

"V.R.T." - April 24

The Urth list — 13 messages, 6 voices, 25 Jul 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4673>

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ori kowarsky — 25 Jul 2006, 19:08

Hello all, I've just finished re-reading FHC and something leapt out at me which seemed worth delurking to explore (whether it will seem worthwhile to anyone else is another matter ...). It seems to me -- and forgive me if this has been raised before, but I couldn't find anything in the archives -- that the prisoner in cell 143 is John Marsch. By which I mean the Earthman John Marsch. If you look chronologically at Marsch's entries from April 24 onwards what seems to be happening is a double-blending. Something has happened to Marsch that makes him think that he's a half-abo boy named Victor; once that transference takes place "Victor" subsequently decides to "become" "Marsch" because that's what Marsch believes abos do. It's as though water trapped in a container is being tipped first to the left and then to the right before attaining some kind of equilibrium. I'll first try to sketch out the "how" of it which will hopefully blend into the "why".

1. Shadow child influence. One day before the transformation begins (but I would not say completes -- see below) Marsch is bitten on the hand by Victor's cat. In "A Story", a very strange thing happens at the end, which is Eastwind is bitten (again, on the hand) by a Shadow child who tells him (and Sandwalker) that the bite will cause some kind of exchange of souls or perspectives. Sandwalker then kills Eastwind -- or does he? Because in "V.R.T." the abo who greets the colonists at Frenchman's Landing is named Eastwind. The transference is first claimed to be accomplished by the narcotic inside the Shadow child's mouth, but later the Shadow child claims that the transference is based on personal belief -- ie. is psychosomatic. Now, I recognize that "A Story" is written by John/Victor and so it is debatable whether the story describes a) an actual happening, b) an actual legend, c) is a thinly (V)eiled account of what happened to John/Victor in the back of the beyond or d) is a complete red herring. I would say, though, that the fact that "A Story" raises an unanswered question as to the true identity of the individual historically known as Eastwind, plus the fact that the exchange happens via a bite to the hand means that it is significant -- either as a description of one of the Shadow children's powers, a belief about the Shadow children's powers or as a sublimation of something psychological that has happened to Marsch.
2. Transference. I'm not a psychologist, but it seems to me that there is sufficient pre-April 24 material to support the idea that even if there is no Shadow child magic going on, there is definitely evidence to support the idea that there is a psychological transference that occurs in Marsch either as the result of the matrix of his personality/profession and environment (he has literally "gone native"), erotic transference, or a combination of the two.
3. The missing months. Assuming that what Marsch later writes about the date (being June, not April) is correct, the process of double-blending occurs over a large space of time. I would argue that during much of this period Victor is still alive and Marsch is unknowingly assuming Victor's persona as they continue the exploration. I believe that it is Victor who in fact died, either as the result of an accident (as written) or somehow in the course of a botched seduction attempt by Marsch or else an attempt by Marsch to catch Victor with the suspected female abo. However it happens, Marsch experiences a complete personality breakdown in the immensity of the wilderness and comes to believe that he is Victor. He then must explain to himself why he a) is alone and b) looks like Marsch, and since he has been immersed in theories that the abos are shapeshifters who take on human form "Victor" becomes "Marsch". This is as far as I've gotten with the theory. Again, if

anyone has previously raised this I apologise for the redundancy and would love to be directed to any posts that outline its development. I would say, finally, that I believe that the Shadow child in "A Story" -- whether he existed or not -- tells a fundamental truth about the colonization of St. Anne. There are no aliens. There are no abos. There are only humans who colonized St. Anne at different times and whose minds and bodies were colonized by St. Anne in turn. It may be that the only true abo is the alien plant seed in the Shadow child's mouth. Ori

b sharp — 26 Jul 2006, 13:03 · follows ori kowarsky

I don't know about others, but for me, Ori's (orikowarsky at hotmail.com) post had the formatting so out of whack it was unreadable. I cut and pasted his post here, reformatted; hopefully it will work better for all:

