

Short Story 66: Three Fingers

The Urth list — 16 messages, 10 voices, 10 Jun 2014

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/6562>

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Marc Aramini — 10 Jun 2014, 03:28

THREE FINGERS

“Three Fingers” was first published in *New Constellations* in 1976 and is included in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories*.*

SUMMARY:

Michael Moss attempts to push Disney trinkets for a dime to a chubby boy reaching through a school fence, then considers going to 44th street in his size S pea jacket to try to sell his wares. He notes no black “Mickey Mafia” cars following him, then hides from an approaching hearse. A stocky woman named June gives him a ride to the store, and he tries to sell her inscribed Disney photos and celluloid figures. Most of his goods are forged. The store is closed but he gets a ride back near his house on a Triumph Bike from a couple named Harley and Amaryllis.

He goes to eat at White Castle when he sees that the man at the counter has beagle puppy ears rather than human ears, so he goes to the soda fountain across the street to watch him.

When he returns to his house he questions the “woman who [runs] the place” about callers, and in his equipment filled room, once he puts on his home made Mickey Mouse cap, he is accosted by Captain Hook, the Big Bad Wolf, and the Wicked Queen. When he encourages them to take off their masks after accusing them of being conglomerations of historical and mythical figures, they are revealed to be paunchy businesspeople in suits. They attempt to force candy in his mouth and nostrils, a suffocation through a surfeit of sweetness. Most of the disjunction here occurs through the final line, when it is revealed that someone is trying to force antipsychotic medication down his throat with four/three fingers encased in white/red gloves.

THEME:

Here, Wolfe is playing with a few wonderful ideas — the obvious ones that the Disney villains are far more historical and archetypal than their actual surface identity — Captain Hook is every dark captain in history, the Big Bad Wolf a remnant of a line of sinister far more bestial predators going back to the wolf Isengrim, nemesis of Reynard the fox. To Michael Moss, the horror of these characters looms behind their sanitized, cartoon faces. Yet in reality, the corporate world has stripped them of their mythic and historical power and turned them into the means of making a large profit (ironically, something he is trying to do to them on a much smaller scale) — thus, underneath the masks descended from legend we see only corporate abuse — and historical symbols being trademarked as watered down (or sweetened up) narrative property.

DIAMONDS:

Diamonds keep occurring as a description whenever someone reaches out to buy Michael's

goods in the story: "The little boy stretched out a hand, thrusting his chubby arm though the diamond mesh of the playground fence" — Later, when Michael tries to sell the figures in his cigar box to June, she reaches out "plump, diamonded fingers." It seems that everyone who reaches out for his wares is associated with diamonds, though of course the first is merely the shape of the fence. Michael's hands fidget to hide the hole in his jeans. The final image of the story involves a hand forcing medicine down his throat — certainly the medicine is also a poison as advertised for destroying the interesting fantasy world Michael inhabits.

AMBIGUOUS DETAILS:

The overall message that companies like Disney to some degree represent the cut throat consumer nature of profiting off old legends and trademarking them in such a way that ideas which should be intrinsically free are "owned" by unimaginative businessmen does not of course explain the descent into insanity in the last several seconds (nor the disjunction between four/three fingers - but I would like to think that we are counting fingers and not thumbs, and that those administering the para-reserpine to Michael are being viewed through his disjunctive double vision.)

Michael Moss is obsessed with Disney and its characters as well, and perhaps embodies the earlier ideology of Mickey Mouse and Disney before consumerism and business sense created the "surfeit of sweetness" and banality any sanitized vision of archetypes will create. He does seem to regret inflation and his prices are so cheap that it harkens back to the pre-inflation prices extant at the start of the 20th century.

It seems that Michael is trying to make a profit on the Disney images just as much as the corporation is, albeit at a microscopic scale — he relishes the attention he gets from them as something that makes him "important", but he sees the mythic importance of all the characters, and even tries to assume the role of Mickey Mouse by putting on the hat to confront the villains, though he does not prove up to the task.

