

migrations, humanity and Aunt Jeanine

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 10 Jun 1998

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Alice Turner — 10 Jun 1998, 21:37

I've been putting off getting into this fray. However:

Tony Ellis (who thinks that if he has to suspend his disbelief in God to accept the logic underpinning The Book of the New Sun, everyone else can accept a trifling prehistoric migration or two.)

Tony, what if we (or I, forsaking the editorial we) were to accept that "abos" came from Earth, but we then rejected the Gondwanaland premise? What if we simply assumed that a boatload of mixed-sex colonists operating at our own considerably slower-than-light speed at some time in our own not-so-far future landed on Ste. Anne and, in the generations before a second, technically whizzier second ship (with subsequent ships) landed on Ste. Croix, "went native." What if, like me and probably you, they'd never been taught how to make just about anything I can easily lay my hands on at my desk? That's why I say colonists rather than explorers, who presumably have been trained in many skills. Or, if that won't wash, say that nearly everyone was killed except for a few folks as dumb as me. And that we then inbred and got kind of spacy, as I would imagine people do get under such circumstances (cf Australia, if you like--hi Damien!). This, it seems to me, would create at least a rope bridge between you and Borski.

(One of the advantages of Vironese names, BTW, is not having to call people by their last names, which seems rude, but there are other Roberts in the group--why don't you guys think about adopting Vironese names? They're fun, and distinctive.)

We pass to Dan'I and his modified Lamarkism:

Once upon a time someone found out how to keep a fire under control in their cave or hut or whatever; this knowledge has been passed down and, indeed, has itself evolved until carefully-controlled fires run our planes, trains, and automobiles. But "controlling fire" is an acquired characteristic, and one that each new generation has to acquire -- but our acquisition is heritable, because we bypass genetic heritage and pass it on through the extrabiological matrix of culture, language, etc.

The same holds true, to a lesser extent, for many prelinguistic animals -- cats and birds can readily be seen teaching their offspring how to perform various survival-oriented activities. They, we, inherit the ability to teach and to be taught, but the actual content of the teaching, the extrabiological inheritance, is inherited but always acquired.

Exactly. They devolved because of lack of ability to pass on acquired knowledge. Also (this is 1972), they're a bit New Agey to start with.

On to Borski, with a fan to blow off a bit o' hot air (sorry, buddy, but 'tis true).

I've been thinking some about various critical analyses as they've been applied to the list.

[snip]

Now I'll be first to admit that my way of looking at Gene Wolfe may be somewhat different than others. I subscribe to the Secret Shadow theory, especially re FIFTH HEAD. My belief--again, at least in regards to this particular work--is that while its grand theme is the search for identity, its central conceit is that no one is simply who he or she seems.

[another snip]

I think the central conceit, just as in several other stories and novellas we've studied, is: What does it mean to be human? That also comes up in TBOTNS (Jonas, Jolenta, the creatures in the cave, etc. etc. etc.), and I will bet you a silver dollar that it's going to be a big thing in TBOTSS.

In all of Gene Wolfe's FIFTH HEAD OF CERBERUS, my favorite character has always been Aunt Jeannine. This is because many, many mysteries obtain to her that Gene Wolfe never seems to address anywhere. What are we to make, for example, of her crippled nature? How did it result--either congenitally or through misfortune? Why hasn't she had her legs--which are described as being withered--fixed? After all, we know from events in V.R.T. that cryobanks carrying replacement limbs exist. We also know that Maitre has the capabilities to transplant supernumerary limbs--witness the four-armed slave seen in the warehouse caper. And yet Jeannine remains crippled.

We don't know that those limbs are transplanted; they're just as likely a mutation. It happens, especially with the kind of help Maitre provides.

Still another aspect I always found puzzling is her desire for money. Why would she need it when all her material needs are being taken care of? Despite what is later revealed to be financial difficulties, surely, from the descriptions we are given of the Maison du Chien with its fountains and rooftop gardens, the whorehouse is no dump. Why then this need for additional funds? A gold-plated wheelchair? What would she do with the money? Retire to the Florida equivalent of Port-Mimizon? And does the quarrel that is mentioned as being responsible for Jeannine and Maitre no longer speaking to one another and having separate quarters result from greed?

She doesn't seem to me that greedy; it's just part of the fabled French thriftiness. She's a good manager. Why couldn't she just disapprove of Maitre because he's a thorough shit?

