

the tree is my hat

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 15 Apr 2003

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Joshua A. Solomon — 15 Apr 2003, 09:58

nice story. new story, no?

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at first i thought "why does the bookseller have to be black?" it wasn't until the story was over that i figured out it was because whe wasn't a (great white) shark. in fact, the only whites in the story are the narrator, his family and the dwarf with the pasty complexion and the pointy teeth. certainly the dwarf is part shark and the narrator becomes one. the journal entries recall "john marsch" whose writing also became less legible as the story progressed. i suspect the narrator's "attacks" are quite violent. perhaps he (and the coconut knife) were ultimately responsible for the carnage at the end. note, at the very end, the shark is seen flying in the air. perhaps this is just a reflection in the airplane window.

bee

Nigel Price — 10 May 2003, 00:50 · follows Joshua A. Solomon

The recording of GW's story "The Tree is my Hat" which is available for free download at <http://www.phaseshift.com/tree/> was due to come down last Tuesday, 6 May, but for the moment still seems to be there. I commend it you all. It's a great story, and a nice dramatisation. It lasts nearly an hour and, hey!, it even features Neil Gaiman as an English Christian missionary. I've listened to it twice, the last time on my pocket PC as I took the dog for his bedtime walk. I can confirm that it's a really good spooky story to listen to at 11 o'clock at night when you're walking country lanes in the dark. I kept looking back over my shoulder...

Please note that the following discussion is full of spoilers for this fine story.

Ages ago, Robert Borski wrote about this story:

"The Tree Is My Hat." A man afflicted with
Hansen's disease is cured by the Polynesian

version of the AntiChrist as the Millennium turns. Hey, what did you expect from an anthology entitled _999_? Rather liked this one, but the story is marred in my opinion by Wolfe's heavy-handed character names: Baden, the leper, is married to Mary Christmas, and their children's names are Mark and Adam. Sheesh!

Now, I haven't read this in print, I've only heard it as an MPEG/MP3, but I don't recall any specific reference to Baden having Hansen's Disease or any other form of leprosy. His disease is, I think, unnamed. All we know is that he caught it in Uganda, and that he gets repetitive episodes of fever, sweating and hallucinations. He tells his wife towards the end of the story that he may die of his disease within a year, and that if he survives, he is still likely to die an early death. (This latter statement is of course prophetic, though his death, which is foreshadowed though not recounted in the story, seems to be in an aeroplane crash rather than from his disease.)

Anyway, to an ignorant layman like me, Baden's illness sounds a lot like malaria or some similar tropical disease, rather than leprosy.

Leprosy is mentioned in the story in the discussion between Baden and Rob the missionary about the strange white dwarf which Baden sees on the beach. If I recall, Rob mentions leprosy as a possible explanation of the stranger's appearance, but rejects the idea because the nearest leprosarium is no closer than the Marshall Islands.

As for the names, well, I've no problems with these! Baden is known as "Bad" for short, and he is, I think, a bad man, for reasons I shall discuss below.

Yes, his estranged wife is Mary, and I think at the end of the story, when he sees her ghost on the cliffs above the sea at North Point, she has in some sense become identified with Stella Maris, Mary as "Star of the Sea".

If I remember right, Baden refers to Mary's father as Pop Christmas. Yes, she's Father Christmas's daughter!

Are the names Mark and Adam particularly significant? Obviously, Mark is a gospel writer and Adam is the first man but...in this instance, so what? If Mary's posthumous explanation to Baden is correct, that she stopped taking the pill and then had the children while he was away in Africa, then they must be twins. Um...the apostle Paul refers to Jesus as a second Adam...Mark is the "mark of Cain"? No, I'm babbling here. At the moment, I see no particular significance to the names of the two boys.

I only question Mary's explanation because early on, when Baden discusses his separation from Mary with Rob, he claims that he has no children. Later, he says that the worst thing a man can do is lie to himself. I did wonder whether we were supposed to see that Baden is lying to Rob and possibly even to himself about the inconvenient children. We are not told the ages of the boys, and we don't have a time frame for Baden's stay in Africa, but the children don't seem like babes in arms when Mary brings them to visit Baden on the island. They can talk and seem much more like 5 or 6. In which case, did Baden know about them and suppress the memory? That would mean that the ghost Mary is a liar, or a delusion of Baden. On the face of it, that would fit in with the idea of Baden as damned and self-deluding (again, see below!), but sit ill with what seems like a perfectly serious development of the "ghosts at North Point" thread in the story.

