

Roy Trenchard, Abo

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 04 Jun 1998

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Robert Borski — 04 Jun 1998, 01:10

Now that I've had my bit of fun, it's time I finished the last of my major essays about FIFTH HEAD.

This one will attempt to prove that Roy Trenchard, the beggar huckster father of VRT, is not human, as everyone in the novel assumes, but a full-blooded abo.

I'm going to do this differently than I normally do and use a semitemporal approach. Certain assumptions will be made immediately at the start, but I hope that you will come less to question them once you've completed the entire piece.

PM = Annese years preceeding the arrival of Dr. Marsch from Earth at the Roncevaux starport (1 year Annese= 1.3-1.4 years Terran.)

-17PM In the back of beyond, a young woman of the Free People becomes pregnant. She and the child's father debate whether they should stay in the Annese outback where winters are harsh and half of all children die, or attempt to find surroundings more conducive to survival. Perhaps additional matters weigh in on their decision. Since there is evidence to suggest that the father-to-be is a Wetlander--i.e., of a rival abo group--he and the woman he's impregnated may not have been welcome by either group (the Montague-Capulet scenario). Size and resource limitations may have also played a part in the decision (the Donner's Pass scenario); Annese groups in the wild seldom number more than 10 people, with an additional restriction on males of fighting size (3-4), and so this might have placed a burden on the survival of the overall group.

For whatever reasons the young couple decides to do something many other of the Annese have done over the past two hundred years: they decide to pass as humans. It's easy enough to do; all you have to do is master their vocal patterns and avoid situations which demonstrate your lack of manual dexterity (a central conceit of the novel and undeniably a given).

Christening himself Roy Trenchard, the man and his pregnant girlfriend go to Roncevaux, a sea-and-starport. Here Roy will attempt to earn a living as a fisherman; while unable to work with tools, the Wetlanders are more than capable, we are told, of manipulating nets woven from rawhide or vegetable fiber (this same ability will later be seen in Victor, who is adept with knots).

Before they take up residence, however, the Trenchards anthropomorphize. Mom takes on a more traditional seductress form (Eve or Three Faces, which is no doubt meant to recall the movie, since Three Faces of Eve is about multiple personality and Victor's mother is allegedly an actress), keeping her native large green eyes, but Roy, thinking it perhaps better to allay suspicions (abo passers are probably more tolerated in cosmopolitan Roncevaux than anywhere else; still, it's wise to know your place) opts for eyes "little and blue."

[There is a parallel to this with the carabao-thing Marsch shoots, but which doesn't die right away, prolonging its mortal coil shuffling until mid-morph; hence its double-pupiled eyes, the surmised nictitating effect speculated upon by Marsch being totally bogus.]

[We must also note that Victor's tiny blue eyes adumbrate where the former light of his eyes will wind up by story's end; i.e., at that other little blue place in the sky, Sainte Croix.]

To better fit in with societal mores Roy marries Eve in a ceremony at Sainte Madeleine. The marriage may also provide them with documentage akin to baptismal certificates.

-16 PM Victor Roy Trenchard is born.

Things appear to go well for the young couple and child during the next year. Roy is able to make a decent enough living. Eve stays home with little Victor, her darling green-eyed boy.

-15 PM Here occurs the rowboat scene recalled by Victor from his citadel cell. Earlier he explains how powerfully-subject to recall all his memories are, even when they've pre-dated any foundation he lacked for understanding them.

Also please note what I've asterisked--they're important.

"...but the odd thing about my dream was that *I knew everything that I was to learn later,* and I looked at my father, who seemed a red-bearded giant, and *knew what would happen to his hands so that he could no longer follow his trade.* My mother--yes, I am sure it was she, though *I have never understood how one of the Free People could bear a child to my father*--had been buttoned into her yellow dress by him..." (p. 216)

Unbeknownst to the idyllic couple, however, much trouble has been brewing, especially for abos who do not know their place.

Roy, after Marsch arrives <PM =0>, provides us with hints of its nature:

"Now you say, 'where are they?' but would they be wise to show themselves? Once all this world of Sainte Anne was theirs. A farmer thinks: 'Suppose they are men like me after all? That Dupont, he is a clever lawyer. What if they engage him, eh? What if he spoke to the judge--the judge who has no French and hates us--and said, This man you call abo has nothing, but Augier's farm was his family's--you make Augier show us the bill of sale?'" (p.192)

Two things are important to note here.

All the records involving bill of sales and other documentage have gone up in smoke when St-Dizier, the capital of Sainte Anne, was "fused" in the war. (I'm speculating laser armaments rather than nuclear; the former we see in a military craft patrolling Frenchman's Landing. It's also here, when Victor starts to wave at the craft, his father yells him, saying "Faitez attention. *You are supposed to be* Francais." In the actual passage the *words are missing because Marsch does not comprehend French, but given the nature of Roy's "the judge hates us French" riff, it is not overly difficult to imagine what he might be saying. It's also stated during Marsch/VRT's interrogations on Sainte Croix that the French hate the government of Sainte Anne, so not waving is important to their cover.

