

Review: upcoming Wolfe anthology

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 01 Apr 2007

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Dan Rabin — 01 Apr 2007, 22:34

I just thought the folks on this list might be interested in the following review of mine that was just accepted by the online journal _SF Silicon Valley_ concerning Wolfe's upcoming anthology.

-- Dan Rabin

Long-time fans of Gene Wolfe's shorter fiction will remember with delight a trio of thematically-unrelated stories having similar titles: "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories", "The Death of Dr. Island", and "The Doctor of Death Island". The three works, all collected in _The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories_, were joined in a long-unavailable volume appropriately entitled _The Wolfe Archipelago_ by a fourth permuted title: "Death of the Island Doctor".

Scholars of high-school algebra among Wolfe's readers have often noted, however, that the words "island", "doctor", and "death" can be permuted in _six_ ways, not merely four. Some, assuming the author's apparent omission to be intentional, have ascribed the absence of the orderings island-death-doctor and doctor-island-death to deep principles developed by Christian Kabbalists (yes, there have been some!) based on reordering the names of the Persons of the Trinity. Other critics have preferred to infer that the ever-fertile imagination of Gene Wolfe had just moved on, or that he gave the missing titles to stories that were rejected (either by editors, or by comparison with the author's own notoriously high standards).

Now, at last, Wolfe himself supplies the missing pieces of the puzzle. His new collection _Isolating Insulation, Doctor Death in Purr-Mutation!_ not only delivers the two entirely new novelettes "Island of the Death Doctor" and "The Doctor's Island Death", but also indulges the author's bent for frame stories by including new versions of the pre-existing four works as is "edited" jointly by the engaging felines Mani (from _The Wizard Knight_) and G. Gordon Kitty (from _Castlevision_).

These editorial changes constitute the "purr-mutations" of the title, as Wolfe deadpans in his brief introductory remarks in his own literary persona. The changes, however, are minor in themselves: most notable is the substitution of felines for primates in "The Death of Dr. Island". As so often with this tricky author, deeper meanings emerge from an accumulation of hints, here hidden in Gordon and Mani's commentaries on the six stories.

The commentaries, each written in one of the cats' first-person voice, are all dated within a two-week period in the spring of an unspecified year. The last commentary, in the voice of G. Gordon Kitty, casually mentions "going over to my owner's in-laws for Passover" before trailing off into an agitated and incoherent tirade. The Gene Wolfe voice then returns in an afterword to say that, however distasteful it may appear to the reader, the last piece is included in the hopes

of assisting the authorities in solving the recent bloody killing of an ordinary Jewish family at their Seder in a suburb of Chicago.

Readers are left on their own to reflect that the Passover Seder, which occurs on a fixed date according to the lunar calendar used in Judaism, always takes place on the full moon, and that a plausible explanation for the carnage alluded to is that old Wolfean favorite, lycanthropy (or the feline equivalent) on the part of G. Gordon Kitty. "Purr-mutation" indeed.

brunians at brunians.org — 01 Apr 2007, 23:18 · in reply to Dan Rabin

Sounds great.

I've been hoping to hear more from Mani.

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 01 Apr 2007, 23:40 · follows brunians at brunians.org

And a very happy 1 April to you, too, Dan.

On 4/1/07, Dan Rabin <wolfe-lists at danrabin.com> wrote:
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