

Victor's parents, abos, Liev's postpostulate, and more

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 04 Jul 2002

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StoneOx17 — 04 Jul 2002, 01:28

One of the interesting questions in 5HC is whether humans and abos are two, or one peoples, and whether they can interbreed.

Jeff Wilson <jwilson at io.com> speculates

The diminutive Shadow Children and the full statured abos are two branches of descent from an original group that arrived at the twin planets. This group lost or cut contact with Earth, which proceeded to develop more distant colonies that were more reliable investments in that ships or at least information came back. The forgotten colonists largely descend into savagery while some imbibe the native vegetation and change themselves with it, like some kind of pseudo-evolutional catalyst, gaining small bodies that are easier to keep fed on the scarce game and forage, and possibly some kind of biofeedback control, that would account for the age-changing and shape-changing abilities. The telepathy might be a real ability granted by the plant, but might just as well be an artifact of the need to explain why the Frenchmen came when they did.

I have another take on this question. I think the above scenario was essentially manufactured by Victor (for reasons described later), and presented in "A Story" as a myth of the Free People. As I remarked here a while ago, the main evidence that humans and abos can interbreed is the existence of Victor, who is apparently half-abo. Marsch writes in his diary:

"This morning we even passed through a tiny settlement the boy called 'Frogstown,' a name I suppose would not much recommend itself to the inhabitants. I asked if he weren't ashamed to use a name like that when he is of French descent, and he told me with great seriousness that, no, he was half of the blood of the Free People (his name for the Annese) and that it was with them that his loyalties lie. He believes his father, in short, though he is perhaps the only person in the world who does. Yet he is a bright boy; such is the power of parental teaching."

Marsch is, of course, wrong about which of Victor's parents was of the blood of the Free People. And the following passage casts doubt upon whether Roy is truly Victor's father in blood:

R. T: "... And you may forget what you have heard! My son is legitimate; we were married by the priest at the church of St. Madeleine."

I believe that Roy is misunderstanding the rumors; that these rumors doubt not whether Victor's parents were married, but whether Roy was really his father. If abos and humans can't interbreed (and if Victor's mother is really abo) Roy can't be Victor's father. But what are we to make of Dollo's law, Liev's postpostulate, and everything the Old Wise One says in "A Story" about a pre-French wave of human colonization originating in Atlantis, Mu, Gondwanaland or Africa? One important thing to note is that these speculations are all due to Victor (either in his notes written in prison or in "A Story"). I think he is basing all his speculations on the (false) assumption that humans and the Free People can interbreed, and thus must originally be of one

stock. Victor may be aware of the problem (the following quote is somewhat ambiguous). In describing a dream, he says

"... I looked at my father, who seemed a red-bearded giant, and knew what would happen to his hands so that he could no longer follow his trade. My mother--yes, I am sure it was she, though I have never understood how one of the Free People could bear a child to my father ..."

He may have thus invented Liev's Postpostulate in order to avoid facing the fact that his blood father is not Roy, but some abo. As Marsch says (even though, ironically, he misunderstands everything), "such is the power of parental teaching."

Indeed, Marsch has a different explanation, namely convergent evolution, for the existence of two peoples almost identical (even to foreskins!) except for opposable thumbs. He writes in his diary:

"Certainly some of the more fantastic [stories] must be pure myth, but there remain a great many reports of a native race so similar to human beings that they might almost have been the descendants of an earlier wave of colonization. So similar, in fact, that old Trenchard can deceive the credulous with his claim to be Annese, and on a planet where we find plants, birds, and mammals so near the Terrestrial types, a form strikingly like man is surely not impossible--the manlike form may be optimal for this biosphere."

I have a few more questions and observations about 5HC.

Has anybody noticed the number of times numbers are used instead of names in 5HC? In VRT, Victor's school notebook is inscribed:

name: Rm E2S14 Seat 18
school: Armstrong School
city: Frenchman's Landing

From an interrogation of VRT, we have:

Q: Who are you?

A: I am the prisoner in cell 143.

From the interview with Mrs. Blount: "The ship we come on was the nine-eight-six, which was not the first one, but one of the more earlier of them. I've heard that before they used to have names for them, which I think would be prettier.

And in the archetypical instance of this, the narrator of the first novella is called Number Five by his father. This is an interesting theme, even if I don't entirely know what to make of it.

I was puzzling over the "sometimes like a man, sometimes like old wood," quote, and noticed that if you look at the previous conversation, it appears that M. Culot's grandfather said it in French (possibly "... parfois comme le bois vieux"?). Could it be a bilingual pun somehow? I don't know enough French to answer this.

Finally, describing his communications with his fellow prisoner, Victor says

"I have filled in the punctuation myself. Forty-seven does not use punctuation, and if I have misrepresented his intention, I hope he will forgive me."

This seemed like a clue to me, so I looked at all of Forty-seven's conversations. It seems

impossible to repunctuate any of them and obtain a different meaning. Then I realized that the punctuation has been filled in not only in all of Forty-seven's conversations, but in all of the interviews Marsch conducted, as well as the prison interviews of Victor. This is too much material for me to enjoy reading through, while looking for ways to repunctuate, but I would encourage anybody on this mailing list who enjoys this sort of thing to try it.

-Stone Ox-

Alice K. Turner — 04 Jul 2002, 11:31 · follows StoneOx17

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

From: <StoneOx17 at aol.com>

name: Rm E2S14 Seat 18

school: Armstrong School

city: Frenchman's Landing

I suppose that's Neil Armstrong the school is named after, just as he shows up in Ultan's library.

-alga

Tony Ellis — 04 Jul 2002, 14:20 · follows Alice K. Turner

While there's nothing in 5HC that lets us say for certain Roy Trenchard is Victor's biological father, that I'm aware of, I can think of several subtle indicators. One is that Victor's Annese traits seem to be diluted: he can't alter his appearance as well as his mother, he tells us, and he's sufficiently dextrous to have mastered basic penmanship.

However, my real problem with the idea of Victor inventing a human origin myth for the Annese to explain how Roy could be his father is this: why on Earth should he? He hates his father. He venerates his Annese mother, venerates the Free People. He would love to think that his 'real' father was Annese. Surely, if Victor was going to invent anything about the Free People, he would invent absolute genetic incompatibility with humans, to reinforce a cosy fantasy that the man he calls a "dirty, drunken beggar" couldn't possibly be his true parent.

The fact that Victor instead puts all the prehistoric-colonists-from-Earth stuff into 'A Story', no matter how it might grate, seems to me further confirmation that he's not making the whole thing up.

StoneOx17 — 06 Jul 2002, 02:15 · follows Tony Ellis

I proposed that Victor has invented the pre-French wave of Earth colonization, and included it in "A Story," in part to explain the fact that he is an abo-human crossbreed, despite the fact (as I believe is hinted in the text) that Roy Trenchard isn't in fact his biological father.

Tony Ellis objects:

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If he thinks he's only half-abo, that itself could explain his lesser ability to alter his appearance, and the abo officer appears to have mastered basic penmanship as well.

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This is a good point. However, I don't believe he's doing it consciously, and the subconscious works in mysterious ways.

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Maybe this would be a valid objection if 5HC were by a different author, but in Wolfe novels, a story is hardly ever just a story. For all of the tales in the story contest in Citadel, the tellers had ulterior motives, and I would expect Victor to as well.

-Stone Ox