

3rd Cue's a Charm?

The Urth list — 14 messages, 7 voices, 16 Jan 2009

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5316>

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Greg Jenkins — 16 Jan 2009, 21:32

Stupid text. Third try. . .

First of all, hello to everyone. I've been lurking for years, reading all the posts from the beginning. I'm now somewhere in 2004. At the rate I'm reading, I should meet you in the present sometime around the year 2010. . . .

In any case, I wanted to give my take on Wolfe's Cues from Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories. I've read the few posts that have touched upon this short short story, and although I feel some of the posts have gotten close to the heart of the story (with the exception of Borski's scatological reading, which, although I usually enjoy his readings, I feel was totally missing the boat -- you WERE joking, right Mr. Borski?), I feel like no one has written about what I feel the story is "really about".

Spoiler alert, although I doubt few here haven't read it already. Oh, and I'll be using the terms "universe" and "cosmos" interchangeably (gets redundant, otherwise).

I think in general this is a story about Perception, sort of along the lines of Wolfe's obsessions with Memory and Identity. It's about how a person can see virtually anything they want in objects or situations. The story is about how one can choose what to perceive, and about the dangers in wishing to perceive things in ways other than the "truth", the way they "really are".

Specifically, the story is about a man who feels his life is passing him by (hence the oft repeated "not so young man, really", or nsymr, moniker), and who hasn't yet been successful in his chosen career as a cartoonist. No one seems to see the humor in his cartoons, at least not to the depth at which he sees it. Or perhaps HE is the one who doesn't see the humor in things as others perceive it.

So, he looks up into the nighttime sky and wishes that he could perceive only those things in life that are humorous, or that he could perceive all things in life humorously. As he wishes this, he's looking into the cosmos, peering up at the vastness of space, filled with light and dark areas.

And the cosmos responds, giving him this wish. Immediately, he perceives what he's looking at as a bowling ball. A dark, nearly black void, speckled with lighter colors, and dark areas that become the holes in the ball. The dark areas or "holes", or at least one of them, we later learn is the Coalsack Nebula.

And he is choosing to perceive the cosmos not only as a bowling ball, but a talking bowling ball, one with a sense of humor. The cosmos, or universe, begins explaining to him what's happening: the nsyr is looking into an infinity of perceptual cues, and from that infinity he's filtering out certain ones, and being left with only those that create humor. And so the image of the universe has become an image of a bowling ball.

Wolfe goes to great lengths to explain this; he spends maybe half the story describing this process. Essentially, the man is being assaulted by an infinite number of perceptual cues, and that even before his transformation he filtered these cues into a coherent meaning. The cosmos says in explanation, "...you are incapable of reacting to or even noticing more than a very small fraction of the total. By an unconscious process you heed these [cues] and ignore everything else." I believe Wolfe spends so much relative ink on this because it's crucial to understand before you can understand the story as a whole.

Soon after, we get a supposed clue of the "identity" of the bowling ball. The ball says it is from "Deneb". When spelled with a lower case d, we have deneb. Although not strictly a palindrome, it's very close to being a word that is its mirror image. This may be over-interpretation, but perhaps this is a tip of the hat to alpha and omega symbology, to the cyclic nature of the universe as it was understood at the time this story was written. In other words, the cosmos is saying, hey, I'm just the ebb and flow that is the universe. Regardless, the cosmos quickly dismisses the subject, saying it didn't matter. (There's something hidden in this bit of the story, but I can't tease it out. The nsymr man says, "I thought you said--", at which point the cosmos cuts him off. I'm not sure what could have been said at this point, but I'll give my opinion in a moment.)

And why doesn't it matter? Because the universe wants it to be known that it, the universe, is not what's important, that's why, or at least that it doesn't want that line of discourse to be explored. And so we begin to get a peek of a conflict in our perception. Is the universe an unthinking, "objective" object, or is this thing an actual sentient entity, with an agenda of its own?

Then the conversation moves to the writer's desire to be a successful cartoonist, and the universe tries to explain that in point of fact, it (the universe itself) has no sense of humor and therefore can't really judge the nsymr's work, because the truth of the matter is that the universe has no volition of itself. It's just "there" in a sort of neo-buddhist way. We see this again later on when the man asks the cost that must be paid for fulfilling his wish; the cosmos responds with a casual attitude that it could be nothing or it could be twenty five cents. In any case, it doesn't appear to matter to the universe. The question is moot.