So what might we assume from these new facts? That perhaps some uppity Rosa Parks type abo decided to take such a case as Roy outlines to court? Perhaps Rosa Abo even wins. Horrors,

it's not bad enough the French have lost the war and have no representation in the government. Now they want to take our land from us too. (South Africa comes to mind here as a parallel). What are we going to go?

Let's kill all of the abos we can find.

And they do, either covertly a la the Klu Klux Klan or with the government's full cooperation. It doesn't matter.

A slaughter or series of slaughters takes place at a ford Dr. Hagsmith calls Running Blood. Only later do we learn the French name for the river (Rougette, 'rosy') as well as its even more telling abo name: End of Days. Both English and abo names omniously invoke images of slaughter and genocide.

[The account of Mr.D on p. 147 dates the Running Blood incident back 15 years, which would mean Victor was still only one year old. Hence my dating.]

And how do the French know that whoever attempts to ford the Rougette might not be human since shape-shifted abos appear indistinguishable from the genuine article?

According to Dr. Hagsmith everyone who comes to the ford--it is probably a major crossing area for both human and abo, and probably near abo sacred sites or required crossing to get there--must pass the Shovel Test.

If the challenged forder can dig with it, he/she's human. If he/she can't, they're not, because abos don't have the manual dexterity: in other words, it's au revoir, a deadly litmus.

No big deal, though. The abos aren't people, they're magical animals.

But what if there are abos in our beloved cities, ask the blood-crazed, land-loving killers. We must devise ways of ridding them too.

So lists are drawn up. Anyone with green eyes is immediately suspect. Anyone with known abo skills like fishing is also suspect. Perhaps only men are questioned, the French thinking if we kill all the stallions, we won't have to worry about the mares and foals.

Roncevaux being a port to livestock breeders, its peoples are used to screams of dispatched animals and blood in the streets.

Roy, for whatever reasons, can't get out of town. Either he's heard the word too late or the baby's sick or the only avenues of escape they have are all patrolled by the shovel-wielding French.

There is only one way he can beat the test.

He has to show a reason why he can't handle the shovel or perhaps delay the test for another day.

Recall to mind now Dr. Hagsmith's story about the cattle-drover's wife, who loses her arms to a train when she collapses drunkenly on the tracks. Remember how these little abo tales have lots of ingrained semibiographical truths, even when refractive.

Roy, doing his best imitation of a drunkard (a role he will perfect over the next

decade-and-a-half), collapses on the tracks before an oncoming train and loses both hands. Yes, it hurts, but he loves his wife and child, as well as his own hide, and in the wild many of his kin lose limbs to feral beasts all the time. No big deal; he can slough off the transplants they provide him with from the cryobank (the same as those that avail the cattledrover's wife), then regenerate his own. That's basically what shape-shifting involves anyway--contouring and directing your own flesh however you want--as if you're both pruner and bonzoi tree.

Eventually Roy recovers, but now either his grafted human hands allow him to take the test (conferred human abilities are implied by Hagsmith's tale), or the evidence of his hands, which never quite properly recover, can't be used against him. (Or he regenerates his own hands somewhat later, after the scare passes). Poor drunken bloke; leave him be. He'll have a rough enough time in life as it is.

Eventually the bloodlust passes or the courts issue a new verdict or considered expert scientific opinion decides there's no such as a remnant aboriginal race left on Sainte Anne.

French 10, Abos 0.

Unfortunately, Roy now can no longer handle even the minimal manual skills he needs to work his nets. This is a corollary of Dollo's Law; while he might regenerate his missing parts, the function of those parts would **not** be reacquired. And so he's forced to prostitute his wife to earn a living.

[Cinderella interlude: look at the multiple shadings Gene Wolfe gets by having Dr. Hagsmith say the abo shaman's name is Cinderwalker, but then adding as if in clarification, "No, not Cinderella--I know what you're thinking." Cinderella, after all, involves two different forms of transformation: physical (mice to horses, pumpkins to carriage) as well as personal (Cinderella the chargirl becomes the glass-slippered debutante)--both types of transformation are seen in the Trenchards. Cinderella also, at least for me, has tangents to the Holocaust with its ash and chimney images.]

-14 to -4PM Things continue to deteriorate for the Trenchards over the next decade. Eve must continue to prostitute herself, which is not only painful to Roy, because he still loves her (but how can I love a woman who sleeps with other men?), but erodes his self-esteem, since he can no longer provide for his family.

When Victor is old enough, and it is summer, Eve takes her son into the back of beyond and introduces him to the Free People and their ways.

