

Short Story 36: Alien Stones

The Urth list — 4 messages, 2 voices, 03 Jul 2012

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6269>

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Marc Aramini — 03 Jul 2012, 05:05

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SUMMARY: Daw and his ship, the rather self-aware Gladiator, approach a large seemingly abandoned spacecraft. It is a far future setting in which mankind has scattered across the galaxy, and though fragments of long lost civilization have oft been discovered, it is revealed that they have always been descended from man himself. Alas, they have finally come across a massive ship, possibly an abandoned derelict, in space, and proceed to explore it. The captain has an understudy, the young Wad, who is described as a dark complexioned young man “whose face showed plainly the strain of two years” involvement in a hell that demanded night and day a continual flow of deductions, inferences, and decisions — all without effect?. In this future, empaths are employed to smooth the way in interpersonal communication, and they always work as married couples because “everyone, notoriously, fell in love with empaths.”

The large ship is modular in nature and several crew members board it to look for traces of the civilization that abandoned it. It is enormous, but during the exploration the empathy Youngmeadow, who is liked by all but is also the subject of some envy because of his beautiful young wife, disappears.

While the crew tries to decipher the alien symbols and their crystalline and vacuum tube computer systems, they do eventually come to understand the star maps of the civilization. Some of the alien symbols are deciphered, and it ultimately turns out to be a numbering system that represents the course of the ship — in particular, Gladiator as it approached the alien vessel.

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Helen then ponders if her husband was ever real, and Daw reveals why he died — breaking something to get their attention, since “his empathy was all for people, not for things.”

Later on the ship he ponders the Matther 22:28 verse (to paraphrase) about a woman who had seven husbands who died — whose wife would she be at the resurrection? But Heaven doesn’t

work that way.

Helen has asked Wad about Daw's youth, and then asks if Daw's training captain was an older version of himself, to which he responds, "I don't think so .. a real captain." He was a crusty bastard, but he generally knew what he was doing. (Of course, this might describe him).

COMMENTARY: Borski has some very interesting analysis of this story as kind of a "Wolfe does an inverted Star Trek and confronts the types of love" but while there is some appeal to his analysis I think he takes an overtly humanist/biological stance on the action that is really not at all warranted by the text itself. In his analysis, "Eros, Agape, and Philos are represented by different characters or relationships in the story and the main didactic purpose of the story is to" chronicle how man is evolving through his machines now, far away from the "young meadow" of Eden. His most convincing point is that on Daw's bridge there is a new and old testament, and this is absent on Wad's otherwise identical bridge. I don't think this anti-tech conclusion is at all warranted for this story written by an engineer, but here is a link to Borski's post below.

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I think this story is not at all condemning man's evolution through machines, but rather about learning to perceive life that is different to some degree, and learning to see ourselves from that perspective — Youngmeadow thinks he understands how the aliens works because he knows they are still there — but when he breaks a machine he makes himself a nuisance to them, and, failing to understand the nature of his own existence, he is destroyed. His suit also fails to understand this, and seeks to preserve the biotic environment of his rotting body. What then is life? Neither his suit nor the aliens recognize him as the only sentient life at that point. In any case, there is a long philosophical/functional discussion of how the symbols of the aliens work (which even includes the etymology of how the rounded number 2 might have evolved from 2 parallel lines) — and it turns out, they are a subjective heading that points towards the Gladiator as it approaches. Those numbers are how the aliens perceive the humans. This is very important for the theme of the story in my opinion. Helen Youngmeadow mentions how stones used to be used for counting, which became an abacus, then over time lost their meaning and she ponders: "those numbers you figured out were little stones from a world we've never seen — The thing I wonder about is where are they now, those first stones?" Ground to powder? Or jus kicking around Italy or Egypt somewhere, little round stones that nobody pays any attention to. I don't really think anything would happen if they were destroyed — not really — but I've been

wondering about it?

All this time is put into deciphering a code that ultimately points to a way of perceiving and contextualizing themselves that is quite simple but was beyond their ability to discern without a lot of work. They assumed it was an escape route, but the aliens have not gone anywhere.

There was simply no way for them to communicate effectively until the realization of the nature of their life forms was brought about. Even the space suit of Youngmeadow cannot know what human life is: it seeks to maintain the biotic organisms that have sprung up from his corpse. Indeed, Wad, a simulation of the captain for the purpose of getting material for training new captains, seems very lifelike at first but is in fact nothing but a simulation of the captain who he can interact with as a ?son?.? Helen wonders after her husband dies if he was ever real at all, since there should only be one real person in every chamber and they were staying in one, and it felt as if he had never been know that he was dead. The aliens are real but they cannot be seen or experienced directly, only through their proxy, a simulation of Youngmeadow.