At this point in the story, the reader begins to realize that Wolfe is playing with even our perception of the story, moving the POV into and out of the nsymr's point of perception, so that sometimes the story is written from his point of view, and sometimes from a more omniscient one (seemingly):

"The not-so-young-man thrust a sketch in front of two of the bowling ball's holes. As it happened, they were the wrong holes." This is Wolfe gently poking fun at the reader, or maybe that's putting it too strongly. Wolfe is poking fun "with" the reader, for here is a man, thrusting his work out to the night sky, saying "Hey, look at this!" Toward what would you thrust a sheet of paper in this case? Wolfe is jokingly saying that the nsymr misses the "correct" holes because there is no such thing.

So now we come to the part where we're told the "truth", that the nsymr is perceiving the universe as a bowling ball:

The cosmos says, "You are sketching me?"
"I am," the not-so-young-man said. "I've just gotten this idea for a sports equipment series."

"If you think I'm funny," the bowling ball said,
"you ought to see the tennis racket."
"How did you know I thought you looked like a bowling
ball? I've been noticing it all this time we've been
talking. It's obtrusive, somehow."
"Only to cartoonists. Artists are likely to visualize
us as dark spheres filled with stars."
"What about the holes?"
"Have you ever heard of the Coalstack [sic] Nebula?"

Okay, so here we have it. The man is beginning to question how this is happening, because he doesn't even realize that his wish is already coming true. And we begin to see the dark reality of what's happening, that his perception is becoming so limited that it's actually become noticeably obtrusive. The cosmos explains that only he sees it that way, and that artists are likely to view it as a sphere with stars. How many times have we seen artists depict the universe as a sphere, with sprinkles of light scattered about, some stars, some galaxies, and so on. And when the nsymr asks about the holes of the ball, how are they formed, the cosmos explains that one at least is formed by a formation known as the Coalsack Nebula, which is a real formation, a dark "hole" formed in the sky from an area unusually less dense with stars. Pictures on the internet show it as a near void in a background scattered with stars. The misspelling is intentional, I think, because Wolfe is starting to warp our storyview into that of the nsymr's. Instead of coalsack, we have coalstack, a rather bland pun with little value. But as we learn later, the process is gradual, and so the humor becomes more pronounced and yet more bizarre.

And here we see another glimpse in the rather malign side of what's happening: the man brings up the cliqued story of someone who basically sells his soul to the devil and worries about this possibility. Not to worry, the universe reassures, and then goes on to say that even the man's children will inherit this "ability". And then this extremely chilling remark: "...from that time forward we guarantee that where others see duty or ugliness or pathos or even beauty, you will see only humor. Good-by."

Why is this chilling? Because at least two of the four fundamental perceptions are good: duty and beauty. But instead of seeing these, the nsymr will see only humor. I think Wolfe is a likely adherent to the Christian belief that "bad" exists in the world, in part, to act as a contrast to the good, that without evil we have no frame of reference to define good. And so, to lose our ability to perceive even the bad, in this case ugliness and pathos, is a bad thing to Wolfe, and to lose our ability to perceive duty and beauty is very bad, indeed.

Now we come to the last part of the short story, and boy! what a compressed bit of writing. Wolfe warps our perception to make us suspect more that perhaps the entity to which the nsymr speaks is not quite as objective as we had begun to think, and that maybe what is manipulating the man is truly a conscious, malignant "being". The young man leaves the presence of the bowling ball, and a second ball comes in. Whoa, how is this possible if there's only one cosmos? Is Wolfe implying a metaverse or something? We read further. The entities perceive each other as fair blue words, surrounded by clouds and "rich with life". A beautiful visual (primordial Earth), but is it the "truth"? At this point we have become unsure that the description is truly objective. Are we seeing the "author's perception" of the situation, the bowling balls' unconscious perception, or are the bowling balls capable of creating perception as they please, even as they've manipulated that of the nsymr?

