand about ourselves, when such power can lie in the written word, or on a screen or canvas or audio recording. I know, I'm talking like Severian here and saying I can only describe it as indescribable. Sorry.

Fifth head, New Sun, and Peace are surely in this category for me. Of course plenty of his other work probably will be, as well, but it doesn't come easy.

Anyway, I put forth this theory of the three different levels of artistic work, which no doubt blend together, because I want to make the point that level three stuff is inaccessible. Many readers are not capable of reading it once, not getting it, and saying ah hah better read it again. My dad, for example, is a relatively smart guy and reads a fair amount of SF. I have strongly and repeatedly urged him to read Wolfe, and Fifth head in particular. Unfortunately, at the time he was in a bookstore and decided to try Wolfe he ended up buying Shadow and Claw. I think he made it to the inn of lost loves before he lost patience. He says to me, "Sorry, I couldn't get into it, it was just this guy walkin around with a sword." Fifth Head, I feel, is more accessible simply because it's short. I tell potential Wolfe newbies to just read the first Novella a few times. This is much less to ask, and if you do that and get something out of it, then you'll be ready to take on the Sun books.

One anecdote before I go: Once I overheard a stranger next to me on a plane say that she

wished she had brought something to read. I happened to have 5HC with me, and offered it to her. I explained that the first novella, only 80 pages, stands on its own and she could easily finish it during the flight. She read about 1/4 of it and then fell asleep with the book in her arms, leaving me stuck reading John Varley. But, she did wake up and finish it all, and she clearly impressed. She said she would definitely look for more GW. So, anyway, Fifth Head worked at least twice.. on me and on her.

Peacock

--- Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote:

My introduction to Wolfe was the New Sun books, followed by the Soldier books, all of which I loved. Then I read 5HC and didn't like it very much. If that had been my introduction to Wolfe, I doubt I would have gone out of my way to read more of his stuff.

Alice K. Turner — 13 Apr 2002, 09:14 · follows Grant Peacock

In my own case, I fell for 5H because of its perversity and cruelty. I think (I really don't recall) that I first read only the first novella, which I found (and find) dazzling, a model of what science fiction could do if it grew up. (Does that mean I consider perversity and cruelty to be grown up?) I don't know that I thought if it that way; it's just that I am not a gee-whizzist, and neither, obviously, is Wolfe. When mantis discovered the Proust connection I was really impressed--in fact I gee-whizzed! I don't think it was till after I was hooked by the New Sun that I read the second and third novellas, which take some patience, but when I did and put them together in my mind--well, it's quite an achievement. Formally, it's Wolfe's most impressive work, and I simply don't believe the yarn that he knocked out the second and third novellas only to ensure publication. Perhaps there's a slightly show-offy tinge to it--look, this is what I, and this marginal field, can do with slightly shop-worn ingredients. I liked Delaney at the time for some of the same elements, but nothing Delaney has written is nearly as carefully crafted as 5H, though he too was trying to do original things with genre cliches.

Sorry, rambling a bit here!

-alga

James Jordan — 13 Apr 2002, 18:52 · follows Alice K. Turner

Well, Alga, once again you and I have something weirdly in common, for 5HC was also my first Wolfe, and thereafter I got and read all I could. But I read the whole thing in the Ace paperback. I recall being most impressed by the sense of "thereness" that Wolfe communicated (to me anyway) in the opening pages. Also, of course, the chilling last sentence of part 1 after the whole "antichrist" buildup with "the Master at 666 Street of the Humbug" attempting to gain mastery of human beings by genetic manipulation -- Wolfe just seemed to have it all: social/religious commentary, brilliant writing, sense of place, etc. And that extremely sad scene of the shapechanger -- who should have been considered human -- in the dungeon hearing the church bells far away in part 3 -- these are hardwired in my memory.

Nutria

At 04:14 AM 4/13/2002, you wrote:

In my own case, I fell for 5H because of its perversity and cruelty. I think (I really don't recall) that I first read only the first novella, which I found (and find) dazzling, a model of what science fiction could do if it grew up. (Does that mean I consider perversity and cruelty to be grown up?) I don't know that I thought if it that way; it's just that I am not a

gee-whizzist, and neither, obviously, is Wolfe. When mantis discovered the Proust connection I was really impressed--in fact I gee-whizzed! I don't think it was till after I was hooked by the New Sun that I read the second and third novellas, which take some patience, but when I did and put them together in my mind--well, it's quite an achievement. Formally, it's Wolfe's most impressive work, and I simply don't believe the yarn that he knocked out the second and third novellas only to ensure publication. Perhaps there's a slightly show-offy tinge to it--look, this is what I, and this marginal field, can do with slightly shop-worn ingredients. I liked Delaney at the time for some of the same elements, but nothing Delaney has written is nearly as carefully crafted as 5H, though he too was trying to do original things with genre cliches.

Sorry, rambling a bit here!