Hello all, I've just finished re-reading FHC and something leapt out at me which seemed worth delving to explore (whether it will seem worthwhile to anyone else is another matter ...). It seems to me -- and forgive me if this has been raised before, but I couldn't find anything in the archives -- that the prisoner in cell 143 is John Marsch. By which I mean the Earthman John Marsch. If you look chronologically at Marsch's entries from April 24 onwards what seems to be happening is a double-blending. Something has happened to Marsch that makes him think that he's a half-abo boy named Victor; once that transference takes place "Victor" subsequently decides to "become" "Marsch" because that's what Marsch believes abos do. It's as though water trapped in a container is being tipped first to the left and then to the right before attaining some kind of equilibrium. I'll first try to sketch out the "how" of it which will hopefully blend into the "why".

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raised this I apologise for the redundancy and would love to be directed to any posts that outline its development. I would say, finally, that I believe that the Shadow child in "A Story" -- whether he existed or not -- tells a fundamental truth about the colonization of St. Anne. There are no aliens. There are no abos.

There are only humans who colonized St. Anne at different times and whose minds and bodies were colonized by St. Anne in turn. It may be that the only true abo is the alien plant seed in the Shadow child's mouth.

Ori

Daniel D Jones — 26 Jul 2006, 18:44 · in reply to ori kowarsky

On Tuesday 25 July 2006 15:08, ori kowarsky wrote:

Hello all, I've just finished re-reading FHC and something leapt out at me which seemed worth delving to explore (whether it will seem worthwhile to anyone else is another matter ...). It seems to me -- and forgive me if this has been raised before, but I couldn't find anything in the archives -- that the prisoner in cell 143 is John Marsch. By which I mean the Earthman John Marsch. If you look chronologically at Marsch's entries from April 24 onwards what seems to be happening is a double-blending. Something has happened to Marsch that makes him think that he's a half-abo boy named Victor; once that

transference takes place "Victor" subsequently decides to "become" "Marsch" because that's what Marsch believes abos do. It's as though water trapped in a container is being tipped first to the left and then to the right before attaining some kind of equilibrium. I'll first try to sketch out the "how" of it which will hopefully blend into the "why". 1. Shadow child influence. One day before the transformation begins (but I would not say completes -- see below) Marsch is bitten on the hand by Victor's cat. In "A Story", a very strange thing happens at the end, which is Eastwind is bitten (again, on the hand) by a Shadow child who tells him (and Sandwalker) that the bite will cause some kind of exchange of souls or perspectives. Sandwalker then kills Eastwind -- or does he? Because in "V.R.T." the abo who greets the colonists at Frenchman's Landing is named Eastwind. The transference is first claimed to be accomplished by the narcotic inside the Shadow child's mouth, but later the Shadow child claims that the transference is based on personal belief -- ie. is

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Transference. I'm not a psychologist, but it seems to me that there is sufficient pre-April 24 material to support the idea that even if there is no Shadow child magic going on, there is definitely evidence to support the idea that there is a psychological transference that occurs in Marsch either as the result of the matrix of his personality/profession and environment (he has literally "gone native"), erotic transference, or a combination of the two. 3. The missing months. Assuming that what Marsch later writes about the date (being June, not April) is correct, the process of double-blending occurs over a large space of time. I would argue that during much of this

period Victor is still alive and March is unknowingly assuming Victor's persona as they continue the exploration. I believe that it is Victor who in fact died, either as the result of an accident (as written) or somehow in the course of a botched seduction attempt by Marsch or else an attempt by Marsch to catch Victor with the suspected female abo. However it happens, Marsch experiences a complete personality breakdown in the immensity of the wilderness and comes to believe that he is Victor. He then must explain to himself why he a) is alone and b) looks like Marsch, and since he has been immersed in theories that the abos are shapeshifters who take on human form "Victor" becomes "Marsch". This is as far as I've gotten with the theory. Again, if anyone has previously raised this I apologise for the redundancy and would love to be directed to any posts that outline its development. I would say, finally, that I believe that the Shdaow child in "A Story" -- whether he existed or not -- tells a fundamental truth about the colonization of St. Anne. There are no aliens. There are no abos. There are only humans who colonized St. Anne at different times and whose minds and bodies were colonized by St. Anne in turn. It may be that the only true abo is the alien plant cud in the Shadow child's mouth. Ori