This examination of what life can be, and how different the ways of the spiritual world are than our biological one, seems an inquisition into the evolution of life through machines, through integration with alien philosophies, and even after death, and I do not think the condemnation of the mechanical that Borski posits is really present at all in the text. The strange ways of the mechanical and spiritual world might be every bit as vital, but just staggeringly different, as the final biblical quote drives home — there will be no marriage in heaven. Old categories will simply be irrelevant.

Also of note is that the Captain was bred for his position — he was not promoted. This engineering for a certain task is seen in some of Wolfe's other short fiction as well.

There is an interesting parallel between Daw having a simulation of himself that he will care for and communicate with and the simulation of Youngmeadow the aliens use to communicate with the humans.

NAMES : Daw and Wad are clearly named as mirror images, one young and one old, but the name Daw means beloved, and this actually resonates well "with Borski's analysis of the story in terms of eros, agape, and philos." His conclusion condemning technology and its exploration completely ignores that it is through understanding things and computers that Daw gains meaningful access to at least a glimpse of the aliens.

Also of note is the name Youngmeadow: his naive hubristic empathy from the starting point, entirely human and entirely based on emotional understanding, simply cannot intersect with the advanced technology/ alien nature of this progress. While it may be inhuman — I think the final biblical quote drives home the idea that ultimately spiritual beings are equally inhuman and incomprehensible. The name Helen Youngmeadow also resonates with the story of Helen of Troy to some degree — the bride of one coveted by another, but though ships are involved here that story has been augmented too much for a simple overlay.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS: The famous quote on marriage from Matthew 22:28 ends the story, and this is a rather profound moment in the gospel that says the ways of man are simply NOT the ways of the spirit — there will be no institution of marriage. But what then of love, the love between a man and a woman? This quote and the meaning of the name Daw really do lend credence to love as a major theme of the story — the types of love and their expression across different boundaries — outside and beyond established relationships, after death, beyond human flesh.

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In any case, unlike Clarke's 2001 where aliens seeded the creative spark for man to evolve, in "Alien Stones" entire civilizations have sprung from mankind and decayed over time to be found by other branches of man's unified species. However, Daw and his Gladiator ship have come across something different and possibly incomprehensible at last.

RESONANCE WITH OTHER WORKS: Once again, I feel that the mechanistic, logical construction trumps human emotion here, much as it did in "Of Relays and Roses". The passionate man Youngmeadow chooses a passionate action and is killed as a result because he does not think things through logically. The nature of the spaceship and its captaincy is less Hobbesian and subject to mutinous contention than Wolfe's novella "Silhouette", but the ships themselves don't seem all that different with their distinctive personalities and ability to operate independently of their captain, though in this case Daw has authoritative manual control over every ship process.

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Daniel Petersen — 16 Jul 2012, 12:40 · in reply to Marc Aramini

I haven't read Borski's take, but it looks like I'd be inclined to side more with your analysis here. It's actually been some years since I read this story, but my overwhelming memory of the story is that it was at core about the incomprehensibility/incommensurability of 'alien contact'. It put me very much in mind of Stanislaw Lem's Solaris. And when I saw Prometheus recently, this story sprang immediately to mind.

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Thanks for your thoughts, Marc.

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Marc Aramini — 16 Jul 2012, 14:14 · in reply to Daniel Petersen

--- On Mon, 7/16/12, Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> wrote:

From: Daniel Petersen <danielottojackpetersen at gmail.com> Subject: Re: (urth) Short Story 36: Alien Stones To: "The Urth Mailing List" <urth at lists.urth.net> Date: Monday, July 16, 2012, 5:40 AM

I haven't read Borski's take, but it looks like I'd be inclined to side more with your analysis here. It's actually been some years since I read this story, but my overwhelming memory of the story is that it was at core about the incomprehensibility/incommensurability of 'alien contact'. It put me very much in mind of Stanislaw Lem's Solaris. And when I saw Prometheus recently, this story sprang immediately to mind.

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Thanks for your thoughts, Marc.

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Thanks Daniel!? I have been going a bit slower on stories so a few more comments like yours can come up.

In the meantime I have read ahead in Wolfe to about circa 1995, and I will try to address where he takes up this theme. As far as aliens or other types of beings are concerned, the sheer lack of time that players like Inire and the pandours get in New Sun have a veneer of this inscrutability, but they are ultimately very understandable in terms of their goals and function: a manipulator and drones. "Tracking Song" I think is actually an inversion of this: things which are not human can seem very human when you live among them.

I think the incomprehensibility is much more common with spiritual and fantastic in Wolfe rather than alien things - the story "Houston, 1943" for example is about as bizarre and incomprehensible as anything Wolfe has done (the boy Roddie in the story can't come to terms with what is happening to him, and finally just concludes it is a dream, though there is no indication he will ever wake up). What is so weird about that story is ... Roddie is clearly supposed to be Gene Rodman Wolfe, it's supposed to be our Houston, Gene really had a dog the name of the dog in the story, and there are all these "familiar" characters from literature, but even with ALL THAT real world crossover of time and place, everything that happens is well and truly bizarre.