-alga

--

Andy Robertson — 13 Apr 2002, 16:22 · follows James Jordan

----- Original Message -----

From: James Jordan

Well, Alga, once again you and I have something weirdly in common, for 5HC was also my first Wolfe, and thereafter I got and read all I could. .net

Me. also. One thing that sucked me in was the library at the beginning, the one with the great dome which M Million climbs up, and the pun on Wilhelm's MILE LONG SPACE SHIP (this being a future where there really are such ships). Trivial, but so charming. But of course that is only one little note in a symphony. I read it again and again.

hartshorn

Jerry Friedman — 15 Apr 2002, 16:52 · follows Andy Robertson

--- Andy Robertson <andywrobertson at clara.co.uk> wrote:

----- Original Message -----

From: James Jordan

Well, Alga, once again you and I have something weirdly in common, for 5HC was also my first Wolfe, and thereafter I got and read all I could. .net

Me. also. One thing that sucked me in was the library at the beginning, the one with the great dome which M Million climbs up, and the pun on Wilhelm's MILE LONG SPACE SHIP (this being a future where there really are such ships). Trivial, but so charming. But of course that is only one little note in a symphony. I read it again and again.

Your timing is perfect, folks, since I just read 5HC. Keep it up!

The above made me think about the library scene, with its plug for Bernard Wolfe (I haven't read the Wilhelm story) and the hints there (along with others) that the narrator's name is Wolfe. Am I supposed to think that Mr. Million is the author (or a descendant)? That the narrator is a portrait of the well-born wolf after a series of worse and worse upbringings? Scary.

People here talk about how the three novellas shed light on or subvert each other, but I don't see the connections. I guess I can wonder when Marsch wrote "A Story"--in prison, after he was replaced by an abo, or went crazy and thought he was replaced by an abo, or whatever? Other than that, what am I missing? (As I missed the reference to Proust, who I haven't read, and passed by the 666 as a mere ornamental detail instead of thinking of the anti-Christ. And maybe it's unfortunate that "saltimbanque" makes me think of "acrobat" rather than "humbug".)

As for introductions, my introduction to Wolfe was various short stories, most of which I found incomprehensible. The 5HC novella may have been one of them--if it was, it didn't grab me. Certainly the world-building is superb, but so little happens. I might even have read the whole novel; I got *deja vu* several times in "V. R. T.", and I don't **think** it was the now-familiar themes. (Mating with trees, ha!) Anyway, it wasn't till I read *_The Book of the New Sun_* in my early twenties (is it possible?) that I really liked Wolfe. 5HC is the **last** place I'd recommend anyone start because it seems the most pointless to me of any of Wolfe's novels, and others might miss whatever point I'm missing. But this is probably just a matter of taste.

Jerry Friedman

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 15 Apr 2002, 16:58 · follows Jerry Friedman

the hints there (along with others) that the narrator's name is Wolfe.
Am I supposed to think that Mr. Million is the author (or a descendant)?
That the narrator is a portrait of the well-born wolf after a series
of worse and worse upbringings? Scary.

More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.) The name is quite fitting, too: the clone-series that includes Five, Maitre, and the original of Mr. Million, is clearly a series of vicious predators upon their fellow humans who use genetic manipulation to achieve their ends -- that is, Number Five is a gene wolf. Gene, of course, is short for "Eugene," well-born: that is exactly what Number Five is *_not_*. He is simply gene, born. Etc., etc. This is full of the kind of play that would delight Derrida if he could ever bring himself to read American SF...

--Dan'I

Michael Straight — 15 Apr 2002, 17:15 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 15 Apr 2002, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own
beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical
list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.)

Really? I thought the name thing was just a joke. Not that the character is supposed to have any real relationship or resemblance to the real Wolfe.

-Rostrum

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 15 Apr 2002, 17:18 · follows Michael Straight

I wrote Rostrum wrote:

[Y]ou are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe.

Really? I thought the name thing was just a joke. Not that the character is supposed to have any real relationship or resemblance to the real Wolfe.

Just started rereading 5HC. I'll respond to this (quite possibly by devouring my share of crow) after I get through the first novella.

John Barach — 15 Apr 2002, 17:28 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

Dan'I writes:

More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.) The name is quite fitting, too: the clone-series that includes Five, Maitre, and the original of Mr. Million, is clearly a series of vicious predators upon their fellow humans who use genetic manipulation to achieve their ends -- that is, Number Five is a gene wolf. Gene, of course, is short for "Eugene," well-born: that is exactly what Number Five is not. He is simply gene, born. Etc., etc. This is full of the kind of play that would delight Derrida if he could ever bring himself to read American SF...

You'll find the arguments at Robert Borski's Cave Canem webpage (<http://webpages.charter.net/rborski/number5.html>). I note, though, that he says "Number Five's name is the male equivalent of Jeannine or Jean/Gene." I'm not sure that "Jean" and "Gene" are really equivalents, since "Gene" is short for "Eugene" and "Jean" (French) is the English "John."

