

Short Story 4: The Dead Man

The Urth list — 10 messages, 5 voices, 25 Mar 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6202>

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Marc Aramini — 25 Mar 2012, 18:05

The Dead Man

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SUMMARY: Taking place in a Hindi river setting, for the first time in generations the river seems unsafe. The main character’s sister-in-law has been taken by a Magar (crocodile, but Urdu/Hindi for “water monster”) 9 days previously. His wife has been bitten on the foot by a jackal and it has reacted badly when she tried to distract it away from her young son, so her husband, called the peasant, must perform the womanly task of getting water from the river since his own mother is too old.

He rises early, but there is an old Brahman already on the step sitting outside his door, who has cast Marigold wreaths into the river to placate the Magar and other river spirits. The man retrieves the first jug and returns to his hut where his wife moans and stirs before he goes back with his second, chipped jug for more water. He grows careless, and his foot slips. As a result, the Magar snatches him by the leg and he passively accepts his fate. He awakens in the lair of the crocodile, next to a blackbuck and a woman whose body seems familiar. He escapes through the “chimney” of the lair and makes his way back to his family (the limp is implied from the injury to his leg during the croc attack). He stands before his house and looks first and last at his wife.

The Brahman is seated inside his house and says, “Do not address it. It is seldom good to hear what they will say” before casting saffron powder from a brass bowl into the air to bring the dead peasant release.

COMMENTARY: Once again we have a dead man unaware of his condition. However, we must address the moment when he returns to awareness after the attack. “When next he came to know our world — maya, that which is not God — it was a small circle of pale blue far above his eyes.” In hinduism, Maya is like an illusion. Along with matter and activity it creates a trifecta through which man “exists”, but he experiences matter and activity through Maya. Thus dualism is taken to an extreme degree — the real world as an illusion, that which is separate from the reality of the divine. Maya is also somehow linked to the act or actors involved in the creation of the physical world.

The Brahmin is someone who has come to experience knowledge of the self, BUT it is a bit suspicious that he is sitting there waiting outside the man’s door when he leaves, then is not present the first time the man returns — but the wife moans and stirs in her bed. Since the description is of a very old man I will not posit that the Brahmin had a vested interest in the wife.

However, the peasant’s half-brother’s wife, which is probably the corpse rotting in the den of the crocodile, also evokes the feeling “A drugged and whirling concourse of surmises rushed through his mind, until simultaneously and without consciousness of contradiction he felt that he lay in the palace of a scaled river-spirit and asleep beside his wife.”

The crocodile has teeth that are ill suited to eating the man, so it has to wait for food to get appropriately soft and rotten to consume it, in its little cooking den with a chimney to prevent the noxious rotting gasses to poison the den. The man escapes through this.

POSSIBLE AMBIGUITIES: Is the Magar there for judgment? Why has the river been safe for so long? Was the man having an affair with his half-brother's wife — is that why they both shared the river-spirit's attention? Was the Brahmin innocent or complicit, being there before the man left and then present at his final return to dissolve his consciousness, but not there upon his first return, when he heard the moan of his wife? Also, is the woman that he recognizes his sister in law? It would seem to be, but has she rotted enough for 9 days? It does not seem to be another fresh victim that he "knows".

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Also, there is a subtle difference between Brahmin and Brahman, and Wolfe usually employs the "a" spelling.

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Craig Brewer — 26 Mar 2012, 06:16 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Nicely done on this one. And you're absolutely right about the prose. 14 years makes quite a difference!

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Brahman having to intervene and cast a spell (or whatever) to free him. The Brahman even suggests that anything he says (or thinks) must be wrong ("It is seldom good to hear what they [ghosts] say."), and the "Name, dissolution, and release" are good things.

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There is the comment about the jungle having been cut down for lumber 50 years ago and now growing back. That might be something different.

From: Marc Aramini <marcaramini at yahoo.com>

To: urth at lists.urth.net

Sent: Sunday, March 25, 2012 1:05 PM

Subject: (urth) Short Story 4: The Dead Man

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Marc Aramini — 27 Mar 2012, 15:37 · in reply to Craig Brewer

--- On Sun, 3/25/12, Craig Brewer <cnbrewer at yahoo.com> wrote:

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Very nice comments, I was hoping someone else would weigh in on the idea of "right/wrong" response to the Magar and materialistic reality - sexual swelling through necrotic gases is an awesome image. This story is a perfect example of why I think spiritual possibilities always have to be considered in Wolfe to make accurate interpretations.

