

VRT's Mother - for sure.

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 29 May 1998

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Tony Ellis — 29 May 1998, 11:57

I wrote:

Now have a crack at my theory, Robert. I say that we meet - well, almost meet - VRT's mother. She's the prisoner in the next cell.

Alga wrote:

FWIW, I too have had this thought, fleetingly.

Robert Borski wrote:

This is an interesting theory and one I've never considered before, but I'd like to see something that supports it from text.

The letter from the authorities at Port-Mimizon states that the prisoner is "an illiterate woman who is a habitual petty thief". This is on the penultimate page of the novel. Why tell us this at all, and why now, unless we are meant to read something into it? And one simple reading is that this woman is Annese: with their lack of manual skills they are doomed to a subsistence existence as beggars and thieves. She certainly isn't a plant, as Robert suggests, or the letter would have identified her as such as it does prisoner #47.

...If true, it would be highly ironic, but also highly coincidental.

Um, this -is- a Gene Wolfe story we are talking about <g>. There are as many coincidences in his books as in a Dickens novel. When are his characters not bumping into each other in the most unlikely places, or turning up just at the right moment, or fishing their own grandmothers out of lakes?

Having said that, a lot of details you regard as so unlikely really aren't:

How is it she's arrested and jailed in a prison that mainly seems to confine political prisoners...

Because it's a prison for ordinary criminals too. The first thing #47 asks VRT is "are you criminal or political?"

...and is placed with access to her son, a suspected spy/murderer?

Because the authorities have no reason to think that this is VRT's mother.

Why would the military government of Sainte Croix even waste time arresting mendicants as opposed to letting them fester in the streets or disappearing them?

Because she's not a mendicant. She's a thief.

Is it even likely she's on Sainte Croix--despite her wishes to go there what resources did she have, and wouldn't these same resources, if they were personal or sexual, avail her after she arrived? { I also maintain she'd be the first abo ever to make such a journey. }

Well, VRT certainly thinks it's possible: "there seemed to be some reason to think, at Roncevaux, that she had come here." We don't know what that reason was, but we know that he was at Roncevaux for a year, long enough to find out plenty. If he thinks it's possible, that should be good enough for us. As for her "resources" securing her a comfortable existence when she got to Sainte Croix, why should they, when the best she could manage on Saint Anne was Trenchard? VRT specifically tells us how ill-equipped she was to thrive in human society: "She knew nothing, nothing... She did not think it wrong to steal... if she had eaten she wanted nothing." [66 pages in, my copy of VRT]

But here's the real meat of my theory:

I count five different passages in the story where the "madman" tapping in the next cell is mentioned. One might be regarded as local colour, but five? When the fifth springs the revelation that the prisoner was a woman all along?

And two of those five passages tells us something special indeed. Before I quote them, here's a little background information:

"...explorers farther south are supposed to have reported signal drumming... by the Annese. ...like all primitives they would presumably have been imitating, with the sound of their blows, their own speech
- 'talking drums.'" [page 5 of my VRT].

Now why prime us with that information, I wonder? Could it be connected to what we're told much later on?

Quote one:

"The prisoner next to me knew I was back, too, and began tapping and scraping on the walls in the old way... the sounds are so various I think sometimes he must be trying to talk with his noises." [76 pages further on]

Hmmm.... could our illiterate Annese lady be trying to get in contact? And if so, and if this was VRT's mother, might not there be one sequence of sounds he might just recognise?

Quote two:

"I listened to the madman on my left until it almost seemed to me that among his idiot scratching and scrapings I could hear my own name." [32 pages in]

Charles Dye — 29 May 1998, 17:35 · follows Tony Ellis

tony.ellis at futurenet.co.uk (Tony Ellis) writes:

Quote two:

"I listened to the madman on my left until it almost seemed to me that among his idiot scratching and scrapings I could hear my own name." [32 pages in]

Wow! Color me convinced! I never, never would have caught this myself

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