I see very little evidence for the above suppositions. I think that, with Wolfe, it's easy to get so wrapped up in uncovering clues and secrets that one starts to see things when there's nothing there. I'm reminded of an old country song concerning a soldier with a deck of cards. You can find the story here:

<http://www.cowboylyrics.com/forum/read.php?f=1&i=26725&t=26725>

Clearly, there is no real relationship between a deck of cards and Christian theology. But it's quite possible to construct an extensive and plausible link if one tries. With a body of work as extensive and convoluted as Wolfe's, it's necessarily possible to find all sorts of links and connections that the author never intended. I suspect that's the case with some of the more exotic and esoteric theories that are discussed here.

I think V.R.T is pretty clear - Marsch died and was replaced by Victor, who imitates him so well that he forgets that he's an imitation. He becomes that which he imitates. The same thing happens with the Face Dancer Tleilaxu in Herbert's later Dune books.

Tony Ellis — 26 Jul 2006, 19:08 · follows Daniel D Jones

Ori wrote:

Something has happened to Marsch that makes him think that he's a half-abo boy named Victor...

The similarity of Marsch's bite and Eastwind's is very suggestive, I agree, and something I've often wracked my brains over.

However, my problem with your theory is the same problem I had with earlier arguments which said that VRT was delusional and only thinks that he has become Marsch: given so many hints that the abos have some sort of ability of mimicry, doesn't it make more sense to assume that Marsch *has* been replaced by an abo, rather than that he suffers from the curious delusion that he has? If he's delusional, you have to find an alternative explanation for Cassilla's apparent ability to look older at will, and for that of VRT's mother, and for many, many other things. Isn't it simpler to assume that abos can mimic and that this is what has happened here? This is, after all, an SF novel. Such things are allowed.

Also, you're mistaken when you say that Eastwind was bitten on the hand, as Marsch/VRT

claims to be. Eastwind is bitten on the arm, so you're starting off from a slightly wobblier premise than you might have thought.

And finally, don't forget that we don't actually *know* that Marsch/VRT was bitten by the cat at all. If VRT has physically replaced Marsch, this was just a lie to explain the change in handwriting, and there is no mystical cat-bite.

All that said, the whole Marsch-Victor-replacement-death thing is one of the most maddeningly enigmatic parts of the whole book. The bite may indeed have happened and may indeed be hugely significant. But I don't think Marsch only thinks he is VRT.

Ori also wrote:

There are no aliens. There are no abos.

There are only humans who colonized St. Anne at different times
and whose minds and bodies were colonized by St. Anne in turn.

Here I'm much in agreement with you. But while I think abos and humans are of the same race, I'm not so sure about the Shadow Children. One of the last things the Old Wise One says is that before men came "We were mostly long, and lived between the roots of trees." And later: "Now I am half a man, and know that we were always here... listening without thought of our own to be men." But he leaves the matter ambiguous by adding "or it may be that all are one stock." Thanks Gene.

Adam Thornton — 27 Jul 2006, 03:04 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On Jul 26, 2006, at 11:44 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:

I think V.R.T is pretty clear - Marsch died and was replaced by Victor, who imitates him so well that he forgets that he's an imitation. He becomes that which he imitates. The same thing happens with the Face Dancer Tleilaxu in Herbert's later Dune books.

I'm not sure he's replaced by Victor.

I think Victor dies, but the cat has already bitten Victor before it bites Marsh, and just as in "A Story" both of them are more or less resident in the same body by the end. Maybe Victor is dominant. The cat is therefore a Shadow Child.

