

Short Story 221*: The Lithosphere Whale

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 22 Apr 2015

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 16:43

THE LITHOSPHERE WHALE

As part of the Creature Coral, "The Lithosphere Whale" was Wolfe's entry in the Wofford College's 2012 shared world. It appeared only online.

Here is the entry in its entirety:

The lithosphere whale (*Physeter macrocephalus borboros*) is more commonly known as the earth whale or the wrong whale. During the great days of whaling in the 19th Century it was called the cachalittle or mobydirty.

Lithosphere whales may be divided as follows: blubber, whale leather, baleen, spermaceti, petroleum, and fossil amber. These are the only cetaceans known to yield the final valuable commodity. Individuals are commonly solitary, wandering the terrestrial crust in search of food, although pods are occasionally reported as causing earthquakes. Large bulls may dive to a depth of three (or even four) diamond mines. They are air breathers and must surface to breathe once or twice a fortnight. By day, their exhaled breath is often visible for a considerable distance; when seen, the exhalations of these whales are commonly termed "dirt devils." In the stillness of night they are heard as long whailings. The superstitious belief that they seek to attract railroad trains for reproductive purposes has little basis in fact.

Diet consists principally of soil squids (q.v.), although coal miners and bomb-shelter residents are taken as well. Calves are said to dine on earthworms, this by filling their mouths with rich soil and forcing it out between their teeth, the worms being retained.

COMMENTARY:

This collaborative creative world was devised in conjunction with Wofford College's 2012 summer writing program. Wolfe's involvement probably stems from his daughter Theresa Goulding's position as editor and compiler of the short stories, alongside figures such as Michael Moorcock, Patrick Rothfuss, the Vandermeers, Lavie Tidhar, and other fabulists of some renown. The overall theme seems to be simply fabulous creatures, most ecologically tied to the environment (such as the lithosphere or the stratosphere). The majority are simply absurd creature entries. There is a large somewhat interactive drawing of the creatures which can be found below.

Wolfe's clearly relies on some of the whaling details from Melville's **Moby Dick,** and takes the classification scheme as a serious blending of the deep terrain and a creature, since types include petroleum and fossil amber. It fictionalizes the dusty exhalation of the beast as a "dirt devil" and borders on absurdity as well with the reproductive talk of railroad trains. Its passive digestion of strained earth resembles the manner in which a real whale would simply passively sift through swallowed water for nutrients. *Physeter Macrcephalus* is indeed the Sperm Whale,

and borboros could refer to borborygmos, or loud intestinal sounds audible externally that can precede blockage or distension. Lithosphere is the hard outer layer of the earth and is composed of the Greek element lithos, meaning rock. Another name for the sperm whale is the cachalot, from the Spanish and Portuguese for root word meaning “big head”, and Wolfe puns on this by calling the Lithosphere Whale the cachalittle. Besides the clear influence of Melville on the entry and a possible allusion to Jules Verne, it is a lighthearted romp with little relationship to most of Wolfe’s other fiction.

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

Wolfe’s contributions to a shared universe can be counted easily on one hand. One foray can be found in the two stories set in the shared world of Liavek which bookend **Storeys from the Old Hotel** and the miscellaneous stories which might blend into the Cthulhu Mythos of Lovecraft. It is interesting to see so many big Fantasy names under the auspice of one program. While some of the entries are related to each other, the majority of them are stand-alone miniature faux encyclopedic treatments. While it is brief and rather uninvolved, it bears a spiritual relationship to works such as **A Walking Tour of the Shambles** and **Bibliomen** its encyclopedic approach.

RESOURCES

Wolfe, Gene. “The Lithosphere Whale.” *Shared Worlds*. Wofford College. 2012. Web. 22 April 2015. <https://www.wofford.edu/sharedworlds/critters/byauthor.html#gwolfe>