

Suzanne Delage: yet another theory

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 May 1998

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William H. Ansley — 12 May 1998, 01:59

You know, maybe we need a separate Suzanne Delage mailing list. <g>

I came up with my own theory about this story, almost against my will, since I was originally going to post a message saying "enough with the Suzanne Delage already". I doubt very much that my theory is what Wolfe had in mind (if he really had anything more in mind than a nod to Proust) but it does have the signal advantage of making the quilt-hunting significant.

But first a comment: it is very hard to tell when the "present" is for the narrator. On page 363 of the *_Endangered Species_* (paperback) he says, "There are a number of pages missing from the class picture section of the earlier book and I seem to recall that these were torn out and cut up to obtain the individual photographs many decades ago."

Assuming he is right about the time frame, this "many decades" poses problems. I would think that at a minimum it would have to be three decades, though many usually means more than this. Three is no problem. It would mean that (if the pages were torn out of the sophomore yearbook right away) that the narrator could be 44 (14 + 30) and that Suzanne would have had her daughter at the age of 28 (44 - 16). Of course, if the pages were torn out of the sophomore yearbook "n" years after it was taken home, we have to add n to the above ages.

If "many" is four, we have Suzanne giving birth at the age of 38; if five, 48. And many could certainly be a higher number than these!

And now, my theory. I say the narrator did know Suzanne as a child and as a teenager. They fell in love and, perhaps, planned to marry. But the narrator's mother did find a "American Revolution times" quilt or embroidered blanket at some time before the narrator's senior year and probably after his sophomore year, in high school. It was infected with smallpox. It had been preserved because some colonists intended to use it to infect Indians. (I have read that colonists did this. I don't know if it is true but it seems plausible. Certainly many, many Indians died of smallpox and they almost certainly caught it from European settlers.) Perhaps a smallpox epidemic breaks out. Even if all the inhabitants of the town were vaccinated, it is likely that some would still be susceptible to the virus to some degree. But certainly Suzanne get the disease and is dreadfully scarred. Other people who come down with it get milder cases and are not scarred noticeably. (This is consistent with what the *_Encyclopedia Britannica_* has to say about smallpox.) The source of the disease is discovered. The quilt/blanket is destroyed. Suzanne blames the narrator and his family and hates him. The narrator, horrified by Suzanne's appearance, no longer loves her. Or, perhaps, she is not so badly scarred, but he finds that he cannot love her now that she is no longer "perfect" and she hates him for this.

Suzanne can't be photographed because she is sick with smallpox or she refuses to be because of her scars. The narrator destroys the pages of the sophomore yearbook because he can't look at her old "pure as milk" complexion without being guilt stricken. (The description of Suzanne's daughter, under my theory, is to let us know what a beauty Suzanne was, pre-smallpox.)

Perhaps his picture is missing because of endearments written on it by Suzanne, that he could no longer bear to read. He forgets all about the smallpox outbreak and so does the town. Suzanne becomes a recluse and so doesn't serve as a reminder. This also explains why he never saw her after high school.

In this context, the fact that the narrator (falsely) remembers a Spanish Influenza epidemic is significant because it was a pandemic disease outbreak that was totally forgotten in a relatively short time. See one of Craig Christensen's posting for details on this. This may be a hint that the town could forget its own epidemic.

The sentence: "On the other hand we are neither of us invalids, nor are we blind." also takes on new significance and perhaps some poignancy, since blindness is a common result of scarlet fever and invalidism could be caused by rheumatic fever or polio. Some part of the narrator that remembers is saying "It could have been worse, couldn't it?"

This could also explain Suzanne having a child quite late in life (see my comment way above). She finally finds someone to love and marry despite her reclusiveness and disfigurement.

Now this is certainly not a supernatural explanation of the story, but I don't think that is required. It is certainly against all probability and the survival of variola (smallpox) virus for hundreds of years might be considered a dislocation of nature.

I am aware there are a lot of problems with this idea; perhaps someone else can refine or build on it. Perhaps the fact that I find it at all convincing just demonstrates that I should get more sleep and do less email reading.

But for now I say, "Enough with the smallpox theory already!"

William Ansley