Adam

ori kowarsky — 27 Jul 2006, 05:25 · follows Adam Thornton

Thanks bsharp! I had no idea my formatting was so off ...

Ori

Daniel D Jones — 27 Jul 2006, 18:11 · in reply to Adam Thornton

On Wednesday 26 July 2006 23:04, Adam Thornton wrote:

On Jul 26, 2006, at 11:44 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:

I think V.R.T is pretty clear - Marsch died and was replaced by Victor, who imitates him so well that he forgets that he's an imitation. He becomes that which he imitates. The same thing happens with the Face Dancer

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I think Victor dies, but the cat has already bitten Victor before it bites Marsh, and just as in "A Story" both of them are more or less resident in the same body by the end. Maybe Victor is dominant. The cat is therefore a Shadow Child.

Who (or what) is it that you think the Shadow Children are?

Ori Kowarsky — 27 Jul 2006, 18:24 · follows Daniel D Jones

Tony and Daniel,

Thank you for your comments.

Both of you object to the theory on the basis that the abos are known to be shapechangers. This "knowledge" is based on hearsay. None of the characters directly observes any instance of shapechanging. The ability of Victor's mother to change is something we hear about via a man who has internalized an enormous amount of Annese folklore -- he may be personalizing and regurgitating other people's stories. Cassilla's "aparent ability to look older at will" is not something that we know she is actually doing. We are supposing it because we, as readers, are filling in the blanks after reading something similar from Marsch's notes. It is actually more likely that she is being seen in an unflattering light after a long night.

Please remember as well that Wolfe tries not to play fast and loose with the basic laws of physics. How long would the supposed abo "worms" have to be to contain the same amount of mass as the grown humans they allegedly become?

There is similar confusion within the text about abos and tools. Weaving nets and using them to catch fish obviously requires greater manual dexterity than using a shovel, and about as much manual dexterity as using a pen. (I would point out that here on Earth we know certain primates use twigs to "shovel" out a spoonful of ants but zoologists would flip if a chimpanzee started drift-fishing with self-braided nets). The idea that there is some kind of Voight-Kampff test to separate the abos from the humans on the basis of tool use makes no sense in the context of what people tell us about the abos -- it's like they say "x" and then in the same paragraph say "not x". It, again, seems more reasonable to assume that this is a weird bigoted meme that has developed, either to dehumanize the abos for political, economic and legal reasons, or else to justify some kind of human-vs.-human massacre at the ford at Running Blood.

Given that 5HC is a study in ambiguity it may be impossible to clearly prove from the text that Marsch is "Victor". I would say, though, that on the basis of that same ambiguity that we should be similarly wary of being too certain that Victor is "Marsch". Exploring alternate theories and viewpoints may lead to a greater appreciation of the work. I believe that if we recognize that there is no concrete foundation for knowing who the prisoner in cell 143 is at all we gain a more robust idea of what Wolfe seems to be saying about the nature of identity.

Ori

Adam Thornton — 27 Jul 2006, 21:31 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On Jul 27, 2006, at 11:11 AM, Daniel D Jones wrote:
Who (or what) is it that you think the Shadow Children are?

Inhumu. So I misspoke when I called the abos inhumu, or rather I meant the subset of the aboriginal peoples who are the Shadow Children.

Um, maybe. The book is a little baffling.

Adam

Daniel D Jones — 27 Jul 2006, 21:47 · in reply to Ori Kowarsky

On Thursday 27 July 2006 14:24, Ori Kowarsky wrote:
Tony and Daniel,

Thank you for your comments.

Both of you object to the theory on the basis that the abos are known to be shapechangers. This "knowledge" is based on hearsay. None of the characters directly observes any instance of shapechanging. The ability of Victor's mother to change is something we hear about via a man who has internalized an enormous amount of Annese folklore -- he may be personalizing and regurgitating other people's stories. Cassilla's "aparent ability to look older at will" is not something that we know she is actually doing. We are supposing it because we, as readers, are filling in the blanks after reading something similar from Marsch's notes. It is actually more likely that she is being seen in an unflattering light after a long night.

