

Short Stories 96 and 97: Date Due and Death of the Island Doctor

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 17 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 17 Aug 2014, 17:05

The story for Date Due appeared in the introduction to *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days* in 1981 and "The Death of the Island Doctor" first appeared in *The Wolfe Archipelago* in 1983, collected in *Storeys from the Old Hotel*.

SUMMARY:

"Date Due"

A student finds a secret exit from the library and manages to steal several books a day until the volumes consume his household. Considering ways to get rid of them, one Saturday he returns home to find the librarian in his own chair, where she tells him "This branch closes in five minutes." He is cast out until Monday morning, a "wanderer on the Earth".

"The Death of the Island Doctor"

The old tenured professor, Dr. Insula, decides to teach a seminar on islands ("including isles, atolls, islets, holms, eyots, archipelagos, and some of the larger reefs — but definitely not peninsulas"). The chancellor lists the seminar as "Not For Credit", and consequently no one signs up for six years. Eventually, after 12 regular and 6 summer semesters of inquiries by Dr. Insula to the registrar, "there came a time, not in fall but rather in that dreary tag-end of summer when — the stores have Halloween cards and the first subtly threatening Christmas ornaments [are] on display, when she could bear it no longer." Thinking that mistakes happen all the time, she assigns a credit to the class for the seventh year. A male and female enroll. She tells them that it will be held at Dr. Insula's house.

When they arrive, his lesson involves all manner of free word associations, all tied to islands, both mythical and real. Eventually, after a slight discourse on the subjective nature of history from the young man and Dr. Insula's assertion that in that case his history is just as valid as any other, he sends the boy and girl out to seek an island where they will find something magical. They find the small island and explore it, but believe they have found no magic.

When they return the following week, the neighbor tells them, "He passed on a week ago yesterday — It was such a shame. He'd come out to talk to me that morning, and he was so happy because he was going to meet with his students the next day." The young woman intuitively understands that they found Dr. Insula sitting in his boat, and only later, (when it was time for the long, long vacation that stretches from the week before Christmas to the beginning of the new semester in January, and that they would have to separate for nearly a month) that they discovered Dr. Insula had not been mistaken about the island after all.

COMMENTARY:

The earliest recorded documents, and even the oral tradition, were meant to preserve culture, history, even religion. Early Judaic writings combined their histories with a rigid set of rules and punishments as well. Aristotle's categorizations are in part scientific texts, though they are now taught in literature classes. This holistic purpose to literature eventually fragmented, but Dr. Insula, "who had been out to pasture so long that no one could remember anymore what department he had once headed", harkens back to the time when poetry, history, and the mystical were still all under the province of literature, part and parcel of the exploration of the human condition. "Dr. Insula himself said that in his time [History and Literature] had been the same department, but all the other professors knew that could not be true."

Here, the fabulous island that Dr. Insula (whose name means island) teaches the students about is yet another storied part of the total human condition — that of love, togetherness, and the new life of Spring that follows the Fall (here neatly mirrored by the Fall and Spring semesters at the college) .

In the previous Archipelago stories, isolation and loneliness, sometimes assuaged through literature, were equated with the islands of the title. Here, the island is one two people create in a communion, completing and fulfilling the promise of the human life cycle, creating their own magical place completely separate from the external world, an island that belongs to them exclusively in their love.

All of Dr. Insula's talk involves free word association with islands, such as ruminating that his tea was once called Ceylon tea (which in 1972 became Sri Lanka, but he presents the Arabic and Greek names for the island as well.) His Scotch bread even serves as a lecture on the British Isles that leads to poetry and beyond. Talk of Thule leads to Valiant, King Arthur, Avalon, and even the Holy Grail. However, the most obvious inspiration for the story, that of Nikos Kazantzaki's **Zorba the Greek**, soon comes up, when Dr. Insula says, "To cleave that sea in the gentle autumnal season, murmuring the name of each islet, is to my mind the joy most apt to transport the heart of man to paradise." The students do not recognize its source, the story of an educated man who realizes that his books and papers are not all the wisdom in the world, much of which he absorbs from the workman Zorba.

When Dr. Insula tries to pass off Malory's reputed epitaph for King Arthur as valid history, the young man says, "No one writes true history" because "that [was] what they had taught him in school."

The subjective nature of history prompts Dr. Insula to teach them that myths and fiction are just as important in their subjectivity. He asks, "Why is it that people at all times and in all places have considered islands unique and uniquely magical" Can either of you tell me? When they cannot respond, he asks if they have a boat, and the young man mentions that he has an aluminum canoe on top of his Toyota (from the island of Japan, of course).

The story for the introduction in Wolfe's **Book of Days**, which occurs in the same universe(ity), deals with an obsessive love of literature, but there is little to no overlap save for the rather mystical nature of the knowledge and obsession for books and stories running through both tales.