DATE:

The story is set at a date sufficiently distanced from 1935 such that a stout woman in a mink coat with two sons at Antioch college (ie — not young) can speculate, "I didn't know they had plastic way back then," unaware of celluloid. This might be a 1976 kind of statement, though the prices at which Michael is attempting to sell his goods seems ridiculously cheap to modern eyes, and might even be set well past 1976. At 10 to 85 cents, even with modern inflation, assuming this was the seventies, he is asking for the modern equivalent of perhaps 60 cents to maybe 6 dollars for something that is over 40 years old in mint condition (even though he manufactures them in his room — everything seems counterfeit in this particular story).

THE RESIDENCE OF MOSS:

There is some hint that his "apartment" is a bit more like a hospital ward than a living quarter:

?The woman who ran the place where he lived said, 'Did you have a nice walk, Mr. Moss?' ...

'You wouldn't let them in if they came, would you? I mean even if they knew my name and said they were friends of mine. You wouldn't let them into my room?' The woman smiled, smoothing her white dress with her hands, wanting to be busy again.

Her white dress, wanting to be busy, and her responsibility for refusing to admit people to the room all at least echo a medical set up. (Note that she also fidgets with her hands here — they

come up quite a bit in this story).

He supposedly has a Dremo Moto-Tool to create his miniatures and an injection molding machine filling his room. He puts on his felt cap with Mickey ears made from his father's skull cap to work, and at this point, when he puts on the home made guise of Mickey Mouse, the villains come out.

LITERARY AND CULTURAL ALLUSIONS:

Besides Disney references, we have at least one other to contemporary fiction:

"He thumbed for nearly an hour before a married couple named Harley and Amaryllis gave him a ride back on their Triumph bike" refers to Richard Hall's 1969 story "To Sport with Amaryllis" in which a square fellow named Harley concedes to his wife Amaryllis' free love and progressive desires. It was also published in the Orbit anthologies of Damon Knight.

The title of that story comes from Milton's poem Lycidas, a lament for a drowned friend, which begins:

Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more

Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-sear

I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,

And with forc'd fingers rude,

Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

Bitter constraint and sad occasion dear,

Compels me to disturb your season due:

For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime

Alas! What boots it with uncessant care

To tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade,

And strictly meditate the thankles Muse,

Were it not better don as others use,

to sport with Amaryllis in the shade,

Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise

(That last infirmity of Noble mind)

To scorn delights and live laborious dayes

Interesting in light of its forceful fingers in the opening stanza, and the concept that we do not just take it easy and enjoy life when goaded on by something else that might cost us.

THE PARARESERPINE

Reserpine was once used in the treatment of schizophrenia and hypertension, isolated from *Rauwolfia Serpentina*, the Indian snakeroot, which had been used to treat insanity, fever, and snake bite for centuries in India. One of its side effects can be nightmares and Parkinsonism (could this be the flitting of his hands interrupting his gestures as seen in the car scene with June?)

Para as a prefix could mean many things, including alongside, near, or synthesized. The idea that all of this is a psychotically induced hallucination is certainly possible, especially in the fictional light of Harley and Amaryllis and the businessmen in Disney disguises which resonate with legendary villains and archetypes. The name Michael Moss makes him a more rat like survivor trying to make a profit — in this case a scavenger inspired by the increasingly sanitized Mickey Mouse.

THE DISNEY FIGURES:

Mickey Mouse Club photos for sale include Tommy Kirk and Annette Funicello, and he tries to foist Pinocchio, Geppetto, Stromboli, and Snow White collectibles on people. He forges their signatures on a counter top and decorates the heart joining their names shield like with Ben Ali Gator and Hyacinth Hippo (dancers from Fantasia) and a beribboned sailor cap for a crest (I'm pretty sure that's Donald Duck's hat).

He identifies Hook with pirates like Blackbeard and Barbarosa and Bligh, the Big Bad Wolf as “the wolf of old europe, the wolf that tore the sentries to bits in front of the winter palace at St. Petersburg. The wolf that was killed by the invention of firearms like the great god Pan by the coming of Christ. The wolf people now say never existed, and forget all the stories. You are Baron Isengrim.” (He is referring here to the serf's rebellion and roaming wolves after the death of Peter the Great in 1725 — social upheaval and collapse, the failure of civilization to predation).