As for the business about the millennium turning, well, yes and no. The critical events take place in February, with the nasty ending being on - I think - St Valentine's Day. Is Wolfe, the resident of Chicago, referring to the Death of Love or a more recent and (to him) more local massacre on that date?

Anyway, on another occasion, also a while back, Joshua A. Solomon wrote about this story...

at first i thought "why does the bookseller have to be black?" it wasn't until the story was over that i figured out it was because whe wasn't a (great white) shark. in fact, the only whites in the story are the narrator, his family and the dwarf with the pasty complexion and the pointy teeth. certainly the dwarf is part shark and the narrator becomes one. the journal entries recall "john marsch" whose writing also became less legible as the story progressed. i suspect the narrator's "attacks" are quite violent. perhaps he (and the coconut knife) were ultimately responsible for the carnage at the end. note, at the very end, the shark is seen flying in the air. perhaps this is just a reflection in the airplane window.

Well now... We are not told the ethnicity of Rob the missionary, but I think that we are supposed to assume that he is white. Doesn't he refer somewhere (I've no easy way of checking!) to someone being "as white as you or I" in his conversation with Baden? Possibly not...

Maybe the business with the woman in the shop is simply to show that Baden is sexually attracted to black women? He tries but fails to engage her in conversation, but will later have an affair with a black islander, even though his wife by that time is on her way.

OK...My take on the story is as follows!

I think that this is a horror story about damnation, about a man who wilfully turns his back on Christian belief, only to discover that just because he doesn't believe in God, that doesn't preclude the possibility of there being devils.

Baden, "Bad", is ill with a tropical disease caught in Africa. With typical Lupine ambiguity, there's a chance that nearly everything he sees in this story is a delusion. I don't think that that is the case, though I do wonder whether his weakened and feverish state doesn't perhaps make him more vulnerable to the evil spiritual forces at work on the Pacific island to which he is sent by the Federal Development Agency (did I get that name right?) that he works for.

He is estranged from his wife Mary and, as discussed above, may be denying the fact that he is also leaving behind twin sons. In some symbolic way, Bad is abandoning his religious as well as his marital faith in deserting Mary, although this separation is still not complete in the early stages of the story when he is still e-mailing Mary and her father and talking to Rob about getting back together his wife.

The island to which he is posted is peopled by Polynesians. Through various details in the story, including Rob's account and speculations, we gather that the Polynesians, great sailors and warriors, do not in fact come originally from Malaya as some ethnologists and historians suppose. Rather, they are the descendants of an evil priestly and kingly caste who were exiled from their mountain home at some prehistoric date by their subjects, who were revolted by

their cruelty and human sacrifices. The story is ambiguous as to where this mountain home might have been. At first it seems that Rob, who tells Baden about this, is referring to the Andean Incas or their ancestors. But the references to the stars being like islands, and Baden's sighting of a UFO with a dorsal fin "like a kid's rocket ship" (but also, of course, like a shark!), introduces the possibility that the Polynesians' original home was somewhere on another world. (Yikes! Shades of Tintin's "Flight 714"...) Their skill in navigating across the Pacific would then be but a terrestrial echo of their original feats of faring between the stars.

There is a white, hammerhead (not Great White!) shark in the bay where Baden swims. The mysterious white dwarf with the pointed teeth, Hange (spelling??), and the shark are one and the same person. When sitting on the beach under the tree, Hange tells Baden that "The tree is my hat." Baden thinks that he means that the tree gives him shade, but while the narrative indicates that this is not quite what he means, it doesn't say just what he does mean. I think that this is because Hange is the cruel, human-sacrificing priest of the hidden temple sunken in the bay. His body is buried on the shore, under the palm tree. It grows over his grave and is in that sense his hat. He himself is a shade! On the land, his evil, devilish, spirit appears as a dwarf. In the water, it appears as a hammerhead shark. He is after Baden's soul. As a shark, he wants to eat Baden. As a priest, he wants to sacrifice it to his cruel and demonic gods.

Rob, the missionary, is only partly successful in his mission to the islanders. Some sing in his choir, but many or all - as the local girl who becomes Baden lover reveals - still worship the old gods of the sunken temple.

