

5HC the abos

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 13 May 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3258>

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.

Roy C. Lackey — 13 May 2002, 05:21

It seems to me that so many "facts" are in dispute regarding 5HC that some attempt should be made to present those for which there can be little or no doubt, so far as that can be done within a work of fiction, a fiction made deliberately vague by its author. If one "fact" is contradicted by another, or appears to be, then we are left to distinguish between or among the perceptions of those presenting those facts, to weigh one against the other, apply our external knowledge of how things work, and come to reasonable conclusions based upon a preponderance of evidence: that, and assume that the author is playing fair and that his puzzles have solutions which can be found in the text. If this latter caveat is not true, then what is the point, either of reading it or having written it? If the work is nonsensical, a literary-seeming "Jabberwocky", why give it a second thought?

With that in mind, here are the facts of 5HC, as I see them, with regard to the "abos".

- 1) The abos existed. Besides the confirmation by Wolfe in that interview (where Shadow child was surely a slip for abo), without abos 2/3 of the work is meaningless.
- 2) The abos antedated the first French landing. The symmetry, number, and age of the trees in the Annese "temple" establish this.
- 3) The abos' lack of, and inability to use, tools is related to their inability to use their thumbs as humans do. It is very difficult to imagine any environmental scenario in which a species, which once had an opposable thumb, would have that trait deselected by evolution. It just ain't gonna happen, especially for a species living in what amounts to a pre-paleolithic condition, where most of their waking hours are spent hunting for food and other necessities, just to keep alive. An opposable thumb is quite handy, whether in a high-tech or low-tech society, or anywhere in between. We are invited to assume that, with a bow to Dollo, the abos use their teeth to compensate for the loss of function of their thumbs--assuming that they ever had it.
- 4) Victor is at least half abo. He may be all abo, in which case the problem of the viability of humans and abos interbreeding is eliminated. If he is half abo, then the fruit of such a union may be sterile, like mules. We are given no other examples of half-breeds. If Victor is half abo, would not the opposable thumb be genetically dominate?
- 5) As to the absence of tangible proof of the abos' existence, for which Marsch was ostensibly searching, the text is not only vague, but inconsistent. Marsch is quite young to have earned a doctorate and, as Hagsmith put it, for an anthropologist seems "hellishly ignorant" of his subject. On the one hand, enough information got back to Earth for some fool to theorize that the Annese "temple" was a natural growth, but somehow Marsch seems to have escaped the quite significant knowledge that abos not only don't use tools, but can't. If he had known that, why would he have thought that the "absence of legitimate artifacts remains to be explained" or gone in search of a sacred cave in which there might be paintings? Whether the knowledge of things Annese reached Earth from the early French or the English-speaking victors--or

both--doesn't matter; what matters is that it did and that Marsch remains improbably oblivious. If humans had encountered a species so close to human on another planet, it's hard to imagine that species hadn't been the focus of intense research for two hundred years, and that specimens didn't exist on Earth. Hell, the first thing the French found after splashdown was a body.

Which brings me to another point often mentioned but not discussed; the affair at the ford. The name of the ford, "Running Blood", implies that a great deal of blood was shed there. The early French colonists evidently found themselves in urgent need of a means of distinguishing between humans and abos, and were taking no prisoners. There is no clue given to the exact nature of that need, but they were obviously sharp enough to have realized that abos couldn't use tools, and used a shovel for their shibboleth. Such loss of life as the name of the ford implies should have resulted in a great many abo bodies. Why wouldn't Marsch think to look there first for abo remains?

6) The use of vines to enter (as Eastwind did) or exit the sand pit: just try to pull your own weight up a steep incline with a rope, without using your thumbs to grasp the rope, or to pull someone up an incline (as was done for Eastwind) without thumbs. When Sandwalker rescued the five Shadow children from another pit he used his hands to pull them out, and the Shadow children used their hands to grasp his; again, pretty hard to do without human-style thumbs. In the fight with the marshmen that followed, Sandwalker "was upon him almost before he hit, his thumbs merciless as stones as they drove into his neck". What, exactly, was he doing with his thumbs? Using them to jab with in a life-or-death struggle? His elbows or knees would be more effective. Or did he have his hands around the marshman's throat, as a man would, in an attempt to strangle? That takes opposable thumbs.

7) It is unclear whether Victor murdered Marsch or Marsch died in an accident, but it is quite clear that the man who showed up at the whorehouse looking for Veil was Victor impersonating Marsch. The journal entries made after the handwriting worsened were made by Victor, as well as all of the writing done in prison. If Victor killed Marsch, why did he do it? It's easy to see why, once Marsch was out of the way, Victor took his place--he had nothing to lose on Sainte Anne, and Marsch's identity was a ticket to a better life. To the Victor go the spoils. Some have maintained that Marsch killed Victor, but all the evidence is to the contrary.

8) The shapeshifting abilities of the abos seem to be limited to rather minor, chameleon-like changes; not really shapeshifting as, say, into the form of an animal, but fundamentally cosmetic. If abos could truly change their form, the French would have been wasting their time at Running Blood.

9) How the Shadow children may be related to the abos and/or humans, I have no idea. If it were not for the fact that Victor seemed to be trying to point some of them out to Marsch (who just isn't paying proper attention), I would doubt their existence.

-Roy