But I note with interest that (according to "'A Story,' by John V. Marsch") on Sainte Anne, all boys are named "John."

... his mother called him John (which only signifies "a man," all boy children being named *John*) Eastwind (Ace, p. 84).

If Number Five's name is the French male equivalent of Jeanette, then he's called Jean, the English of which is John -- the standard name for any boy on the neighbouring planet, and also the name of John V. Marsch. Interesting, I said to myself, but significant...

Speaking of which, is there some significance to "Marsch"? I note that John Eastwind and John Sandwalker in "A Story" are named after circumstances connected with their birth. And what is John V. Marsch's middle name?

John

Jerry Friedman — 15 Apr 2002, 23:18 · follows John Barach

--- Dan'I Danehy-Oakes <ddanehy at siebel.com> wrote:
the hints there (along with others) that the narrator's name is Wolfe.
Am I supposed to think that Mr. Million is the author (or a descendant)?
That the narrator is a portrait of the well-born wolf after a series

of worse and worse upbringings? Scary.

More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.) The name is quite fitting, too: the clone-series that includes Five, Maitre, and the original of Mr. Million, is clearly a series of vicious predators upon their fellow humans who use genetic manipulation to achieve their ends -- that is, Number Five is a gene wolf. Gene, of course, is short for "Eugene," well-born: that is exactly what Number Five is not. He is simply gene, born. Etc., etc. This is full of the kind of play that would delight Derrida if he could ever bring himself to read American SF...

Well, Mr. Million is number 1 (or 2, being Number Five's great- grandfather?), so maybe he is the author, which is what I said. I missed the "merely born" thing, though. On the other hand, even "born" is, in a sense, what Number Five is not--born of man and woman, anyway.

Anyway, I've been reading Robert Borski's pages, and the parts that I believe are answering a lot of questions.

Jerry Friedman

Jerry Friedman — 15 Apr 2002, 23:41 · follows Jerry Friedman

--- John Barach <jbarach at telusplanet.net> wrote:

...

You'll find the arguments at Robert Borski's Cave Canem webpage (<http://webpages.charter.net/rborski/number5.html>). I note, though, that he says "Number Five's name is the male equivalent of Jeannine or Jean/Gene." I'm not sure that "Jean" and "Gene" are really equivalents, since "Gene" is short for "Eugene" and "Jean" (French) is the English "John."

But I note with interest that (according to "'A Story,' by John V. Marsch") on Sainte Anne, all boys are named "John."

... his mother called him John (which only signifies "a man," all boy children being named *John*) Eastwind (Ace, p. 84).

If Number Five's name is the French male equivalent of Jeanette, then he's called Jean, the English of which is John -- the standard name for any boy on the neighbouring planet, and also the name of John V. Marsch. Interesting, I said to myself, but significant...

Speaking of which, is there some significance to "Marsch"?

A connection to the marshmen?

I note that John Eastwind and John Sandwalker in "A Story" are named after circumstances connected with their birth. And what is John V. Marsch's middle name?

Victor? Borski speculates that Victor R(oy?) Trenchard added the middle initial after killing the real Marsch and assuming his identity.

Speaking of names, Borski doesn't mention that in Zen and the

Art of Motorcycle Maintenance_ "Phaedrus" is said to mean "wolf", which would be strong support for his theory that Phaedria is Number Five's half-sister. (However, according to <<http://phaedrusdeinus.org/me/phaedrusdeinus.html>>, that etymology is not true. Has this stuff all been discussed?)

Jerry Friedman

Roy C. Lackey — 16 Apr 2002, 00:26 · follows Jerry Friedman

Date: Monday, April 15, 2002 12:00 PM

Dan'I wrote:

More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.) The name is quite fitting, too: the clone-series that includes Five, Maitre, and the original of Mr. Million, is clearly a series of vicious predators upon their fellow humans who use genetic manipulation to achieve their ends -- that is, Number Five is a gene wolf. Gene, of course, is short for "Eugene," well-born: that is exactly what Number Five is _not_. He is simply gene, born. Etc., etc. This is full of the kind of play that would delight Derrida if he could ever bring himself to read American SF...

Even if what you wrote isn't true, it ought to be. That's brilliant.

-Roy

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 16 Apr 2002, 00:28 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Even if what you wrote isn't true, it ought to be. That's brilliant.

This is why I said it was full of Derridean play. It doesn't have to be intended by the author, only visible to the reader. While I have a lot of reservations about a lot of pomo-ism, and do have some respect for "what the author meant," I am fundamentally in agreement with the pomo concept that, once the work is published, it is out of the artist's hands and its "meaning" is what is generated in the space where it encounters a reader's mind, whether this is what the author intended or no.