As time goes on, Baden gradually comes to deny whatever faith he may once have had. When he stubs his toe on the rock in the ruined palace in the jungle, he cries out "Jesus!" (or was it "Christ"? - whichever!), and I'm sure that we're supposed to be reminded of Paul's words in Romans 9.33 about Jesus being the stone on which men stumble (quoting or alluding to Isaiah 8.13-14 and 28.16). Baden stumbles and rejects Jesus, whom he reduces to an expletive. By the end of the story, he is explicitly referring to the shark god as his god and his brother.

Baden's only chance of protection against the evil designs of the shark god seems to lie in the fish charm which is given to him by the local chief. There seems to be some sort of contrast being set up between the good king/chief, with his palace on the land, and the evil priest, with his temple under water. The chief gives the charm to Baden at a ceremony in the ruined palace. Later, Baden returns, and this time encounters Rob the missionary in the temple ruins. That's the occasion when Baden stubs his toe on the "Christ" stone. However that may be, the fish pendant seems to be both a pagan charm and an "Ichthus", the symbol of Christ. (In any other author, I would have said that those two meanings were completely mutually exclusive, but somehow, in Wolfe's stories, he manages to make them co-exist. Don't ask me how!) It protects Baden from the shark so long as he wears it, but he doesn't always wear it, and when Hange visits his bungalow in the night, Baden is persuaded to untie the thong that threads through the fish charm's eye and give it to Hange.

This seems to be the crucial scene that seals Baden's fate. He is untying his last safety line to God, his links with his wife and any Christian faith he may once have possessed. After this, he will share blood with Hange and become his "blood brother". (Note that Hange's blood tastes to Baden like seawater. This is because it is shark's blood, which is, I believe - I've never tasted it! - mostly salt water.) He will be unfaithful to his wife by having an affair with a native woman. And he himself will become part shark, able to swim underwater for long periods and...well, this is completely ambiguous...possibly attack his own family. More on this in a moment.

The way that the charm works, in its "pagan" capacity, seems to be that the carved fish is "bound" by the thong threaded through its eye. When Baden undoes the thong, he is both

untying himself from any residual Christian commitment, and setting the shark god free to attack. There may be some sort of hidden reference to Matthew 12.29 here, except that in this case, the "strong man" is being untied. (I think that the story even refers to Hange at this point as a strong man.) There is some sort of third spiritual presence in the bungalow at this point, but he or it is unable to save Baden because the knot binding the fish god has been untied.

Is the other presence in the bungalow that of the chief? An angel? Baden wonders about what happened to his Agency predecessor on the island, and I don't think that we are ever told. Was he killed? Is it his ghost haunting the bungalow? I really have no idea.

Baden explicitly denies any belief in Rob's god, although he does believe in the shark god. When his wife Mary visits him on the island, bringing their two sons with her, she and the boys are attacked by the shark or the shark spirit. The account of this attack is fragmented and elliptical, but it seems to start at the bungalow, half a mile in land. The humans are driven by the shark spirit to the sea, "like sheep", and there Mary is devoured by the hammerhead, who takes her up in his "yard-wide jaws". Although the boys are injured, one of them seriously, Baden is able to save them by attacking the shark with his knife.

When the attack takes place, Baden realises that the shark god has tricked him. Like other misleading devils before him, Hange has kept the letter of their agreement, but not its spirit. Baden proclaims that by attacking his family, the shark has broken their treaty, because by injuring those he loves, the shark has effectively attacked him.

Now, it is still possible that it is Baden himself who kills his wife and injures his son. He is fevered and possibly delirious and, now that he is in love with a native woman, he has a strong motive for getting rid of the inconvenient wife who has come looking for him. If this is the case, the shark on dry land which explicitly does not "swim through the air" when it comes to attack his family is Baden, who has exchanged blood with Hange is in some measure possessed by the evil shark spirit. In this reading, he loses his hand because when he "comes too" in the middle of the murder he cuts it off himself with his knife to stop himself causing further injury to those he loves.

Or maybe he really attacks the shark, and that's how he loses the hand. It would also be how he breaks their agreement not to attack each other.

Anyway, Baden has come to his senses, but it is too late. Mary is dead, and when Baden sets off in the aircraft to fly one of his sons to Cairns, the evil shark god is after him, and can be seen swimming below the aircraft. One of the aircraft's engines has failed, and at the end of the story it is flying into a thunder storm. It would seem that the hammerhead has become a thunderhead, and the reader is left with little hope for Baden's physical or spiritual survival.