I think, if one considers the entire book and not just V.R.T, that there is a great deal of evidence that the abos did exist and were actual shape changers.

Please remember as well that Wolfe tries not to play fast and loose with the basic laws of physics.

Really? I guess I've been out of school too long. I had no idea that time travel and certain peculiar types of black holes and white fountains and resurrections and all sorts of other things were now established as part of the basic laws of physics. :-)

How long would the supposed abo "worms" have to be to contain the same amount of mass as the grown humans they allegedly become?

Is it necessary that they immediately take on the aspect of humans?

There is similar confusion within the text about abos and tools. Weaving nets and using them to catch fish obviously requires greater manual dexterity than using a shovel, and about as much manual dexterity as using a pen. (I would point out that here on Earth we know certain primates use twigs to "shovel" out a spoonful of ants but zoologists would flip if a chimpanzee started drift-fishing with self-braided nets). The idea that there is some kind of Voight-Kampff test to separate the abos from the humans on the basis of tool use makes no sense in the context of what people tell us about the abos -- it's like they say "x" and then in the same paragraph say "not x".

An interesting point that I'd not considered.

It, again, seems more reasonable to assume that this is a weird bigoted meme that has developed, either to dehumanize the abos for political, economic and legal reasons, or else to justify some kind of human-vs.-human massacre at the ford at Running Blood.

It seems to me much more reasonable, if that's your criteria, to assume that there were in fact abos who simulated human beings.

Given that 5HC is a study in ambiguity it may be impossible to clearly prove from the text that Marsch is "Victor".

I'd say that it's impossible to clearly prove much of anything from the text.

I would say, though, that on the basis of that same ambiguity that we should be similarly wary of being too certain that Victor is "Marsch". Exploring alternate theories and viewpoints may lead to a greater appreciation of the work. I believe that if we recognize that there is no concrete foundation for knowing who the prisoner in cell 143 is at all we gain a more robust idea of what Wolfe seems to be saying about the nature of identity.

I certainly didn't mean to imply that one should not explore various viewpoints. I wouldn't be a member of this list if I thought that way.

Ori Kowarsky — 27 Jul 2006, 22:06 · in reply to Daniel D Jones

On 7/27/06, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:
I think, if one considers the entire book and not just V.R.T, that there is a great deal of evidence that the abos did exist and were actual shape changers.

But only through the accretion of highly suspect circumstantial evidence. There is no direct observation of any of this stuff.

If we use Number 5's family as a "control" against which to measure Marsch and his interviewees, we find that disinterested citizens of the Sisterworlds are either mystified or completely confused as to who the abos are/were or what happened to them.

Please remember as well that Wolfe tries not to play fast and loose with the basic laws of physics.

Really? I guess I've been out of school too long. I had no idea that time travel and certain peculiar types of black holes and white fountains and resurrections and all sorts of other things were now established as part of the basic laws of physics. :-)

I suppose I should have said that, as an engineer, he tries to keep his sci-fi logically consistent.

How long would the supposed abo "worms" have to be to contain the same amount of mass as the grown humans they allegedly become?

Is it necessary that they immediately take on the aspect of humans?

So you're saying they evolved up the species ladder from annelid to humn in one generation? In "A Story" the Shadow Child describes a phantasmagoria of rapid metamorphoses that seem to have more to do with an acid trip (or chewing on an alien plant) than what the abos are otherwise described as being capable of.

It, again, seems more reasonable to assume that this is a weird bigoted meme that has developed, either to dehumanize the abos for political, economic and legal reasons, or else to justify some kind of human-vs.-human massacre at the ford at Running Blood.

It seems to me much more reasonable, if that's your criteria, to assume that there were in fact abos who simulated human beings.

How so?