Note that the first bowling ball is described in the beginning of the second to last paragraph as a

"he" originally. Let's look at that. In fact, let's decompress this entire paragraph. In a nutshell, here's the "action" that takes place in the second to last paragraph. Bowling Ball 1 (BB1) and the nsymr are together. The man leaves BB1. A second bowling ball, BB2, comes in. BB1 and BB2 look at each other and see fair worlds. The man pops back in and asks for a quarter. Another customer (let's call her NC for new customer) comes in. (The nsymr has now been associated as a customer himself, and so customers are coming into some place where BB1 and BB2 are, and there is the implication that the customers are being served something from or by BB1 and BB2.) BB1 begins to think, and here we have Wolfe playing with our perception again. Wolfe has BB1 think "sexy", _as the NC would later phrase it herself_. So now we're being yanked into the POV of the NC, and what does she want? The NC wants to feel sexy.

And the NC thinks of BB1 as female. She does so because the NC is herself a female, and so she is more likely to view a sympathetic BB1 as female. That's suddenly how Wolfe describes BB1, saying "after an inventory of her mind". Her in this case is BB1. So we have, in the space of one paragraph, BB1 morphing from nsymr's BB1 perception as male, to NC's BB1 perception as female.

And finally BB2 says the line about bedding pardon. Again, we see this line from the NC's point of view, but also from the nsymr, because not only is the line "sexy", it's also a terrible pun. And speaking of puns, we've come to fully realize the nature of the nsymr's wish and its fulfillment. In classic demon style, we realize the wish has been fulfilled, but it's only the "letter of the wish" that's fulfilled. For we see that the man will see everything humorously, but in a shallow form. Puns are considered one of the lowest forms of humor by many, and throughout the story it's clear that's what the man is seeing. Hence the pun earlier between "goblin" and "gobbling".

The story finishes with an ironically scary line: "And, still grinning, the not-so-young-man withdrew." At this point we realize that he's grinning a hideous grin, a grin that's involuntary, an almost Lovcraftian grin of predestination and lack of free will.

So, that's about it. I'm still a little confused about the actual identity of the bowling balls. I'm thinking other members more versed in mythology could tease it out. Are there any demons or spirits or such that make themselves perceived as images of the universe, or alternately as the primordial Earth? I'm guessing there's something to Wolfe's image of the bowling balls seeing themselves as such. Also, there's the bit about the bowling ball sitting on a chair of "massy gold and conform[ing] to an alien pattern of beauty and utility." I took this as sun imagery. A god sitting upon the sun as a throne, perhaps? The bit about alien-ness I interpreted as one way to perceive the backdrop of the universe, that its pattern and function, whatever that may be, is unknown.

We see an evolution in our perception of just what, exactly, BB1 is throughout the story. First, it's a bowling ball. Then, it's the universe. Then, when seen by another like it, it's a fair world. Finally, we know it as none of the above, but rather, some malignant "thing" for which we have no name. There is the bit about "I beg your pardon", said by both BB1 and BB2 at different points in the story. Is there something in classic literature where a Mephistopheles-type character says something of the sort?

One last thought is that this story warns the reader against going out into the night and blindly wishing for something that isn't well thought out. It turned out that the joke is that the man will spend his life seeing only bad jokes. And it was because he prayed to a nighttime sky, a false idol, which was really a demon made manifest as such.

So, any comments on this? I dismissed this story on first reading, thinking it was one of Wolfe's throwaway jobs, but I'm currently re-reading TIODDAOSAOS and was struck by the sinister

nature of this story which I completely missed the first time around.

Sorry for the rambling style. Not on my A game today, lol.

-- Greg (until I decide to take an Urthian name)

Dave Tallman — 17 Jan 2009, 04:59 · in reply to Greg Jenkins

Hi Greg, thanks for posting. I rarely agree with Borski, but on this one I think he found the right approach. This thing is loaded with double-entendres and near-puns, leading to a scatological interpretation.

"not so young man" = "old coot" = cootie

"chair" = "throne" = toilet

"dark spheres filled with stars" = "firmament" = fundament "coal sack" = "cul de sac" = end
Deneb = Arabic for "tail" humor = "butt of a joke" = butt

In short, the story is about an STD passed by a bug on a toilet seat. When it withdraws, still grinning, it has just bitten its second victim, the second bowling ball (bottom) to use the seat in a toilet queue.