--Dan'I

Alice K. Turner — 16 Apr 2002, 11:48 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

From: "John Barach" <jbarach@telusplanet.net>
Speaking of which, is there some significance to "Marsch"? I note that John Eastwind and John Sandwalker in "A Story" are named after circumstances connected with their birth. And what is John V. Marsch's middle name?

Well, Victor. But V is also the Roman 5.

-alga

James Jordan — 16 Apr 2002, 14:56 · follows Alice K. Turner

At 11:52 AM 4/15/2002, you wrote:

(As I

missed the reference to Proust, who I haven't read, and passed by the 666 as a mere ornamental detail instead of thinking of the anti-Christ. And maybe it's unfortunate that "saltimbanque" makes me think of "acrobat" rather than "humbug".)

Jerry Friedman

Jerry, also notice that it is a whorehouse, the opposite of the church (Bride of Christ) in the Book of Revelation (The Great Harlot). Thus, 666. Also, the place is guarded by Cerberus, who guards the gates of hell. In Proverbs, the harlot's feet "extend down to sheol," and the opposition of Lady Wisdom and Harlot Folly in Proverbs 1-9 is immediate background to Bride versus Harlot in Revelation, and something Wolfe cannot fail to have missed. (Anyway, the abode of the antichrist is hell until he appears on earth, when "they want us.")

James Jordan — 16 Apr 2002, 15:00 · follows James Jordan

At 12:15 PM 4/15/2002, you wrote:

On Mon, 15 Apr 2002, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.)

Really? I thought the name thing was just a joke. Not that the character is supposed to have any real relationship or resemblance to the real Wolfe.

-Rostrum

Methinks Dan'I is right. Gene Wolfe is pointing to the "heart of darkness" in everyman/woman, and using himself as an example. Number Five and Maitre are what Everyman could be -- and what Gene would be apart from saving grace. Remember: Wolfe believes in Original Sin. And there has been discussion here of the fact that evidently he has a "depressive personality." It all fits.

Nutria

James Jordan — 16 Apr 2002, 15:10 · follows James Jordan

At 12:28 PM 4/15/2002, John Holbrook Vance Barach wrote:

But I note with interest that (according to "'A Story,' by John V. Marsch") on Sainte Anne, all boys are named "John."

... his mother called him John (which only signifies "a man," all boy children being named *John*) Eastwind (Ace, p. 84).

If Number Five's name is the French male equivalent of Jeanette, then he's called Jean, the English of which is John -- the standard name for any boy on the neighbouring planet, and also the name of John V. Marsch. Interesting, I said to myself, but significant...

Could all these "Johns" have come from "Buckaroo Banzai"? Well, I guess not, given the dates of writing and of the movie. But a John is a user of prostitutes, so the names fit with the larger "antichrist" theme in the book. It may be another truly dark hint, that the shapeshifters are imitating the wrong kind of people, "Johns" who frequent the "harlots" at 666 rue de Saltimbanque. Does this remind us of the Book of the Short Sun? Yes, it does. What kind of people will the shapeshifter/inhumi imitate? Kudos again to Gever for making the thematic connexions!

A comment on Borski's Je m'appelle Jean Loup from his website. He writeth:

Although the title novella of THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS is narrated in the first person, and there are countless interactions between the narrator and the other characters of the novella, the only name ever attached to him is Number Five, which comes from Maitre, his father, and refers to his clonal nature. And yet it is possible to work out Number Five's real name from certain clues within the novella.

Our first clue comes early in the text, when at the public library, Number Five attempts to locate books written by his father, the authorship of which he has found out about from the mysterious lady in pink. Where does he begin his search? In the "W" holdings, where he finds books by Kate Wilhelm, Bernard Wolfe, Virginia Woolf, and Vernor Vinge (the VV of V.Vinge having apparently been misread as "Winge" by some errant librarian). Number Five concludes his search by saying he never found any books by his father, but it now seems reasonable to assume his last name begins with W.

Later then, just before Number Five is first given his numerical nickname, he says, in response to his father's telling him he may pick his own name, "It seemed to me quite impossible that I should have any name other than the two words which were, in some mystic sense I only respected without understanding, my name."

Me: I would add that the "mystic sense" has to do with genetics (gene) and the lupine (man is a wolf to man) character of the family. Borski adds:

So now we know Number Five's name consists of two words, the latter of which begins with W.

Enter into Number Five's life Maitre's sister, who introduces herself as Aunt Jeannine. Later, however, we learn that Aunt Jeannine is a female variant of Number Five's father (and since Number Five himself is cloned from the same source), so inferentially this allows us to assume Number Five's name is the male equivalent of Jeannine or Jean/Gene.

As for the "W" patronym, besides the library reference, Number Five remarks that his house is sometimes referred to as Maison du Chien (because of its statue of Cerberus) and that this "may have been a reference to our surname as well." Chien usually means dog in French, but it can also mean wolf.

