

House of Ancestors

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 25 May 2008

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5032>

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Greg Bates — 25 May 2008, 07:02

I've been reading through the Endangered Species short story collection (about halfway through so far and loving it), and I just tripped over this story. The other couple of stories i've read that I wanted some clarification on the "twist" from, like "Kevin Malone", have been discussed pretty extensively, but this one hasn't gotten any mentions. Couple things i'm trying to figure out:

1) Is the "Joe" in the last paragraph of the story actually Joe, or a robot created by the Thing? I get this impression from the last sentence of the story in which Joe remembers that his girlfriend is pregnant. Earlier on, we're told that anyone who enters the Thing gets "a segment" of their genetic code read and an extrapolated ancestor as their guide created from the DNA sample. So at first, I figured "Joe" is a creation of his unborn child's DNA created by the Thing, except that your clone mimics you at the time of your conception, ergo Joe wouldn't be talking about getting the nail removed from his heart. So now i'm confused again. What's the significance of having a protagonist with a nail in his chest anyway? It's clear Wolfe never adds a detail for no reason.

2) What's the significance of the paragraph in italics at the beginning? It describes two people looking through the fair's telescope (presumably at the top globe of the Thing where the climax of the story takes place), one right before and one right after the climax. However, isn't the fair supposed to be deserted, none of the exhibits open? Are the woman and the man characters from the party Joe is with? What the hell does it mean?

Other than that, i'm loving Endangered Species, especially the New Sun universe stories, "Thag" and "Ming the Merciless".

Greg

Dave Tallman — 26 May 2008, 08:38 · follows Greg Bates

Greg Bates wrote:

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I think the Joe at the end is a real person. At the point they find him sitting outside, Bonnie had not yet entered the Thing. Her unborn child was not involved, except to give him assurance of continuation. Even if he dies in the operation he will live on through his child.

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Joe wouldn't get an operation because he had a subconscious death-wish. He faced and defeated that part of himself. Symbolically, the nail in the heart reminds me of images the Sacred Heart of Mary. His female ancestors partake of his suffering and are a crucial factor in helping him.

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These people are looking up at the building from a long way off. I picture them as tourists looking through the pay telescopes at the top of the Empire State Building.

"For a few seconds a figure stood at one of those holes; then another who struggled with him; then both were gone."

Without this line, one might think that everything that happened after Joe went into the Thing took place only in his mind. In fact, what seems to have happened is a form of timeless information feedback, almost time travel.

"He could sense her beside him in the blackness; and unexpectedly, overwhelmingly, the certainty came to him that they had waited together like this before, and that the sensation he now felt was familiar through countless repetitions."

Somehow, what his ancestor robots learn is fed back to him across time. Joe contains his ancestors, and these robot copies somehow link to their souls. What Joe's "mother" knows was transmitted to him at conception, therefore he knows it too. When he gives up his death-wish, that too is transmitted back. He now chooses to wait at the entrance instead of going in. The others would have said something if they found him bloodied. All that happened in the Thing has been undone except for the internal change that leads him to ask for the operation. (I'm reminded of "Free Live Free" -- have you read this?)

I'm still trying to suspend disbelief about the scale of the Thing. My back-of-the-envelope calculations say it would be taller than the orbit of the moon. There are over 200 million base pairs in a typical DNA molecule which is part of the human genome. Every atom is represented. Wolfe is an engineer, so I'll assume he crunched the numbers better than I did for the height. But how much time would it take to prepare presentations for all those rooms? How could a world's fair visitor have the time to see them all?