Another thing I found curious is that she also attends the first play Number Five and his cronies put on--why does Wolfe have her do this, since her presence at the play adds nothing in the way of plot advancement? Yes, it allows us to glimpse her withered legs pre-departure, but this could just as easily be conveyed by having Number Five notice them as she levitates up the spiral stairwell?

Yes, Wolfe wants the sideshow of her futuristic prosthetic device, but I thought her presence indicated that she has begun to feel like family to the boys--Maitre would never attend an event like this, but Jeannine has unbent to them. She loves them. I like this; I don't think it's odd at all, plot or no plot, but simply part of a kind of richness of writing that allows a maiden aunt to love and be loved.

Then there is her scientific persona of Aubrey Veil, the originator of Veil's Hypothesis. Whatever would possess the madam of a whorehouse to undertake the study of aboriginal aliens on a completely different world? What leads her to formulate her intriguing hypothesis--that the abos of Sainte Anne have killed and replaced the humans? What is the significance of 'Aubrey Veil?'

Well, hell, this is a scientific family. They have theories, they do experiments. that's clear from the git-go, and there's nothing odd about it--it's in their genes. Aubrey is a sexually ambiguous name and "Veil"--well, she's put a veil over her identity. Not an unsmart thing to do if you're being supported by a whorehouse. As to why she should have this particular hypotheis--well, that's what all three novellas are about, isn't it? What is human?

Lastly then, we have an additional mystery to consider and here I need to quote it direct. Victor, cast in the prison darkness of the citadel, is reminiscing about his get-togethers with Jeannine. Notice exactly how he states it:

She possessed real intelligence as well as a fascinating mind, and we had a number of long talks--often with one or more of her "girls," as she called them, for audience. (p.230)

Apart from the slightly ludicrous notion of a bunch of vaginas-for-hire sitting around listening to two scholars chew the anthropological fat, the sentence is preposterously redundant. No editor worth his or her salt would *ever* let a writer use both quote marks and the appending 'as she called them.' In fact, there is no need to use either. Cross out the quote marks, the 'as she called them' and maybe add a "present" and the sentence still reads absolutely the same. Remember the old saw from Creative Writing 101--"Never say things twice or be redundant"? Well, this is Wolfe saying it three times and it's a clue--one of his patent tricks that he uses frequently, and over and over again <malicious grin inserted here>--i.e., that the tea-and-Leakey get-togethers discussed above are anything but what they appear to be.

This seems pretty feeble to me. Aunt J. is always nice to the girls, and why shouldn't they hang out. (Strict, too, I imagine.) And the quote marks thing makes no sense at all; plenty of editors (and copy editors, who really rule in these realms) would let it go.

In light of the above paragraph and to continue with what has been a long series of similar suppositions I would like to make the following proposal: wouldn't it be exquisitely apposite if Jeannine Wolfe herself validated Veil's Hypothesis? But then, yes--wouldn't this mean that Jeannine's an abo?

Absolutely. But how can this be?

There's lots more of this, but I reject it all unless Veil's teasing hypothesis is true. Which it may be, but then #5 is pretty much correct when he says that it doesn't make any difference. In other words, it's all very clever, but pretty much beside the point except as a sort of Mobius twister--e. if Jeanine is an abo, then nearly everyone else in the story is an abo too, except for possibly Marsch at some point. I don't think that's, given Maitre's and #5's manual dexterity, terribly likely.

-alga-

Tony Ellis — 11 Jun 1998, 11:58 · follows Alice Turner

Alga wrote:

Tony, what if we (or I, forsaking the editorial we) were to accept that "abos" came from Earth, but we then rejected the Gondwanaland premise? What if we simply assumed that a boatload of mixed-sex colonists operating at our own considerably slower-than-light speed at some time in our own not-so-far future landed on Ste. Anne and, in the generations before a second, technically whizzier second ship (with subsequent ships) landed on Ste. Croix, "went native."

Surely if such earlier expeditions had ever taken place Marsch and Number 5 would raise this theory themselves? Why would they suggest such a way-out idea as a prehistoric migration if this was an option?

I also don't think that the novellas are set far enough in the future for a STL crew to get to St Anne, and turn into the abos before the later French colonists arrived. If the (presumably faster) French colonists didn't pass the STL ship on the way, I think they would still arrive before its crew could un-evolve the ability to use tools, which I imagine would take millenia.

(And why raise the Gondwanaland premise in the first place? Why have the Old Wise One name-check Gondwanaland, Atlantis etc as if to confirm it?)