Ergo, our narrator's name, is Gene Wolf(e), although given the prevalence of French in Port-Mimizon, it might just as easily be Jean Loup.

Me: But it's interesting that it's not. It's "Gene" and "Wolfe." (Thank goodness Wolfe did not have No. 5 looking under "L" for his father's writings, or else probably even Borski would not have figured it out!) So, we have the American Gene Wolfe living in the New Orleans French society. (And Wolfe did live in Nawlins in his childhood, right?)

Nutria

Michael Straight — 16 Apr 2002, 18:58 · follows James Jordan

On Tue, 16 Apr 2002, James Jordan wrote:

Methinks Dan'l is right. Gene Wolfe is pointing to the "heart of darkness" in everyman/woman, and using himself as an example. Number Five and Maitre are what Everyman could be -- and what Gene would be apart from saving grace.

I agree with this, but I think it is a symbolic connection rather than a literal one. That is, I don't think we should expect #5 to look like our own Mr. Wolfe nor look for clues that the family has held on to a single name since the 20th century. But by giving #5 and Maitre his own name, Wolfe is implying something along the lines you suggest.

-Rostrum

Jerry Friedman — 16 Apr 2002, 19:15 · follows Michael Straight

--- James Jordan <jbjordan4 at cox.net> wrote:

At 12:15 PM 4/15/2002, you wrote:

On Mon, 15 Apr 2002, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:

More: you are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own

beloved Gene Wolfe. (I believe it was John Clute who gave a canonical

list of arguments for that being Number Five's real name.)

Really? I thought the name thing was just a joke. Not that the character

is supposed to have any real relationship or resemblance to the real Wolfe.

-Rostrum

Methinks Dan'I is right. Gene Wolfe is pointing to the "heart of

darkness" in everyman/woman, and using himself as an example. Number Five

and Maitre are what Everyman could be -- and what Gene would be apart from

saving grace. Remember: Wolfe believes in Original Sin. And there has been

discussion here of the fact that evidently he has a "depressive personality." It all fits.

Thanks, fur-bearing one! This comment and your previous one were helpful.

If Wolfe is going to suggest that the main character of "5HC" is himself, I think it's all right for me to continue the discussion of his personality. In his interviews he strikes me as rather arrogant (of course he has a very big lot to be proud of), and someone on rasfw called him "nasty", "rude", and "a prick" after seeing him on a panel; that's consistent with arrogance. (See <<http://groups.google.com/groups%3Fq%3Drec.arts.sf.written%2BWolfe%2B%2522in%2Bperson%2522%26hl%3Den%26selm%3Dabridge-89B1E3.11172601092000%2540news.dcn.davis.ca.us%26num%3D1>>--I

hope this shortene [!] URL works.) On

the other hand, people have inferred that he has tendencies to self-doubt and depression, which probably includes self-accusation.

This is exactly the combination that someone would need to see himself as so arrogant that (if, as you say, he let slip his reception of the divine grace he believes in) he could embark on a project to find out why he wasn't as powerful as he should be and make himself into the anti-Christ in the process.

By the way, am I supposed to think that the Gene Wolfes in 5HC are *really* becoming the anti-Christ, or are freeing their inner anti-Christ, just as good Christians believe that God is within them and try to imitate Christ?

According to the headlines, if Wolfe did want to clone himself, it's probably possible now. There could be duplicates available when the Mr. Million part of the project becomes feasible and if the starcrossing part does.

Jerry Friedman

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 16 Apr 2002, 19:54 · follows Jerry Friedman

I wrote Rostrum wrote I wrote:

[Y]ou are to think that he is an n-th generation clone of our own beloved Gene Wolfe.

Really? I thought the name thing was just a joke. Not that the character is supposed to have any real relationship or resemblance to the real Wolfe.

Just started rereading 5HC. I'll respond to this (quite possibly by devouring my share of crow) after I get through the first novella.

Okay, I don't think I am up for a corvid sandwich at this point, but only because of my rather cautious wording above: I said you are supposed to think that #5 is a clone of the "real" Wolfe, but I did

not say that he is. As Nutria observes, this identification may be symbolic, but is definitely more than _just_ symbolic; Wolfe is pointing to what he himself could, potentially, become.

The primary evidence that the "original" may be "our" Wolfe is the photograph of Number Five's mother, first displayed on pp25-6 of the Ace edition:

... a photograph utilizing, as I supposed, some novelty technique which washed away all color save a light brown. It was small, and from its general appearance and crumbling edges very old. It showed a girl of twenty-five or so, thin and as nearly as I could judge rather tall, standing beside a stocky young man on a paved walkway and holding a baby. The walkway ran along the front of a remarkable house, a very long wooden house only a story in height, with a porch or veranda that changed its architectural style every twenty or thirty feet so as to give almost the impression of a number of exceedingly narrow houses constructed with their side walls in contact. I mention this detail, which I hardly noticed at the time, because I have so often since my release from prison tried to find some trace of this house. When I was first shown in the picture I was much more interested in the girl's face, and the baby's. The latter was in fact scarcely visible, he being nearly smothered in white wool blankets. The girl had large features and a brilliant smile which held a suggestion of that rarely seen charm which is at once careless, poetic, and sly. Gypsy, was my first thought, but her complexion was surely too fair for that. Since on this world we are all descended from a relatively small group of colonists, we are rather

a uniform population, but my studies had given me some familiarity with the original Terrestrial races, and my second guess, almost a certainty, was Celtic. "Wales," I said aloud. "Or Scotland. Or Ireland."

