

Castaway

The Urth list — 3 messages, 2 voices, 10 Jan 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3751>

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Nicholas Gevers — 10 Jan 2003, 09:09

SPOILER SPACE

Rich Horton re "Castaway":

"Do you think the world was actually Earth? Or was the castaway remembering lost Earth somehow?"

The world was Earth, I'm pretty sure--in a sense, Urth post Ragnarok. I think your comparison with Tiptree is well founded--the theme here is very much alienation from Mother Earth, only this time with humanity surviving, Earth dying. Interesting to consider who the Castaway really is--the shipwreck victim, or the narrator, and with the narrator, the entire human species?

--Nick Gevers.

Nicholas Gevers — 10 Jan 2003, 09:09 · follows Nicholas Gevers

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mournings glory — 21 Feb 2003, 23:46 · follows Nicholas Gevers

Hello all.

Delurking just long enough to post my own deranged thoughts about Wolfe's "Castaway."

Is it just me or was anyone else bothered that the only named characters in the story have decidedly non-futuristic names? There are Yarmouths and Oberts in my local phone directory (well, actually Oberst, but close enough), and yet we're meant to believe that the story takes place in the far future, when the sun is dying. Surely, Wolfe, whose naming conventions are usually brilliant, could have come up with less modern-sounding names.

Atrothers, on the other hand, seems pure Wolfean. I'm speculating that it derives from the Latin "atrox" (horrible, abominable, fierce, savage, unrelenting; "atrox" also being closely related etymologically to "ater," dead black, malevolent). "Others," of course, means, well, others, presumably here aliens or non-natives; but notice how Wolfe uses the word the lone time it's mentioned: "We got hit by the Atrothers." For some reason, when I first read this, my mind flashed back to the anthrax attacks that took place shortly after 9/11--probably because "horrible black creatures" connotes for me the anthrax bacillus, and the similarities of atrox/anthrax. And then I began to wonder: could "Castaway" actually be Gene Wolfe's fictionalized account of an immune system response to viral/bacterial/"alien" invasion? Sort of the sfnal version of "Osmosis Jones"?

Consider the following bits of evidence:

"The sun was red and real close, but there didn't seem to be a lot if heat in it" This could be the heart, either no longer beating or severely compromised because of toxins in the bloodstream. Blood also orbits the heart.

The years-being-shorter-now may refer to cells that are still attempting to thrive in an essentially dying or dead body. (I assume that bone marrow produces blood cells for at least some while after death--probably until the temperature cools or circulatory stagnation. And "years" of course is a relative term--the life/reproductive cycle of a cell, therefore allowing the woman to be "millions and millions of years old".)

Given Wolfe's religious views, the "woman" discussed by the castaway (who's also very definitely "sick") may well represent the soul, who is able to communicate with her would-be rescuer various, if obviously more corporal, joys: the descant of birds, autumn's foliage, etc., etc.

Everything in the ship is white, signifying the leucocytes of the immune response, which seem "to just suck the color out of everything *except* blood." The castaway, since he retains color, may be a red blood cell or something equivalent to a platelet, or enzymatic thrombin.

And lastly, the "things inside her, eating the corpse" are lysosomes--which eventually digest all dead cells.

All right, it's a goofy idea, but I thought I'd toss it out anyway.

(My vironese nickname and its abbreviation may well make me both fem and chem. Daresay, I've been called worse.<gr>)

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