So the theme of context making higher meaning and a failure to understand it inhibiting valid communion or even self-awareness is ALL throughout Wolfe: Peace, The Haunted Boardinghouse, Mute, A Cabin on the Coast, ?Sorcerer's House, Short Sun ... but I don't think anywhere else is it quite so concerned with pure outerspace aliens as in this story. I've noticed that Wolfe's 1970s fiction was usually more concrete and closer to real world physics than the short works he was writing in the late 80s to mid 90s - he seemed to take a conscious step away from near future dystopia towards overt fantasy (albeit sometimes still dystopian).

Thanks again for your comments, Daniel. My favorite part of Alien Stones is that the symbols that they work so hard to decipher simply indicate that the aliens are aware of their approach, and are thus symbols of themselves through alien eyes.

Daniel Petersen — 16 Jul 2012, 15:08 · in reply to Marc Aramini

Yes, yes, yes. Good points all round, Marc. Glad you mentioned 'Tracking Song' - I hadn't even thought of that one in connection to 'Alien Stones'

- interestingly, the two stories gave me a **very** similar feeling (though I riproaringly enjoyed 'Song' unlike being a little bored by 'Stones'): unease and mystification in the face of the non-human. And that's crazily artistically badass how Wolfe achieved a similar effect in a story all about beings by degrees much **closer** to what we know as humanity.

And I agree, 'Houston, 1943' is the most densely and inherently enigmatic story I've read by Wolfe.

And yeah, of course, I see it now: this is practically Wolfe's biggest theme throughout his oeuvre, but mostly in the medium of the fantastical and metaphysical and supernatural rather than 'space aliens'. Although, in the Solar Cycle, I'm not sure how much Wolfe draws a distinction. And maybe that's Wolfe's main point in tracing the career trajectory you describe - away from tech s.f. into a science fantasy and/or magical realism of sorts. I'm not sure he'd even like the term 'real world physics' (beyond its handiness). The metaphysics of his work overall seems to embrace a very 'ontologically haunted' (to borrow one philosopher's phrase) reality.

So maybe what's explored in one sphere in an early work ('space aliens' in 'Alien Stones') is widened out to the universal as his career progresses - the 'whole show' we're swimming in is

just that irreducibly enigmatic - barely decipherable symbols that only show us a new view of ourselves as seen by Others - things like that. (My fave part of 'Alien Stones' as I recall was just that they were floating and jetting around in space suits inside this mega-relic alien craft type deal, cheap-thrills boy that I am, ha!)

On a theological note: I think drawing out this kind of inexplicable universe so consistently and incrementally throughout his work is what makes Wolfe's introduction of divine 'revelation' by which comes 'salvation' so quietly powerful and persuasive for those readers who want to follow out that thread. The Conciliator and Outsider and so on really make *hope* of meaning creep up and sneak in on the otherwise hopelessly indecipherable existence the characters experience.

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In the meantime I have read ahead in Wolfe to about circa 1995, and I will try to address where he takes up this theme. As far as aliens or other

types of beings are concerned, the sheer lack of time that players like Inire and the pandours get in New Sun have a veneer of this inscrutability, but they are ultimately very understandable in terms of their goals and function: a manipulator and drones. "Tracking Song" I think is actually an inversion of this: things which are not human can seem very human when you live among them.

I think the incomprehensibility is much more common with spiritual and fantastic in Wolfe rather than alien things - the story "Houston, 1943" for example is about as bizarre and incomprehensible as anything Wolfe has done (the boy Roddie in the story can't come to terms with what is happening to him, and finally just concludes it is a dream, though there is no indication he will ever wake up). What is so weird about that story is ... Roddie is clearly supposed to be Gene Rodman Wolfe, it's supposed to be our Houston, Gene really had a dog the name of the dog in the story, and there are all these "familiar" characters from literature, but even with ALL THAT real world crossover of time and place, everything that happens is well and truly bizarre.

So the theme of context making higher meaning and a failure to understand it inhibiting valid communion or even self-awareness is ALL throughout Wolfe: Peace, The Haunted Boardinghouse, Mute, A Cabin on the Coast, Sorcerer's House, Short Sun ... but I don't think anywhere else is it quite so concerned with pure outerspace aliens as in this story. I've noticed that Wolfe's 1970s fiction was usually more concrete and closer to real world physics than the short works he was writing in the late 80s to mid 90s - he seemed to take a conscious step away from near future dystopia towards overt fantasy (albeit sometimes still dystopian).

Thanks again for your comments, Daniel. My favorite part of Alien Stones is that the symbols that they work so hard to decipher simply indicate that the aliens are aware of their approach, and are thus symbols of themselves through alien eyes.