I guess I will press forward - I think that even though two of the stories in "Young Wolfe" were not published until 1992 in that volume, they seem like very early works, so we will talk about them before going to the Tor anthologies. The Dead Man, Mountains Like Mice, and The Green Wall Said are definitely the highlights - Mountains like Mice is far and away the longest, so I should be able to finish up my scans of Young Wolfe tonight, get those out, and start posting some of those comments.

Then it looks like Trip, Trap - the story from which Damon Knight grew Wolfe from a bean. That story will probably slow us down a little, but that's all right.

David Stockhoff — 30 Mar 2012, 01:30 · in reply to Craig Brewer

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The gun stories we are coming up to now are so meticulous in their detail about the type of wood used in construction, how long it would take for the scent of that wood to fade, etc. Even in his fairly amateur works, he really does make most other writers look very shoddy and sloppy - this is why I feel when something is elided in Wolfe, HE knows exactly what should feel the gap, and it was engineered that way.

--- On Thu, 3/29/12, David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net> wrote:

From: David Stockhoff <dstockhoff at verizon.net>
Subject: Re: (urth) Short Story 4: The Dead Man

DAVID STOCKHOFF — 30 Mar 2012, 16:37 · in reply to Marc Aramini

And if he was this meticulous that early on, even for a little ghost story, it tells us a little about how he generally regards detail in narration. He's a high-resolution writer, and as you say, such "necessary" detail is to be both given and withheld. Sometimes the pattern of permitted/omitted information forms a puzzle, but that doesn't mean the gaps are just puzzles.

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To: "Craig Brewer" <cnbrewer at yahoo.com>, "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net>
Date: Thursday, March 29, 2012, 6:30 PM

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Apparently all crocodilians ambush their prey and roll like that.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=f8uFPKPzInEC&pg=PA264>

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DAVID STOCKHOFF — 30 Mar 2012, 19:42 · in reply to Jerry Friedman

Makes sense. Looks like ours used methods ABC: ambush, death roll, hold and drown.

The description in your source is slightly different---it doesn't mention the disorienting effect of the death roll, although the peasant's leg seems to almost have come off, which effect it does mention.

What a bizarre book, btw. Where are the monster stats? (never mind where was the editor)

From: David Stockhoff [dstockhoff at verizon.net](mailto:dstockhoff@verizon.net)

I can only add to this that the depth of research needed for this little OMG-I'm-the-ghost ghost story is remarkable. It's not entirely convincing, because of the little Orientalist "footnotes," but the sheer legwork to get us into the peasant's mind---banter of women, jungle species succession, the croc's chimney, if true (I can't confirm it)---is commendable.

Incidentally, the croc is known as the "mugger" crocodile and does lie in wait for prey (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mugger_crocodile). However, the manner in which it actually killed the peasant sounds more like the "death roll" described for the saltwater croc (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saltwater_crocodile). One would need to delve deeper than Wikipedia to? sort it out further, but the conflation works, if conflation it is.

Apparently all crocodilians ambush their prey and roll like that.

<http://books.google.com/books?id=f8uFPKPzInEC&pg=PA264>

Jerry Friedman

David Duffy — 30 Mar 2012, 23:55 · in reply to DAVID STOCKHOFF

On Fri, 30 Mar 2012, DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote:

Makes sense. Looks like ours used methods ABC: ambush, death roll, hold and drown.

The woman who survived a salty attack a few years ago in the Northern Territory played dead and escaped from the hollow log where she was stashed, IIRC. You just have to keep a cool head...:)

David Stockhoff — 31 Mar 2012, 02:40 · in reply to David Duffy

The story does seem plausible, doesn't it? That is, that the Dead Man could be alive---until you recall the title.

On 3/30/2012 7:55 PM, David Duffy wrote:

On Fri, 30 Mar 2012, DAVID STOCKHOFF wrote:

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