I'm glad that this tale is due to be included in the next Wolfe anthology. I'm one of those who really enjoys Wolfe's short stories, and I think that this is a very good one. Definitely a horror story, though. If I were being picky, I might suggest that by introducing gods, ghosts, possession, and UFOs into such a brief narrative, Wolfe might be slightly over-egging things. But no, I won't suggest that. I enjoyed the result, grim though it is.

Nigel (who is delighted actually to have finished one of his Urth list messages at last. Now to finish the other half dozen waiting in my "Drafts" folder...plus a similar number of e-mails that I owe to Lupine friends patiently waiting by the dock of the Bay)

James Jordan — 10 May 2003, 18:52 · follows Nigel Price

Thanks for putting us onto this, Nigel.

A mother named Mary and a son named Adam certainly seem significant. If Baden really did not know about them, then he's been away for a long time. Mary conceives, but the father is not present for the birth. Close enough to be a virgin birth allusion, particularly with a child named Adam (= a new Adam).

Baden looks like "Bad 'un," Bad One.

His rejection of true religion is paralleled and expressed by his rejection of Mary and ignorance of her son Adam.

Why a twin named Mark? Are we (gasp!) to think of the Adam Mark hotel line, and these sons are an alternate house that Baden does not inhabit, has abandoned? Houses of one sort or another (hut, church, temple) are thematic in the story. The hut stands between church and temple, a place of human habitation that must be linked with either one or the other. Baden has abandoned the good house of Mary nee Christmas, and of her sons. His hut becomes a place of adultery.

Alternatively, Mark means "warrior," though I don't see how this fits.

Alternatively, according to modern theory, Mark is the first gospel writer, and that might fit thematically: Jesus-Adam and Mark.

Anyway, since Wolfe had no reason to introduce a second son, a twin, there has to be a reason for it.

I noticed that after his deal with the shark, Baden is unable even to visit the church, being too sick on Sunday.

A google search shows that Mervyn can mean "sea hill," "sea ruler," or "high hill." There seems a pregnant reason by Robbins rejects that name, in context. His name becomes Rob Robbins, and Mary's father has an "R" for his middle name. Seems deliberate. Mary's father is Julius (link to Yule, I imagine) R. Christmas.

Internet: A "spiritual" medium that links Baden both with a witch and with Yule Christmas. Another manifestation of the choice before him.

The flying saucer, as is obvious, links with the shark. Are we supposed to think of real extra-terrestrials? I'm thinking of how Wolfe conflates the perceptions of people in *Castlevision*. My best guess is that Baden as a modern man perceives a spiritual reality in terms he understands, since he (initially) does not believe in a spirit realm. Given that the shark is Satan (see below), it feels wrong to me for Wolfe to overlay an SF dimension to this story. And, there is much discussion of perception in the story. So I'm more comfortable, at this point, with a *Castlevision* explanation of the flying saucer.

My guess is that the third spirit in the hut is indeed the ghost of the former agent. He knows what is going on, since it happened to him.

He was formerly in Afghanistan, and I think we must see that as a place parallel to Africa, a place where "old religion" is still somewhat operative, as it is on the island. I think we are supposed to understand that he also had become corrupted, and then seduced by the shark spirit.

Another aspect of the story seems to be a contrast between the very busy pastor and Agent Baden, who has nothing but lazy time on his hands. The missionary has come there to work; Baden has come there just to be there. Baden does not use his time to help the natives, as the pastor does, but finds the time to explore the pagan side of things. His choice of how to use his time, and perhaps the dangers of idleness, seem one theme in the story.

If I'm right, the back plot is that several years earlier Baden had left his wife, probably adulterously given how quickly he falls into that sin on the island. By rejecting "Mary" and also Christianity, he also moves back in the realm

of the "old" world. He does not even know about the new Adam that Mary brings forth. Symbolically, he has rejected the family of Christmas. What happens to him happens between Christmas and Easter, but he will not come to Easter because he has rejected Christmas. On the title: I think we have to remember the serpent in the garden, at the Tree of Knowledge, traditionally pictured IN the tree, with the tree as its hat. Think of the coral tree that sprouts from the altar of human sacrifice in the submerged temple (itself a good image of what becomes of the old religion once the New has come: it is flooded). Ultimately, the shark is Satan himself, and the Tree of Knowledge in which he dwells is his hat. Just some grist for your mill.

Nutria