

Short Story 58: The Rubber Bend

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Marc Aramini — 23 Apr 2014, 19:42

The Rubber Bend

"The Rubber Bend" first appeared in

1974 in Universe 5 (according to the copyright page on Storeys from the Old Hotel, anyway ? ? ?). This is a sequel to "Slaves of Silver" from 1971. Gene Wolfe's mysteries are easy because there is a detective there to solve them, so you don't have to!

This one is not serious, but still has many allusions and even personal references, but there are almost no elided details that require a super close reading. SUMMARY: Dr. Westing is sent by his roommate, the Sherlock Holmes based March B Street, to assist the Nero Wolfe derived robot Noel Wide in his capacity as bio-mechanic. Upon arriving, he meets the client of Wide, Alice Dodson, whose "father" has disappeared in the midst of his studies, but whose ghostly figure haunts her at certain times in his laboratory when she goes in to clean it. After threatening the normally housebound Wide with litigation, they journey to the massive Groan building and Dodson's laboratory. March correlates the appearances of the ghost and its relative posture with dates and times, and determines Dodson has created a device to change his perception of space and time such that he now perceives time as a height. Standing up and sitting down thus cast him forward and backwards in time. After utilizing a powerful fan to pluck Dodson's notes into his time, Street stands on his head so that the relative position of his own perceptions allows him to communicate with Dodson. Dodson returns to a lower level at the end to give himself a call and thus stop the entire displacement before it ever occurs.

Comments on this as a sequel to "Slaves of Silver"

In "Slaves of Silver", there was much more attention paid to the set up of declassified humans who actually had to work for a living or accept being euthanized after either a century of life or in the case of asexual reproduction, but this one abandons that rather heavy social backdrop in favor of straight pastiche and light humor. "The Rubber Bend" is perhaps one of Wolfe's easiest and least serious stories in the 1970s, in the midst of his super dense novellas. The social implication of upper and under class which plays out so strongly in stories like "The Hero as Werewolf" is very far off-screen in "The Rubber Bend".

CULTURAL AND LITERARY REFERENCES:

The Wolfe Wiki has done a pretty good job on picking up on the references, but there are still a few more. Most are obvious. MILFORD, PEIRCE, DAMON KNIGHT, ALICE, AND PULP Westing is a member of the Peircian society which argues that Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) is actually Damon Knight (1922-2002) due to the Milford, Pennsylvania and heavy beard association. Peirce's logical pragmatism/pragmaticism would without a doubt appeal to Wolfe: the idea that words, language, and thought do not at all serve to represent reality but must actually accomplish

something in practice. The backdrops of his position are that absolute truth can be discovered independent of opinion, and that argument and thought should follow the scientific method. (This is the same general approach I take to Wolfe's texts, for what it is worth.) Knight was actually from Oregon, but the Milford Writer's Workshops of peer critique operated there until moving to the UK in 1972. In the story, Milford and that portion of the United States are underwater after a disastrous deluge. This Peircian society does seem to echo many of those ridiculous revisionist groups who will maintain that, for example, the Queen wrote Shakespeare's plays rather than some man named William Shakespeare. (The wolfe-wiki notes that this is a parody of the Baconians in particular.) Of course Damon Knight was the editor who re-worked Wolfe's story "Trip, Trap" and thus grew him from a bean. At the 2013 Nebulas, Wolfe commented that originally his design for "Trip Trap" was about as asinine as anyone could imagine, with the two stories running next to each other in columns, and that Knight's redesign could not have been improved upon when he tried.

The scientific oddity that represents Dodson's experiment is based on a quote by Damon Knight "If all four space-time dimensions are equivalent, how is it that we perceive one so differently than the rest?" Dodson's Peircian pragmatic view that ideas which cannot be put into practice have no worth spurred him to experiment with time as a measurable distance, switching in his own perceptions vertical distance and duration.

Lewis C Dodson and Alice are, as is obvious, named after Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson) and his Alice of Wonderland fame.

This pastiche of the pulp magazines like *Amazing* becomes almost cringeworthy at times, as this dialogue shows: "The culture medium [for Wide's mushrooms] is shredded paper pulp mixed with sawdust and horse manure." "Amazing." This fungi is said to be from points as exotic as David Lindsey's *Arcturus* or as homely as Lovecraft's *Yuggoth*.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEIGHT AND

TIME: for whatever reason, the "temporal" sensing organ of the brain and its relative height determine the time that Dr. Dodson will appear. This flitting through the dimensions is perhaps a less confusing examination of the displacement in his Thag stories. The denouement is simply to have Dr. Dodson descend far enough to call himself in the past and avoid the experiment all together — which causes neither paradox nor time anomaly in this nice cozy pastiche universe. I feel that time's perception will play a central part in the novel *Peace* which Gene might have been working on at the same time as this shorter, less dense story. There is also the hotel scene in the novel in which a Weer's aunt seems to switch places temporally and temporarily with a future guest, disturbed by the busy future traffic on the street while that guest calls to complain about the floating candle lights in the room. While it is science fiction, the bulk of the reference are to fantasy and fantasists or famous mystery characters, and at the end Street overtly admits he is in a story written by a man named Wolfe.

THE GROAN BUILDING: no doubt this massive building with thousands of floors references Gormenghast and the stronghold of Titus Groan, who, when he descends into the real world at last, finds that he is not actually in a medieval setting, but transposed into a modern one.

NERO WOLFE STORIES AND RELATIVE TIMELESSNESS Noel Wide is quite clearly based on Rex Stout's rather hefty Nero Wolfe, and the title of the short story adapted from the Stout novel *The Rubber Band*. The reluctance of Wide to shake hands and his girth, as well as insistence on maintaining a rigorous schedule, are directly from Nero Wolfe. Archie Goodwin becomes Arch St. Louis, the cook Fritz becomes the elevator/house cyberpersonality Fritz which responds to voice command, etc. There seems little connection between the plot of that particular novel and this story. Besides the name, there are several attractive things to Gene about Nero: While the

novels of Nero Wolfe by Rex Stout are contemporary with their writing, none of the characters ever age. The brownstone house is a bastion of timelessness and unalterable habit, which Nero Wolfe lords over. He solves all his cases through mental process completely removed from leaving his center of control. I think this "in time but out of time" approach is attractive to Gene Wolfe. Nero Wolfe's vocabulary is also erudite and baroque. In the Stout novels, Wolfe never leaves his house unless something extraordinary prompts his egress. Here is the dialogue that prompts Wide to venture forth: 'Mr. Wide, I've been paying you for a week now, and you haven't gone to look at the ghost yet I want you to go I person. Now. Tonight.' 'Madame, under no circumstances will I undertake to leave my house on business.' 'If you don't I'm going to fire you and hire a lawyer to sue for every dime I've paid you.' 'However, it is only once in a lifetime that a man is privileged to part the curtain that veils the supernatural.' Wide rose from his huge chair. The story does break the wall into a slight metafictional moment at the end: 'There was some correspondence on his desk, and one of the envelopes was addressed to Wolfe.' 'That was intended for the author of this story ?. Don't worry, Wide will forward it to him.'? Overall a simple pastiche, the story bears little resemblance to the majority of Wolfe's heavier output at this time. The subjective/relative perception of time and the relative ability to affect objects with which one interacts is slightly interesting, but there are really no enduring mysteries or unanswered questions in this particular text.