As the conclusion to Wolfe's Island stories, this one serves to finally grant a bittersweet ending — the cycle of life continues and two people come together to create their own island. The isolation is no longer so tragic, for Spring follows Autumn, and those who die alone can still see

the promise of a fertile tomorrow as their wisdom is passed on.

His death in the boat highlights how magical the human condition can be, where myth, history, science, and love all come together. While Dr. Insula is dead, in a way he can never die.

LITERARY ALLUSIONS

While perhaps the most important literary allusion to never named, when Dr. Insula quotes *Zorba the Greek, *most of the allusions also involve in some manner, perhaps obliquely, the seasonal passage of Autumn, when the old leaves fall — and here, in the final Fall semester of his life, Dr. Insula paves the way for a new Spring.

Scotch Braid summons Thomson's poem "Autumn", which deals with the migration of sea fowl in the Hebrides, and gives Dr. Insula a way to tie in a place that sounds mythological (Thule) with its historical cognate (Iceland).

Dr. Insula's claim that Arthur's coffin was discovered in Somerset in 1191 plays with Mallory's *La Morte D'Arthur*. Yet some men say in many parts of England that King Arthur is not dead, but had by the will of our Lord Jesu into another place... many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse: Hic jacet Arthurus, Rex quondam, Rex que futurus*." *(*Le Morte d'Arthur* 21:7) This too ties in with the pattern of eternal death and rebirth in an almost seasonal manner.

For Dr. Insula, everything dealing with islands, since all history is subjective, becomes part and parcel of his knowledge, so mentioning the True History of Lucian of Samosata can lead to Greek myth, such as Apollo's birth on Delos, to Christian lore, where St. John beheld the Apocalypse, to the fictional Phraxos of John Fowle's *The Magus*. All contain something of value to Dr. Insula.

When he sends them to find the island, he promises to show them Atlantis, High Brasail, and Utopia and quotes Thoreau's "The Atlantides", dealing with the mythic:

Our fabled shores none ever reach,
No mariner has found our beach,
Scarcely our mirage is seen,
And neighbouring waves of floating green,
Yet still the oldest charts contain
Some dotted outline of our main.

This poem shows of the existence on maps of something which is mythical and "unreal", but still somehow charted, as the intangible magic of the islands and existence can still be outlined.

His final quotation is from Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses",

?The deep

Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,

?Tis not too late to seek a newer world

Push off ?

? for my purpose holds

To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths

Of all the western stars, until I die.

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;

It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,

And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.

Of course this poem ends with the rather famous final lines, "Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." Here Dr. Insula dwells on death and the possibility of being swallowed in the great gulf of nothingness, or the possibility that once again the heroic trappings of youth and vitality will be found on the Happy Isles. This good-bye to the young woman tells her all she needs to surmise that he is going on a journey into the unknown symbolized by those great waters, seeking his own island.

DATE DUE

While they are both set in the same university, these stories show fairly opposite end results of the love of stories and literature. The student who takes all those books becomes a victim of his own hobby, obsessively taking something and hoarding it, when what it represents should be shared.

His sin here, rather than mere avarice, is probably the sequestering of knowledge. He eventually realizes that he must get rid of all those books, and the best lines involve his thought processes: "Even as he sat thinking how he might free himself from his thousands of stolen volumes, he feared they might fall and crush him — He considered setting fire to the building in which he lived, but he felt sure he would lose many valuable possessions now forgotten and buried under the books. — Instead of accepting a lucrative offer from a major corporation," he would open a book store. He even considers the best way to attract shoplifters.

Eventually the library reclaims its space, and the ending line, that "he became a homeless wanderer on the face of the earth until 9:30 Monday morning" does not quite tell us whether he is ever able to reclaim his apartment from the literal library that has claimed his existence.

The concealed door to the library is covered by holly, which could be used at entrances to detain evil spirits on the threshold.

Date Due shows a character slowly come to hate the books he so obsessively collects and traps in his room, creating a prison, while the knowledge which Dr. Insula has hoarded serves a far more beautiful and fruitful purpose — opening up to the vastness of reality rather than cluttering up a crowded room.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS:

Why is the door to the library in “Date Due” hidden behind fifty year old Serbian books?

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

As the conclusion to Wolfe’s Island stories, he finally overturns the solitary loneliness and tragedy of the earlier works and shows how two people can create their own magical island. While it is fantasy, there is a logical consistency and rigor to it. Wolfe says in his afterword in *The Best of Gene Wolfe*: “I love this story — this is a special favorite — because it so resolutely refuses to be like other stories. It is its own wistful self, always, weeping as it smiles. I hope you love it, too.”