"What?" ... My aunt looked at me acutely and said, "You're right. I'll send for you and we'll talk about this when we've more leisure."

(That discussion, of course, never comes.)

What I would like to know is whether Gene Wolfe actually has this photograph in his possession, and, if so, who it depicts, and where.

--Dan'l

Andy Robertson — 16 Apr 2002, 21:37 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

----- Original Message -----

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <ddanehy at siebel.com>
... a photograph utilizing, as I supposed, some novelty technique which washed away all color save a light brown.
It was small, a

<snip>

What I would like to know is whether Gene Wolfe actually has this photograph in his possession, and, if so, who it depicts, and where.

I am irresistably reminded of the pictures that hold the replicants' fake identity/memory in BLADE RUNNER.

hartshorn

matthew.malthouse — 17 Apr 2002, 13:19 · follows Andy Robertson

On 16/04/2002 20:15:11 Jerry Friedman wrote:

Sheesh...

<<http://groups.google.com/groups%3Fq%3Drec.arts.sf.written%2BWolfe%2B%2522in%2Bperson%2522%26hl%3Den%26selm%3Dabridge-89B1E3.11172601092000%2540news.dcn.davis.ca.us%26rnum%3D1>>--I

Reading the Urth (and the late Whorl) lists has made me think about the way I read. The regular (and apparently unending) unurthing of things I'd not noticed brought me to the onclusion that I was generally an uncritical reader.

Reading that rasfw thread however maybe I'm too hard on myself. If I lack insight then in comparison some of the contributors to the thread are close to brain death. I can understand if ones taste simply doesn't run to the baroque use of language but for someone who'se read it to say "Severian is a man with a good memory" beggars belief.

Thanks too Jerry for reminding me why I gave up reading rasfw. :-)

Matthew

Jason Voegele — 17 Apr 2002, 15:18 · follows matthew.malthouse

If Wolfe is going to suggest that the main character of "5HC" is himself, I think it's all right for me to continue the discussion of his personality. In his interviews he strikes me as rather arrogant (of course he has a very big lot to be proud of), and someone on rasfw called him "nasty", "rude", and "a prick" after seeing him on a panel; that's consistent with arrogance.

FWIW, when I met Wolfe he seemed a very kind and friendly man. I was at a convention and just happened to be standing near by when he signed in (he was guest of honor). He introduced himself to me and we talked for a few moments, and when it became clear to him that I would not be able to make the book signing that was being held later that day, he sat down with me, signed my books, and we talked for maybe ten minutes. David Brin was also at the convention and I had a copy of STARTIDE RISING for him to sign. Wolfe offered to sign that one as well, claiming that he "knew how to spell 'Brin'". He was very polite and had a richly subtle sense of humor.

That said, given an incident at that same convention when David Brin was speaking on a panel discussion, you might also make the claim that he is quite arrogant, although I'd say rather that he is firm in his convictions and outspoken in his opinion. I sat next to Wolfe during a panel discussion on which Brin was speaking (Wolfe was not part of the panel, just in the audience). Brin was stating something to the effect of "sitting around watching television all day isn't such a bad thing. It's certainly better than what we did a few hundred years ago, sitting around staring at a fire."

Wolfe took strong objection to this, and shouted, interrupting Brin, something along the lines of "Anybody who believes that is living in a dream land." Brin retorted, essentially saying the same thing he did before, that sitting around watching television as so many people do now is a better thing than what people did in the past, sitting around staring at a fire. Wolfe's final comment was "sitting around the fire, *talking*". After a few moments, he and his wife stood up and left the room.

Perhaps this was the same panel discussion that the r.a.s.f.w poster witnessed. I was surprised when Wolfe had interrupted Brin's speech, but I can't say I disagreed with him. Whether you'd call this arrogant, I don't know, but maybe it shows the two sides of Wolfe's personality (Silkhorn may be more real than we know). I certainly can't agree that he's "nasty, rude, and a prick." I'd invite him to dinner any time.

Anyway, I'm feeling guilty now about treading into Wolfe's personal life, so I'll stop.