David Stockhoff — 17 Jan 2009, 21:56 · follows Dave Tallman

I haven't read Borski on this story, nor do I claim to understand it. But few of those examples are even puns or anything like puns. Chair = toilet, OK; Deneb = tail; OK. But the rest are simply not-so-clever misspellings or forced associations.

The game of football is no less scatological by this logic---all those tight ends, you know.

Wolfe doesn't require you to bring words to his stories. He provides all the words you need.

Message: 5

Date: Fri, 16 Jan 2009 21:59:53 -0700

From: Dave Tallman <davetallman at msn.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) 3rd Cue's a Charm?

To: urth at lists.urth.net

Message-ID: <497165C9.1060600 at gmail.com>

Content-Type: text/plain; charset=ISO-8859-1; format=flowed

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Dave Tallman — 18 Jan 2009, 03:32 · in reply to David Stockhoff

David Stockhoff wrote:

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Wolfe doesn't require you to bring words to his stories. He provides all the words you need.

Those were rough examples; I don't have my copy of the story on hand. I'll get it and try for a more detailed exegesis in a few days.

Greg Jenkins — 18 Jan 2009, 08:34 · follows Dave Tallman

Guys, come on. I mean, really. A two page scat joke by Wolfe?

After everything the man has written, after all the forum's discussions about his religious beliefs and how these pervade his stories, after considering his generally serious nature and how when he does display humor it is sometimes dry but almost always clean -- I really can't bring myself to believe Wolfe would do such a thing. I can picture Wolfe rolling his eyes at that interpretation.

Besides, those connections ARE extremely weak. If Wolfe meant for the reader to deduce "coot", why wouldn't he have simply called the protagonist an "old man"? Why force such a bent chain of reasoning? And the children being called "cooties"? And the incredible leap in believing the use of nested quotation marks around "Earth" signifies "fundament", which requires a huge leap from "firmament" to "fundament"? Wouldn't a more plausible reading be that the quotes are nested to indicate the not-so-young-man understands already at that point in the story that his concept of "Earth" is a mere construct of perceptions that he has chosen? And to go from "chair" to "throne"...and then leap to "toilet"?

Come on, guys! Is there anyone out there reading the story as I am? Where is the honorable Mr. Lackey or Blattid when I need them?

Consider the sex change of BB1 in the penultimate paragraph.

What in the world does this have to do with a scatological reading? Why would Wolfe bother with this detail if his intention was to tell a crap joke?

And look, here are a few more bits to ponder:

*The tennis racket that BB1 mentions is a common depiction of the space-time continuum, a grid of "space" upon which rests a ball. This graphical construct has been used countless times to try to aid understanding of the mechanism of gravity.

*The man must know a smattering of astronomy, because he understands the Coalsack Nebula reference, the space-time reference, the infinite nature of the universe, the concept of infinity applied to space.

*Story of train and rope-skipping girl. Who would simply stop and let a train pass if a kid were skipping rope beside the track? Wouldn't a normal response be: "I would get out of the car and ensure the child's safety?" But that's not how our nsymr answers; he says he'd simply stop and let the train pass. "Exactly," responds BB1. The response of a pleased demon.

* * * Religious imagery * * *

* Nsymr says, "I'm going to have a hell of a good time," to which BB1 responds, "You certainly are." Taken as a pun or read as ironic, the nsymr is saying he will be having a twisted, hellish version of a good time. A nightmare, really.

* The "gift" (curse) will be passed to the nsymr's children, but they will not outshine him in his lifetime. What biblical figures fit this mold?

* Odd wording by nsymr asking for a quarter: "I wonder if you Denebians could stake ME to twenty-five cents instead of the other way around?" An image of being staked (crucified) comes to mind. In response to this, BB1 begins to "think sexy". Perverted thoughts of pleasure at the idea of crucifying nsymr?

*"BB2 saying he "beds" pardon. Perversion towards pardon for nsymr? Instead of allowing for his pardon, BB2 jokes that he will defile it?

* BB2 saying they give no quarter. A pun on twenty-five cents, but also a statement that their damnation has no mercy. To give quarter can mean the clemency of not killing a defeated enemy.