Daniel D Jones — 28 Jul 2006, 10:20 · in reply to Ori Kowarsky

On Thursday 27 July 2006 18:06, Ori Kowarsky wrote:

On 7/27/06, Daniel D Jones <ddjones at riddlemaster.org> wrote:

I think, if one considers the entire book and not just V.R.T, that there is a great deal of evidence that the abos did exist and were actual shape changers.

But only through the accretion of highly suspect circumstantial evidence. There is no direct observation of any of this stuff.

Of course not. It's a central issue of the book.

If we use Number 5's family as a "control" against which to measure Marsch and his interviewees, we find that disinterested citizens of the Sisterworlds are either mystified or completely confused as to who the abos are/were or what happened to them.

Why do you find this surprising? How much knowledge and interest does the average American have about the Native American Indians, who aren't on another planet and who didn't simply disappear?

Please remember as well that Wolfe tries not to play fast and loose with the basic laws of physics.

Really? I guess I've been out of school too long. I had no idea that time travel and certain peculiar types of black holes and white fountains and resurrections and all sorts of other things were now established as part of the basic laws of physics. :-)

I suppose I should have said that, as an engineer, he tries to keep his sci-fi logically consistent.

So he consistently allows shape-changers to gain or shed mass. :-)

How long would the supposed abo "worms" have to be to contain the same amount of mass as the grown humans they allegedly become?

Is it necessary that they immediately take on the aspect of humans?

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I certainly don't think they evolved in any sort of traditional sense of the word. But I also don't think they necessarily underwent an immediate metamorphosis like a werewolf in a cheap horror flick.

And the Shadow Children are, at the very least, quite confused. I suspect that their stories are highly distorted versions of reality.

It, again, seems more reasonable to assume that this is a weird bigoted meme that has developed, either to dehumanize the abos for political, economic and legal reasons, or else to justify some kind of human-vs.-human massacre at the ford at Running Blood.

It seems to me much more reasonable, if that's your criteria, to assume that there were in fact abos who simulated human beings.

How so?

It's the simplest and most logical answer which solves the most problems and leaves the fewest questions.

Tony Ellis — 28 Jul 2006, 18:08 · follows Daniel D Jones

Ori wrote (of Daniel D Jones and I):

Both of you object to the theory on the basis that the abos are known to be shapechangers.

Not quite, but I'll get to that in a moment.

This "knowledge" is based on hearsay.

And hearsay in a novel is a million times more significant than hearsay you or I hear down the pub - because the author has deliberately chosen to put it in. As with Chekhov's Gun, if a good author includes a reference to an old legend or rumour in their story, we can be damn sure it has a bearing. If the author piles on such references, the way Wolfe does with shape-changing and mimicry in all three Fifth Head novellas, then we know that something is definitely going on.

Cassilla's "aparent ability to look older at will" is not something that we know she is actually doing. We are supposing it because we, as readers, are filling in the blanks after reading something similar from Marsch's notes. It is actually more likely that she is being seen in an unflattering light after a long night.

And Wolfe just happens to include such a meaningless scrap of descriptive prose in a book chock-full of references to shape-changing aliens? After we've been fed the very idea of abo women changing their apparent age to influence men? I don't think so.

Please remember as well that Wolfe tries not to play fast and loose with the basic laws of physics. How long would the supposed abo "worms" have to be to contain the same amount of mass as the grown humans they allegedly become?

If you think VRT has to be a giant shape-changing worm in order to have replaced Marsch, then I begin understand your reticence. :-) But who said anything about that?

I said in my post that the abos have "some sort of ability of mimicry", and I meant just that. They're humans, or humanoids, with a very limited ability to appear like other humans. There is some evidence to suggest that a race of shape-changing beings also exist, or once existed, on St Anne, but that's a separate issue. The abos are mimics. Perhaps it's muscle control, perhaps it's telepathy, but it's certainly nothing than can be dismissed by invoking the laws of physics.

And until it can be dismissed, it remains our best explanation of what happened to Marsch.