

Short Story 218*: Planetarium in Orbit

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 16:34

#Planetarium in Orbit

"Planetarium in Orbit" first appeared as part of the Chicago Worldcon Bid for 2012 pulp fiction series in an August 2009 pamphlet, with the title
Constipating Science Fiction on the cover.

##Summary

The villainous Doctor Death Vice, Ph.D. in mad science, narrates this pulpy parody. He proclaims that he is the master of the Lakemich Monster and the man who stole Mars.

The police have never brought me to justice and they never will. My scientific knowledge stands at eight-hundred ninety five, highest in the known universe. My cruelty at nine hundred and ten. That puts me third, but that is clearly an error; a better reckoning would advance me two grades. When I have Elaine Ecdysiast in my grasp ...

His plot involves the precept that the essential essence of every planet is stored in the planetarium in the lake. Having the essence of Earth in his hands from the planetarium would, according to his scheme, make Dr. D. Vice the Master of the World. With his twenty subordinates, he drives to the planetarium and positions their stolen cars to block access to the planetarium, also starting fires to prevent access.

When he enters the building, "a burst of fire from our submachine guns brought new galaxies into existence and silenced the otherwise disordered audience."

He introduces himself and proclaims that it is mad science which humankind requires, indicating that his black and scarlet-lined cloak was donned as a laureate of that field.

A youthful blond asks if she can feel the fabric, and Dr. Vice states, "I recognized her at once. It was whatshername, Brick Somethingorother's girlfriend."

He explains his plot, indicating that this model of the solar system has a sun far too small and planets far too close, amongst other errors.

Brick shows up saying, "I betcha forget her name, Doc. My dear is whatcha always calls her when ya can't think of her real name. ... Her real name's ... uh ... Elaine. Only I can't never remember the last one." She declares it is Ecdysiast, further commenting that it is Greek.

The Doctor responds, "I know her name as well as I know yours, Brick Somethingorother."

Elaine declares that she and Brick represent Balance: "The universe tends toward balance in all things; if it didn't it would've flown to pieces long ago. Snow White's pretty, so the dwarfs are funny. All that stuff." She claims that the universe kicks in by providing Brick and herself to foil

his scheme.

The Doctor declares that probes have been sent to correct the model in the planetarium as far as Kleptos (punning on thievery), recording the essential essence of the sun and its planets "plus that of Luna, Deimos, Phobos, [the moons of Mars] and all the other pieces of rock with lovely names. The spheres you see are these recordings. Possessing the essential nature of the planets themselves."

Elaine says that in "the higher Platonian universe ... this really is the solar system. Isn't that cool?"

The doctor states that he will pluck Earth from its orbit. He hesitates, "for two point four seconds only ... Two point four five, perhaps, but not more than that. ... a slight confusion had overtaken me. Red or blue? Blue or red?"

He asks Elaine which is which, and she replies, "I'm happy to help ... Earth is the blue one, Doctor D. ... The sun is in the middle and we're three doors down. ... Here's Mercury, number one. This is Venus - I just love her! - number two. And the third one is us, Earth. Terra was her maiden name, but she's Earth now."

Dr. D declares it a clumsy deception, grabbing the red planet. Elaine gasps and goes pale, saying "I failed to take your diabolical cunning into account, Doctor. It's hanging out with Brick so much. I get to thinking all you men are, well, you understand."

"He's not near as strong as me," Brick declares imploring the Doctor to put it back as he "levels a finger somewhat thinner than his skull" at his nemesis.

The lights go out, for the fires the Doctor set outside to block entrance to the planetarium have burned through "Commonwealth Edison's high-tension lines."

In the dark, Brick takes out the Doctor's henchmen as Elaine narrates, noting most of them as "cute" and identifying them by the weapons they held.

Having mastered ventriloquism, the Doctor casts his voice a different direction to distract Brick and makes his escape, boarding his speedboats. He gloats that he has stolen Mars:

Oh, yes, I realized it was Mars as soon as I searched it thoroughly without finding either Paris or Chicago. The canals were another giveaway. Mars ... Elaine had known no better than I!

And yet Mars offers certain advantages. He is the god of war, and in conjunction with Saturn... In the end I was not displeased.

But that was at the end. I was indeed displeased when I saw Brick and Elaine commandeer the last of my boats. I could still blast the planetarium into orbit, as I did forthwith, but those two had escaped it.