Dave Tallman — 18 Jan 2009, 10:15 · in reply to Greg Jenkins

Guys, come on. I mean, really. A two page scat joke by Wolfe?
After everything the man has written, after all the forum's discussions about his religious beliefs and how these pervade his stories, after considering his generally serious nature and how when he does display humor it is sometimes dry but almost always clean -- I really can't bring myself to believe Wolfe would do such a thing. I can picture Wolfe rolling his eyes at that interpretation.

But he does have a sense of humor, and a pretty strange one. I think it's a mistake we Wolfe interpreters make sometimes, to fail to use our sense of humor.

Besides, those connections ARE extremely weak. <snip> And to go from "chair" to "throne"...and then leap to "toilet"?

Borski's key to many of these references is to look for words that sound like "cue": coot, cootie, cutie, queue, etc. Toilets are often jokingly called thrones, so that's no extra leap at all.

Consider the sex change of BB1 in the penultimate paragraph.
What in the world does this have to do with a scatological reading? Why would Wolfe bother with this detail if his intention was to tell a crap joke?

The sex-change makes perfect sense as part of a toilet joke, and no sense otherwise. From what point-of-view are a male and female body identical? The person attached to BB1 was female, but from the perspective of the cootie it didn't matter. The "bed" pun suggests the cooties will

be spread further by sex. The "quarter" suggests the coins used to enter a pay toilet.

David Stockhoff — 18 Jan 2009, 14:28 · follows Dave Tallman

Better yet, do you have a link to the original essay?

I should say, I have no doubt that that story is indeed an extended joke .. (and probably not a very good one!)

Message: 5
Date: Sat, 17 Jan 2009 20:32:39 -0700
From: Dave Tallman <davetallman at msn.com>
Subject: Re: (urth) 3rd Cue's a Charm?
To: urth at lists.urth.net
Message-ID: <4972A2D7.6020505 at gmail.com>
Content-Type: text/plain; charset=ISO-8859-1; format=flowed

David Stockhoff wrote:

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The game of football is no less scatological by this logic---all those tight ends, you know.

Wolfe doesn't require you to bring words to his stories. He provides all the words you need.

Those were rough examples; I don't have my copy of the story on hand.
I'll get it and try for a more detailed exegesis in a few days.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 18 Jan 2009, 18:04 · in reply to Greg Jenkins

On Sun, Jan 18, 2009 at 12:34 AM, Greg Jenkins <grsjenkins at yahoo.com> wrote:
Where is the honorable Mr. Lackey or Blattid when I need them?

To be dead honest, I have no memory of this story whatsoever. I'll have to reread it before I jump in, and I'm in the middle of something else pretty dense right now.

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>
<http://www.danehyoakes.com>

I once absend-mindedly ordered Three Mile Island dressing in a restaurant and, with great presence of mind, they brought Thousand Island Dressing and a bottle of chili sauce. -- T. Pratchett

Greg Jenkins — 18 Jan 2009, 19:02 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

David wrote:
Better yet, do you have a link to the original essay?

David, try this:
<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0015/0121.shtml>

Steven — 18 Jan 2009, 23:29 · in reply to Greg Jenkins

On Jan 18, 2009, at 3:34 AM, Greg Jenkins wrote:

Odd wording by nsymr asking for a quarter: "I wonder if you Denebians could stake ME to twenty-five cents instead of the other way around?"

An image of being staked (crucified) comes to mind. In response to this,

BB1 begins to "think sexy". Perverted thoughts of pleasure at the idea of crucifying nsymr?

A second customer has entered the room. It's she, not BB1, who wants to 'think sexy.' BB1 has taken an inventory of her mind. There's no sex change in the BBs. The nsymr is the first customer.

I bed your pardon mirrors or reverses the name deneb. Which I always thought, given the context of the word, could mean something like de nada.

I see the story as obviously Faustian.

My question: What is the significance of the story starting in the title word? So that the body of the story begins with the question mark? Simply a foreshadowing of the many questions raised?

Steven Bowen

<http://bowenfinearts.com/>

Roy C. Lackey — 19 Jan 2009, 05:38 · in reply to Greg Jenkins

Greg Jenkins wrote:

Come on, guys! Is there anyone out there reading the story as I am?

