

More arboreal headgear

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 10 May 2003

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Nigel Price — 10 May 2003, 11:24

Reread what I wrote last night about "The Tree is My Hat". Hmmmm... One or two little things to add.

I've assumed that the dramatised reading sticks closely to the text, and the whole text, of the story. That's certainly how it sounds. If it turns out that there's further detail in the original written version which is missing in the audio version, for example, about the nature of Baden's disease, then I will, of course, apologise to Robert for ever doubting the accuracy of his diagnosis!

While I'm on the subject of Baden's mysterious illness: I did consider the possibility that Baden might have contracted HIV during his time with the Agency in Uganda. I believe that HIV is rife in that country, and if it is true that he is attracted to black women and had sexual relations with the locals as he later does on the Pacific island, then it would have been possible that he caught the disease... But I rejected this line of reasoning on two grounds. The first is that I think that if GW had wanted to write an HIV story, he would have been much more specific about the illness and probably emphasised different issues in the story too. I don't really see him leaving HIV as just an unnamed tropical disease. The second reason for rejecting this line of thought is that while those suffering from HIV can, if they develop AIDS, become vulnerable to a variety of diseases and therefore display a wide range of symptoms, Baden's sweats and fevers don't sound anything like the most typical symptoms, whereas they do sound like the typical symptoms of diseases like malaria. Over against that, those who develop full-blown AIDS often develop lymphatic and brain cancers and as a result can experience paranoid delusions. (Having seen this happen in a friend, I can testify to how terrifying it is to the sufferer, and how frightening it can be to those around them too.) But while Wolfe seems to keep the possibility open that Baden is suffering from delusions as a result of his illness, I still don't think it likely, on the balance of evidence, that he's got HIV or AIDS.

I look forward, when I get to read the printed version of the story, to seeing how all the names are spelled. All my efforts in this and my previous message are just "best guesses" based on what I heard on the dramatised reading. Is it "Baden" or "Badden"? And how is the shark-man's name spelled? "Hange"?

And talking of names, I realise that I never discussed the name of the missionary on the island. His full name is - from memory - something like "Mervyn Robertson" or "Robinson", but he doesn't like his given name and prefers to be called "Rob". As some of the other names in the story are clearly significant, I wondered what Rob's name might indicate.

The obvious explanation is that he is some sort of "robber", though at first that didn't make any sense to me in the context of the story. He's not one of Wolfe's idealised saints, but he's certainly not a bad man either. He too has seen a ghost at North Point, in his case, a villager who, it later turns out, has been dead for four days. Thinking him an ordinary, living man, Rob helps him on his way by giving him a lift to North Point in his jeep, and in gratitude, the ghost,

who is off "to visit his parents", kisses him on the eyes. This last detail is strangely gentle and clearly significant. It seems like a blessing of some sort. I suspect that it confers a gift of clear-sightedness or something similar. Maybe Rob doesn't save many souls, but he generally helps them on their way.

As the obvious representative of Christianity in the story, Rob's a fairly positive character, for all the somewhat limited success of his mission. In terms of understanding what is really going on on the island, he has managed to work out the secret of the islander's origins, but has failed to find the location of the evil underwater temple. Of course, if Baden's experiences are anything to go by, not finding the shark god's temple is a blessing rather than a failure. It really isn't a place you want to go! On the other hand, Baden is there, happily sitting among the ruins of the king's palace in the jungle when Baden goes there a second time. The first time Baden went there, it was with his would-be protector the Chief. This time, Baden stubs his toe, shouts out "Christ!", and - hey presto! - there's Rob, Christ's imperfect local representative, sitting on the ruined stones above him.

No, I'm sure that Rob is "one of the good guys", which rules out any sort of John 10.8-10 allusion. He is called "Rob", but he's not one of those who comes to steal and destroy the sheep. No, if Rob's name is significant, my guess is that it refers again to that verse I referred to last night:

"Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can rob his house."
(Matthew 12.29)

In this verse, Jesus is rebutting the charge made by the Pharisees that he has been casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub. He is making the point that he is robbing the strong man (Beelzebub) of his victims, because he has first "tied him up" (bound him with his own spiritual authority as God's Son), rather than relying, as he is accused of doing, on the strong man's help. In Wolfe's story, "Rob" is the would-be thief who would rob the shark-god of his victim, Baden, but Baden unties the fish charm and thereby releases the strong man, rendering Rob's efforts ineffectual.

A final, if whimsical, point. At the end of the story, when it attacks Baden's family, the shark spirit "flashes" on and off, because it can only be visible to one person at a time and has to appear sequentially to four (or was the native woman there too, which would make it five?) people. Given that it is hinted that the Polynesians and their gods come from the stars, and that Baden glimpses a shark-like UFO above the island, are we to suppose that what is being described is the application of some sort of hyperspace technology? Compare the braking manouvers carried out by decelerating spacecraft in C J Cherryh's books. They "pulse the vanes", flicking in and out of hyperspace, in order to "dump delta V". Just a thought!

Nigel