The Wicked Queen becomes powerful and cruel women in power like Lucrezia Borgia and Catherine De Medici and even Morgan le Fay, while our thin scavenger selling forged goods puts on his cap and tries to assume the role of Mickey Mouse.

IS THERE A FINGER CHOMP?

The motions of hands throughout are interesting, including the chubby child's hand reaching through the diamond meshed fence, the chubby beringed hand of the woman June reaching for the Snow White replica, and Michael's own: “All his gestures were interrupted by the desertions of his left hand, which made quick trips to draw the torn cloth [leaving his knee exposed] together again.” I have always thought that Moss acts to bite off the finger of the villainous toon/executive, who has both real and mythic identities, thus making the glove both white and red with blood, and accounting for the different number of fingers, though the casual nature that it strokes his face does not seem to support this reading:

“He tried to swallow it before she could get in another, and found that it had become a red jelly bean too, and went down easily. 'What is it?' said the man who had been Captain Hook. 'Synthetic para-reserpine,' said the woman. 'I've had good luck with it on him.' She touched

Michael's face with a white/red rubber-gloved hand that had four/three fingers."

Of course, we also have the odd fact that Mickey Mouse and his crew only seem to have three fingers and one thumb, and this might simply show the transition from his interesting fantasy world of three fingered Disney to banal reality — but note that the RED rubber glove has three fingers, and not, as is typical in Disney, the white one. For this reason, I think the final moment constitutes a pretty severe chomp, and that one way or another Michael Moss doesn't live in reality, though his version of things might be more interesting. Indeed, his violence might be able to make at least one feature of the real world conform to the three fingered schematics of his fantasy. If he is in a hospital all along, then these paunchy businessmen assume one more identity: the nurses and caregivers "tormenting" him after his walk.

RESONANCE WITH OTHER WORKS: I feel that what Wolfe is doing thematically here, taking pop culture, and identifying its mythic roots while at the same time making it all too ordinary, is exactly the kind of thing that happened in "Thag", where Henry Nailer, an ordinary father, is somehow translated into a mythic fairy story and an ordinary man "becomes" Odin. Here, in the imagination of a young boy, these corporate types become figures of legendary villainy behind defanged children's masks.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jun 2014, 03:50 · in reply to Marc Aramini

"Three Fingers" remains one of my favorite Wolfe stories. I am, myself, an immense Disney fan/freak who has gone so far as to spend the money to eat at Club 33 just so I could say I had.

But Wolfe is right, the Disney corporation's protection of its trademarks/copyrights is downright paranoia-inducing.

There was a daycare in Florida that decorated with hand-painted images of Disney characters. Unfortunately, it was on the outside of the building, and when a Disney suit happened to pass by, they received a letter ordering them not only to cease and desist, but to repaint immediately, which, if you know anything about the economics of daycares, was tantamount to bankrupting them.

(There's a happy ending. Someone at Warner heard about it, and WB paid to have the place repainted in Warner Bros. characters.)

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Gerry Quinn — 10 Jun 2014, 12:42 · in reply to Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

On 10/06/2014 04:50, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
But Wolfe is right, the Disney corporation's protection of its trademarks/copyrights is downright paranoia-inducing.

There was a daycare in Florida that decorated with hand-painted images of Disney characters. Unfortunately, it was on the outside of the building, and when a Disney suit happened to pass by, they received a letter ordering them not only to cease and desist, but to repaint immediately, which, if you know anything about the economics of daycares, was tantamount to bankrupting them.

(There's a happy ending. Someone at Warner heard about it, and WB paid to have the place repainted in Warner Bros. characters.)

That said, it wasn't just one daycare centre, it was several in the same city. That may have struck Disney lawyers as more dangerous than a single centre...