Where is the honorable Mr. Lackey or Blattid when I need them?

Thank you for your regard, but I will bravely relinquish a place at the front to Dan'I while I observe the, uh, rear.

-Roy

Greg Jenkins — 19 Jan 2009, 15:24 · follows Roy C. Lackey

Steven wrote:

A second customer has entered the room. It's she, not BB1, who wants to 'think sexy.' BB1 has taken an inventory of her mind. There's no sex change in the BBs. The nsymr is the first customer.

There's a lot compressed into that sentence. Here it is....

Another customer pushed past him as he spoke, and the first bowling ball, after an inventory of her mind that required only a fraction of a second, began -- as the new customer would later phrase it herself -- to "think sexy."

I was reading it (incorrectly, I'm now convinced) as:

...after an inventory of BB1's mind that required...

But you're pointing out that it says:

NC pushed past nsymr as nsymr spoke, and BB1, after an inventory of NC's mind that required only a fraction of a second, began -- as NC would later phrase it herself -- to "think sexy."

Okay, no sex change.

But wow, what a whopper of a compression job. In the space of one Wolfian sentence we learn:

- 1) there are customers to BB1 (BB1 provides some "service")
- 2) the service seems to be the granting of an ability (to customers) to limit or change perception of sensory cues
- 3) BB1 also has the ability to inventory (read?) customers' minds
- 4) such an inventory takes BB1 only a moment
- 5) the NC has a desire to see objects and situations as "sexy"
- 6) the NC will later be granted this ability (limitation)

Whew. Good thing Wolfe let us off the hook with only those things in mind.

As for the title being encapsulated as such, I believe someone else refuted Borski's original idea and pointed out that perhaps it was at least partially a convenience or a literary trick. I think it also serves as a wakeup call and helps us realize that as readers we're unconsciously filtering sensory cues. Initially some people (at least I did) will glance over the odd opening and dismiss it as a simple oddity, or suspect a typo. After re-reading the story, it becomes an example of how we chose the cues we wanted to see and let the others go un-noticed.

(BTW I really don't mean to be bashing Mr. Borski. I think he's great and own a copy of SOLAR LABYRINTH.)

Greg Bates — 19 Jan 2009, 18:24 · in reply to Greg Jenkins

I too have read Borski's interpretation and find it lacking. I really like the idea that the nysm is being given his wish, but can only see humor via bad puns - especially considering all the cue-related puns in the story (waiting in a queue, etc).

I would've sworn I read somewhere that this story was inspired by a convention where Wolfe and another (female) sci-fi writer were on a Q/A panel. They ended up answering writing questions and dispensing advice to scores of young writers of dubious talent. Maybe that's where the customer's wishes come from? The nsym could be some sort of comedy writer, the second customer a failed romance novelist, etc. Can anyone back me up on this story?

On Mon, Jan 19, 2009 at 10:24 AM, Greg Jenkins <grsjenkins at yahoo.com> wrote:
Steven wrote:

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David Stockhoff — 19 Jan 2009, 22:16 · follows Greg Bates

I can't. But I do notice that "Q&A" contains a "cue."

Puns are frequently off-color. Borski's interpretation does appear to explain much about the story. But so does yours.

Message: 1

Date: Mon, 19 Jan 2009 13:24:38 -0500

From: "Greg Bates" <tedkennedyrolls at gmail.com>

Subject: Re: (urth) 3rd Cue's a Charm?

To: grsjenkins at yahoo.com, "The Urth Mailing List"

<urth at lists.urth.net>

Message-ID:

<81c420fa0901191024j33f197471l1cfff4b17004908 at mail.gmail.com>

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I too have read Borski's interpretation and find it lacking. I really like the idea that the nysm is being given his wish, but can only see humor via

bad puns - especially considering all the cue-related puns in the story (waiting in a queue, etc).

I would've sworn I read somewhere that this story was inspired by a convention where Wolfe and another (female) sci-fi writer were on a Q/A panel. They ended up answering writing questions and dispensing advice to scores of young writers of dubious talent. Maybe that's where the customer's wishes come from? The nsym could be some sort of comedy writer, the second customer a failed romance novelist, etc. Can anyone back me up on this story?