Jason Voegele

Alex David Groce — 17 Apr 2002, 18:26 · follows Jason Voegele

mantis said:

Well hey, if people are still perculating on 5HC, get on over to Ultan's Library and read the two essays there. First by Peter Wright, who, as I've written before, does a great job on the post-colonialist interpretation of 5HC; and then the response by our favorite Robert Borski, which I especially like since he says pretty

much what I would have said, and he does it better than I probably would have.

Agreed. Three cheers (or little creepy stars) for Borski.

Going back to alga's comment on the cruelty of 5HC, I think part of what amazes me about the book is that it's a beautiful trap for the characters, of the only "fair" kind--Number 5 and V.R.T. are physically imprisoned (one released) but the real traps are their selves. "All he can do forever, it seems, is become more like himself," as Borski puts it. mantis mentions Camus, but I think of a reversal of Sartre (of course, one hardly original to Wolfe): "Hell is not other people, but built out of a certain kind of constructed self."

Wright's essay is good, but I must also raise issue with the notion of "the isolated intellectual Wolfe favours throughout much of his fiction." Isolated intellectuals like Severian and Silk and Horn? Where are the isolated intellectuals of Wolfe?

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

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

--

Alex David Groce — 17 Apr 2002, 20:40 · follows Alex David Groce

So to what extent are the Proust and Coleridge "encapsulations" in the 5HC novella essential to the theme, and to what extent does Wolfe do this kind of thing just because he can?

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

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

--

Jerry Friedman — 17 Apr 2002, 15:45 · follows Alex David Groce

--- Jason Voegelé <jason at jvoegele.com> wrote:

If Wolfe is going to suggest that the main character of "5HC" is himself, I think it's all right for me to continue the discussion of

his personality. In his interviews he strikes me as rather arrogant (of course he has a very big lot to be proud of), and someone on rasfw called him "nasty", "rude", and "a prick" after seeing him on a panel; that's consistent with arrogance.

FWIW, when I met Wolfe he seemed a very kind and friendly man. I was at a convention and just happened to be standing near by when he signed in (he was guest of honor). He introduced himself to me and we talked for a few moments, and when it became clear to him that I would not be able to make the book signing that was being held later that day, he sat down with me,

signed my books, and we talked for maybe ten minutes. David Brin was also at the convention and I had a copy of STARTIDE RISING for him to sign. Wolfe offered to sign that one as well, claiming that he "knew how to spell 'Brin'". He was very polite and had a richly subtle sense of humor.

Being nice to fans and having a richly subtle sense of humor (I do like that offer) strike me as totally consistent with arrogance.

That said, given an incident at that same convention when David Brin was speaking on a panel discussion, you might also make the claim that he is quite arrogant, although I'd say rather that he is firm in his convictions and outspoken in his opinion.

[snip story]

Perhaps this was the same panel discussion that the r.a.s.f.w poster witnessed.

Different one--the panel mentioned by "Infozombie" in rasfw was at a librarians' convention, and the other panelists were Joan Vinge and Joan Slonczewski.

I was surprised when Wolfe had interrupted Brin's speech, but I can't say I disagreed with him. Whether you'd call this arrogant, I don't know, but maybe it shows the two sides of Wolfe's personality (Silkhorn may be more real than we know). I certainly can't agree that he's "nasty, rude, and a prick." I'd invite him to dinner any time.

He could certainly have been far more polite to Brin. "I disagree with you completely, because..." Of course, no one's at his best on hearing something that he violently dislikes.

Anyway, I'm feeling guilty now about treading into Wolfe's personal life, so I'll stop.

Well, as I said, if he creates a character with his name who's totally consistent with being himself (as far as I can tell, anyway), I think he's permitting speculation that the character is a self-portrait of some kind or other, which leads to discussion of his own character.

It's worth noting that we take Silk to be Wolfe's portrayal of a good person, and Silk is given to being "merciless" (as Silkhorn puts it) with himself. Wolfe may have thought he was being a good person in being so merciless with himself that he envisioned himself as Number Five and his father.

To be fair, I should probably admit that what I'm speculating was Wolfe's problem, at least at the time of writing 5HC, is something I have a problem with myself--excessive pride and excessive self- condemnation. I may be seeing only what I'm familiar with, but on the other hand, I am presenting reasons for seeing it.

Jerry Friedman

--- Michael Straight <straight at email.unc.edu> wrote:

On Tue, 16 Apr 2002, James Jordan wrote:

Methinks Dan'l is right. Gene Wolfe is pointing to the "heart of darkness" in everyman/woman, and using himself as an example. Number Five and Maitre are what Everyman could be -- and what Gene would be apart from saving grace.

I agree with this, but I think it is a symbolic connection rather than a literal one. That is, I don't think we should expect #5 to look like our own Mr. Wolfe nor look for clues that the family has held on to a single name since the 20th century. But by giving #5 and Maitre his own name, Wolfe is implying something along the lines you suggest.

As I said in an earlier e-mail, Wolfe has survived to the 21st century and there's no need for holding onto names. More to the point, the possibility that he could be cloned someday was probably a reasonable sf assumption in 1972.