- Gerry Quinn

Marc Aramini — 10 Jun 2014, 16:29 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

So do you guys think he bites a finger off at the end? The yellow bonbon becomes a red jelly bean in his mouth, the glove is white/red. Do we not count thumbs as fingers? Any other possible meaning to the title?

On Tue, Jun 10, 2014 at 5:42 AM, Gerry Quinn <gerry at bindweed.com> wrote:

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Marc Aramini — 10 Jun 2014, 16:34 · in reply to Marc Aramini

As far as I can tell, the Wicked Queen of Snow White, Grimeheld, has five digits on each hand and doesn't wear gloves, and is distinct from the villain of Sleeping Beauty, Maleficent. (Though I suspect this story would not deign to separate them symbolically)

Craig Brewer — 12 Jun 2014, 20:08 · in reply to Marc Aramini

I just read Michael Swanwick's *_Stations of the Tides_*, which I've read was intentionally inspired by Fifth Head's style.

Are there other known/acknowledged pieces as closely mirroring Wolfe? (Let's leave out the obvious *_Shadows of the New Sun_*...)

Every time I ask questions like this, I feel like I'm forgetting something obvious.

Craig

David Duffy — 13 Jun 2014, 00:47 · in reply to Craig Brewer

On Fri, 13 Jun 2014, Craig Brewer wrote:

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Are there other known/acknowledged pieces as closely mirroring Wolfe?
(Let's leave out the obvious _Shadows of the New Sun_...)

Writing style? Plotting? Ambience?

Influenced by:

Paul McAuley (Confluence trilogy)
Paul Park (Starbridge Chronicles)

And someone else has made a list:

http://www.freebase.com/user/jfry/default_domain/views/authors_influenced_by_gene_wolfe

Cheers, David Duffy.

Andrew Mason — 14 Jun 2014, 20:45 · follows David Duffy

Neal Stephenson's _Anathem_ is reminiscent of _New Sun_ in a number of ways, so much so that once, having momentarily forgotten the name of its hero, I found myself calling him 'Severian'. It may be that Stephenson is acknowledging this influence in naming a language (not a planet, as some have claimed) 'Orth'.

Michael Thayer — 15 Jun 2014, 02:10 · follows Andrew Mason

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I am a big fan of Anathem, but I just don't see the New Sun parallels/connection -- what specifically do you see as the similarities?
I'm intrigued.

Marc Aramini — 15 Jun 2014, 16:27 · in reply to Michael Thayer

On Sat, Jun 14, 2014 at 7:10 PM, Michael Thayer <michael.o.thayer at gmail.com> wrote:

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Urth Mailing List

To post, write urth at urth.net
Subscription/information: <http://www.urth.net>

Anathem is my least favorite of Stephenson's by a good stretch. I found the metaphysical implications of New Sun far more personally compelling than the "history of philosophy" execution in Anathem, perhaps because the numinous and spiritual was approached from a different contextual standpoint.

Perhaps the big difference between Wolfe and other authors resides in the fact that he is practically trained as an engineer, respects both pulp and classic literature, and still believes in the spiritual and mystical world in a way that many other modern, intelligent writers do not. Thus works obviously inspired by him like Confluence seem extremely secular and "nonmysterious" in comparison when the veneer of plot is stripped away or as the story develops, leaving worldly themes that close off and exhaust mysterious possibilities rather than embrace them. Fantasy is just a genre to play with to authors like John Crowley and even perhaps M John Harrison, and I think Crowley's Aegypt sequence shows that triumph of boring realism in its progression to a very unsatisfying conclusion (a tone clearly in tune with the dominant literary zeitgeist of the 20th and 21st century, unlike some of Wolfe's efforts). Extremely religious works usually wind up being unintellectual propaganda, and Wolfe, in my opinion, avoids this, too. (Of course I am assuming we are not talking about escapism and fluff like, say, superhero movies as a dominant movement in "literature" until fairly recently, though it is certainly alive in the culture right now).

Andrew Mason — 17 Jun 2014, 21:05 · follows Marc Aramini

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Set on an Earth-like planet in the far 'future' (though not as far, nor as blatantly Earth-like)

Lots of unusual words (in Wolfe real words: in Stephenson made-up ones, though not too mysterious if you know Latin; but the effect is similar).