Doctor Death is a bit disappointed at how poorly the planetarium holds together, but "Even so, the fine powdering of human beings that surrounded the wreckage- many in bright sumer attire, and others dyed in pleasing shades by their own blood - made a stirring sight."

Elaine and Brick give chase on the lake, and the Doctor summons the Lakemich Monster.

It rose, water cascading from its huge head as it does when at last a fat woman quits her bath. Stinking mud and great streamers of water weeds clung to its head and neck; but as they fell away its iridescent scales shone in the afternoon sunlight, each as large as many a satellite dish:

cerise and aureate and heliotrope; damask, are, and sapphire, scales that formed a pattern more complex and more lovely than that upon the back of any serpent.

Its cavernous mouth gapped wide, displaying discolored fangs as long as the legs of any center the Bulls have ever boasted. My breast swelled with pride as I watched its jaws close upon Brick Somethingorother. Never again,

I told myself. Never would I be troubled by him again!

Alas, it spit him out.

##Commentary

A very slight work, it was commissioned as part of a series for the Chicago Worldcon Bid for 2012, with all of the contributors using the themes of "pulp" SF and Fantasy. Ten "bidzines" were produced featuring Chicago-related authors. All of the stories shared a few features: the deceptively intelligent and talkative heroine was named Elaine Ecdysiast (whose last name implies a pole dancer or stripper), the villain was Dr. D. Vice (though his first name changed in every tale), and the hero had the initials B.S. (hmmm). The short vignettes also featured some cameo or fact of Chicago landscape or tradition, such as Wriggley Field or the Chicago Art Museum. Bogus titles for the magazines besides *Constipating Science Fiction* included *Contemptuous Science Fiction* (with a story by William Shunn) or *Confounding SF* (with a story by Steven H Silver). Other authors included Frederik Pohl, Matthew Stover, Mike Resnick, and Phyllis Eisenstein. Several of the other stories are available online at <http://www.chicon.org/bid/pulps-online.html>. Chicago was in fact successful in its bid to have the 70th World Science Fiction Convention, called Chicon 7.

The themes at work are fairly obvious, as the exploration of pulp as brainless adventure is slightly emphasized: a hair-brained scheme, a Ph.D. with the highest scientific knowledge in the world who thinks Earth is the fourth planet from the Sun, and a heroine who waxes lyrical about balance (the specialty of the pole dancer, after all) all contribute to the pulpy feel. The Lake Michigan Monster is a "real" story of the unexplained of a snake like creature which lives in Lake Michigan, comparable to the hype surrounding the Loch Ness Monster (though of course with a lesser reputation.) The planetarium in question is no doubt the Adler Planetarium founded in 1930 located on the northeast tip of Northerly Island on Lake Michigan. It has been declared a National Historic Landmark.

The only indication that Wolfe is definitely the author, besides naming his narrator-antagonist Doctor Death, involves the Platonic nature of representation and ideality explained by Elaine Ecdysiast: the planets somehow contain the essence of the things that they represent. This has been explored in Wolfe's fiction even as early as "The House of Ancestors" - the essence and even function of something is symbolically contained in a physical representation of it. Of course there is also the irony of Elaine, with her suggestive last name, mentioning platonic idealsThe tendency to make all of the characters ironically ignorant is also probably a clue to Wolfe's identity as author.

When Dr. Death talks about Mars in conjunction with Saturn, in astrology this refers to a great determination to overcome all obstacles and tenaciously persevere. Saturn can represent boundaries, organization, and work ethic, while Mars is associated with soldiering, fighting, and activity (but can also be associated with constructive forces). The conjunction of Mars and Saturn is commonly ascribed to Engineers and people with technological savvy (and of course, the symbol of the God Mars is the wolf).

##Unanswered questions

Does Elaine actually try to mislead the Doctor, as he believes? She does go pale when he plucks out the representation of Mars, commenting that he is even more diabolical than she planned, but all of her other explanations for the location of the Earth are of course sound.

##Connection with other works

This is the light hearted Wolfe of parody, relying on puns and irony. This piece is closest to short works such as "A Visit from His Confidant" and "The Lithosphere Whale". While he has named his Dr. D. Vice character Doctor Death, all of the characters in the Pulp series used had to use the D. initial for the first name of the villainous doctor.

##Resources

- "The Pulps - Online Issues." Chicago 2012 Worldcon Bid. March 2010. Web. 20 April 2015.
<http://www.chicon.org/bid/pulps-online.html>