Also, note that the Gene Wolfes of 5HC are both engineers and writers, like our hero.

How about looks? Anyone know what Wolfe looked like when he wrote that story?

Perhaps even more to the point, the story strikes me as *much* more chilling if we take it as Wolfe recognizing this potential in himself.

Jerry Friedman

Alex David Groce — 18 Apr 2002, 05:22 · follows Jerry Friedman

Another random minor 5HC tidbit:

The man in black who arrests V.R.T. being from (at least for the moment) The Department of Public Works, Subdepartment of Sewers and Drains could be a nice little nod to Solzhenitsyn's "The History of Our Sewage Disposal System" except 5HC is 1972 and _The Gulag Archipelago_ didn't come out until 1973 in the US.

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

--

Alex David Groce (agroce+ at cs.cmu.edu)
Ph.D. Student, Carnegie Mellon University - Computer Science Department
8112 Wean Hall (412)-268-3066
<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~agroce>

--

James Jordan — 18 Apr 2002, 13:31 · follows Alex David Groce

At 04:48 PM 4/17/2002, you wrote:

Perhaps even more to the point, the story strikes me as *much* more chilling if we take it as Wolfe recognizing this potential in himself.

Jerry Friedman

I guess so. But my point, and I think Wolfe's, was "theological" and thematic. No. 5 is Everyman -- eschatological humanity moving toward "antichrist" -- apart from

grace. No. 5's real name could be "James Jordan" or "Jerry Friedman" or even "Alice Turner." ;-)
I suspect "antichrist" may be thematically more important than
I've previously thought. Recall that Christ died for others, whereas the
people in 5HC are constantly making others die for them. Christ reached out
to others and taught that he who would be great must be servant of all, the opposite of what
the powerful people in the first and third novellas are doing.

FWIW.

Nutria

Jeff Wilson — 19 Apr 2002, 06:26 · follows James Jordan

From: Alex David Groce <Alex_Groce at forlesen.modck.cs.cmu.edu>

Another random minor 5HC tidbit:

The man in black who arrests V.R.T. being from (at least for the moment) The Department of Public Works, Subdepartment of Sewers and Drains could be a nice little nod to Solzhenitsyn's "The History of Our Sewage Disposal System" except 5HC is 1972 and _The Gulag Archipelago_ didn't come out until 1973 in the US.

Vaguely recalled from a transcribed radio interview of Wolfe:

"The Fifth Head of Cerberus" was written about 1971-2; Wolfe used it for a workshop story where Knight was teaching. Knight offered to publish it if Wolfe could supply two other novellas to go with it. THE FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS, the volume including the three stories, came out about 1976, so Wolfe had plenty of time to read Solzhenitsyn and turn in "V.R.T." later.

Jeff Wilson

How Am I Posting? 1-800-555-6789

"If your SecOp can see you, so can the enemy." -Cpt Law

--

Tom Foster — 24 Apr 2002, 16:10 · follows Jeff Wilson

I've been following the recent discussions of 5HC with a good deal of interest. My introduction to Wolfe was _The Shadow of the Torturer_ (the best possible introduction IMHO), which I came to via Jack Vance's _Dying Earth_ books. I read 5HC shortly afterwards, but had never returned to it since (many years having now elapsed). The recent discussions of it piqued my interest (it's one of the only 'major' Wolfe books that I had not read more than once) and I've been reading it for the past few days. I enjoyed it considerably more this time around, perhaps because when I first read it I was only around 15 and didn't understand/appreciate many of its qualities. I'm not sure that I would consider it an especially good introduction to Wolfe as it is convoluted even by his standards and requires a lot of thought and involvement from the reader. It also lacks a strong central character like Severian, Silk or Horn (or even Latro), the depiction of which is where Wolfe excels, I feel. I think that had it been my first Wolfe I would have enjoyed it but not particularly felt the need to seek out other works by him, whereas having read _Shadow_ I immediately wanted to find out what else this author had written.

With regards to the issue of whether or not the abos possessed the ability to shape change, I am inclined to agree with those who feel that this was probably not the case. There are no instances in the book where we are positively told that a character has morphed into something else. Sandwalker

seems to become an otter (though this is only part of a story written by VRT(?) anyhow), VRT

assumes John V Marsch's identity but still looks younger than him, VRT's mother could make herself look older by doing certain things, etc, but nothing concrete.

I thought it was interesting to note the apparent similarities between the inhumis and the abos. There is a mention of an abo looking like a piece of "old wood", compared to the liana staff of Silkhorn (and indeed the liana itself shows up again in 'A Story'). Also, the ability to shapeshift, which the inhumis certainly possess in comparison to the abos' rumoured ability.

Anyway, thanks to the group for inspiring me to re-read 5HC and also to Robert Borski for his useful insights at Cave Canem.

Tom