The hero begins in an enclosed community and then goes on a journey.

And, most importantly, the idea of alternative worlds and a choice between them.

Well, it may not add up to much, but Stephenson was rather absurdly accused of plagiarism (with the mistaken claim that the planet is called Orth), so clearly others besides me have noticed a similarity.

As I mentioned a little while ago, Paul Witcover's *The Emperor of All Things* seems to acknowledge a debt to Wolfe, though perhaps a negative one, as the character Wolfe is a villain; (but then, Umberto Eco made Borges a villain, and I don't think that was meant in a wholly hostile way).

>

Antonin Scriabin — 17 Jun 2014, 21:17 · in reply to Andrew Mason

Anathem didn't do it for me, but I agree that the New Sun plagiarism charges are silly.

On Jun 17, 2014 5:05 PM, "Andrew Mason" <andrew.mason53 at gmail.com> wrote:

Michael Thayer wrote:

I am a big fan of Anathem, but I just don't see the New Sun parallels/connection -- what specifically do you see as the similarities? I'm intrigued.

Set on an Earth-like planet in the far 'future' (though not as far, nor as blatantly Earth-like)

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And, most importantly, the idea of alternative worlds and a choice between them.

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dunnaaa . — 21 Jun 2014, 01:01 · in reply to Andrew Mason

The world-building is very similar - we are aware that there is a lot going on out there, but we are only teased brief details which let us attempt to construct the larger picture.

I definitely got a BotNS vibe off of Anathem - mostly for this reason. I think the difference lies in the explanations that we are given by the authors - for instance, I would have been perfectly happy reading the first half of Anathem and then leaving it be, with all my questions unanswered, but the possibilities I could create still out there. Whereas with Wolfe, I am much happier with the world and the answers that he provides.

So I guess I'm saying that Wolfe is the better writer, but I can definitely get that Anathem evokes some of the feelings that I got when reading BotNS.

Cheers,
Sean

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Antonin Scriabin — 21 Jun 2014, 03:26 · in reply to dunnaaa .

That was one of my main problems with Anathem. Once the main Avout goes out into the world, it isn't all that interesting. Whereas Urth is fascinating, alien, and gets more intriguing by the page. Also, I am on my phone and it wanted to autocorrect Urth to Utah. Utah is also interesting. Thanks phone.

On Jun 20, 2014 9:01 PM, "dunnaaa ." <bahamut0 at gmail.com> wrote:
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Robert Pirkola — 22 Jun 2014, 19:00 · follows Marc Aramini

I looked around at some possible suspects for an evil queen with red gloves and three fingers but also came up empty. I re-read Snow White and Briar Rose from Grimm's. There is no mention of handwear for the Evil Queen in Snow White and Maleficent is nowhere to be found in Briar Rose. The Disney cartoon versions of The Evil Queen, Maleficent, and The Queen of Hearts all have four fingers and a thumb and no red gloves. I think your belief that the chomp occurred is well founded because of this and makes a lot of sense except for what you have already pointed out: the calm manner in which the woman who is supposed to have just lost a digit is reacting. But if the syntactical sequence of the words in the final sentence is read as describing the temporal sequence of events, it could be that the chomp occurs after she casually touches his face and the gloved hand changes from white with four fingers to red with three within the space of the sentence. Therefore, the reaction would occur beyond the final word of the story, in the head of the reader. "Youch!

Craig Brewer — 27 Jun 2014, 01:30 · in reply to dunnaaa .

I unintentionally answered my own question. Well, in a sense: I just finished Caitlin Kiernan's *The Drowning Girl*, and (although I have no idea if it was intentionally influenced by Wolfe), it certainly seems to fit. There are two narratives being given us at once from the pov of a single admittedly "insane" narrator. And both can't possibly be true (or "factual," as she says), although both are, she insists, true. So "unreliable" narrator, explicit plots that obviously aren't the "real" story, werewolves and ghosts that might not be, etc.

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