Roy, unable to pimp Eve during these same months, relocates to Frenchman's Landing, a prime spot to open up his Abo-Wonders-of-Yesterday-Tour-and-Souvenir Shop. Here he sells "genuine" abo artifacts that Victor has made, according to Vic, with his teeth. Roy's becoming more and more deracinated, more and more marginalized by the people who think he's little better than a drunk-slash-conartist-slash-malingerer. Unfortunately, this is not a role uncommon to many figures in all societies where two cultures come together and one is adjudged to be more primitive or inferior (which usually means less technically adept--a case that applies here). It's even questionable if he could survive with his useless hands in the back of beyond, so this makes him even more the man without a culture.

[Note to mantis: you need to uplink your artifact speculations--they're another point in my case, but yours to deliver.]

Victor too seems caught between two cultures, or perhaps it's better to say he has two cultures

to pick from, although he does seem to lean more towards the Free People side of his heritage until he eventually leaves Sainte Anne (witness how he cries when an abo shape-shifted animal is shot by Marsch, but reviles the French with the "Frogtown" epithet). Victor must also resolve the difficulties involved with having a mother who's a prostitute and the attendant associations these are likely to chart on his psychosexual development. (I maintain they contribute to psychosis and possible latent homosexuality.") [Please note here I am not saying that homosexuality is a malign psychosexual response.]

Witness too how at one point Victor says he is half animal. While at another juncture he declares "I am half the blood of the Free People." Many readers might assume by this that he's implying the other half of him is human, but notice that's not at all what he's saying. His father has turned his back on his feral heritage (he can't even fish, the one vestige of his Wetlander roots he at one time retained), and is therefore nothing. Of course, Victor could still say "and the other half of me is marshman." But that would be too telling by Wolfe in several respects. Note too this explanation accounts for the I-don't know-how-a-Freelander-could-bear-my-father's-child line earlier.

-3 PM Victor, now an adolescent, though yet to shave, is witnessed by his mother having sex in the back of beyond.

Eve leaves Victor for Roncevaux where she will somehow work her way over to Sainte Croix--perhaps seeking to fulfill her actress dreams (we do have the staged plays of act 1 to perhaps hint at a more aesthetically minded planet). Her responsibilities as a mother are over; her son has been "milk-weaned" i.e., he can take care of himself.

Victor meanwhile returns to Frenchman's Landing, where he joins his father's tent-and-pony show, often playing Kaspar Hauser's feral boy to his father's assumed identity as Twelvewalker (and perhaps it does reprise a bit of family history), but otherwise reading as much as he can when offstage. Having been abandoned by the Free People side of his heritage, the stage now seems tipped for him to go the other way--which he does, although it requires him to murder and leave his enfant sauvage days far behind him.

Eve too fares similarly, winding up, as Tony Ellis has neatly demonstrated, in the same cellblock as her later arrested son.

Free People, right?

As for Roy Trenchard, for all we know he continues to thrive.

Perhaps there are lessons to be drawn here.

Some prisons are kinder than others.

Some dreams are worse.

Robert Borski (who's trying to make amends for some of his weirder posts)

Tony Ellis — 04 Jun 1998, 17:32 · follows Robert Borski

Robert Borski wrote:

This one will attempt to prove that Roy Trenchard, the beggar huckster father of VRT, is not human, as everyone in the novel assumes, but a full-blooded abo.

This is an inventive, imaginative theory, but I don't see any evidence in the text to support it. I do see plenty to the contrary.

You asterisk several lines in VRT's rowboat memory, but not this one: "My mother...had been buttoned into her yellow dress by him." Buttoned in because the Annese can't handle buttons any more than they can handle tools or writing. How can Trenchard do that if he's Annese too?

For someone who grew up in a marsh, doesn't RT read rather well? Yet his wife remained illiterate.

If RT is an abo, why does his son have to keep correcting all his bogus information about the abos?

We're shown that VRT lacks the manual dexterity to have made the fake flint tools RT shows Marsch. That leaves RT. How did he make them, if he's an abo too?

As for this incredible business of RT cutting off his hands, grafting on new ones, and then growing a _third_ set... :-)

Why would he need to, when almost everyone thinks the abos are extinct? The threat to abos RT speaks of is described as coming from gun-toting farmers out in the country; there is no evidence of the sort of inner-city witchhunt you suggest. You're also saying that the Running Blood test took place a mere 15 years ago, but Dr Hagsmith tells us this is a test that the French applied, which puts it about a century back. He even says that the French were "supposed" to have applied it - wouldn't he be a little more certain if it had only happened 15 years ago?

If RT was a shape-shifting abo, why would grafted human limbs even accept his alien tissue in the first place? And if they did, why would this give him the ability to use tools, when the organ that has "atrophied" is in his brain?

In any event, there is no evidence that the Free People can grow new limbs. There's certainly no sign in "A Story" that they have this fantastically useful survival trait. If it comes to that, there's no evidence in "A Story" that the Free People can change their shape at all. I think there's an awful lot of misconception in this area - but that's the subject for another post.