

# 5HC: outline of reading

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 14 Jun 1998

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m.driussi — 14 Jun 1998, 05:14

The First Big Twist Goes like this:

We read "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" and say, wow, great story.

We start the next one, "'A Story,' by John V. Marsch." We think, oh, wasn't he that anthropologist from Earth who blundered into the truth in "The Fifth Head of Cerberus"? Neat, now we get a new tale from a character that was relatively minor.

Oh look, it is one of those warm 'n' fuzzy noble savage romances, thinly fig-leaved as anthropologically derived. Well cool; if we keep our filters on we might be able to figure out where the facts are. And peer into the full bore "many different abos before humans came" scenario.

At the end we say Gee, that was a creepy story after all.

Then we read the mishmash of "V.R.T." and learn that:

(1) A boy (abo or human or "half-breed") killed Marsch and took his place on an expedition on Sainte Anne (where "A Story" was set).

(2) We never saw Marsch in "5HC," we only saw the boy impersonating Marsch. (And Number Five was right when he seemed most wrong.) So we revise elements of our reading(s) of "5HC."

(3) The story by Marsch wasn't by Marsch, it was by the boy impersonating Marsch. And thus it is less the anthropological romance that we initially thought it was and more like the deranged fantasies and coded confession of a psycho murderer. So maybe there really =are= no abos--the potential "truth" content is shot to hell. We revise our reading(s) of "A Story" drastically.

(4) We never knew Marsch, but we can know him through what remains of his journal. And there, with all this talk of artifacts of stone being real or forged, amid all the clutter of abo yes, abo no, abo high, abo low, there are the ruins of the circular temple with tree rings going back long before the French landed. Not a breath is made (IIRC) in suggesting how this temple might have been faked (in contrast to the stone tools). Yet their physical presence is a rather powerful indication that =someone= was living on the planet before the French came; that they were sophisticated enough to know the days in a solar year, to plan and build a temple of living trees (ceder trees, which puts us back in the ancient middle east, Humbaba and Ashtarte) as a sort of woodhenge (no, I'm not making that term up).

The fact that the ruins are there, just as the informants said, also gives strength to the idea that the sacred cave really exists, too. So we have to revise our reading(s) of "A Story" again, bringing the fantasy back to a level approaching some sort of anthropological reconstruction,

which of course was our initial reading.

(5) The boy as Marsch was arrested for the murder of Number Four, which he didn't commit. The authorities know it, too. But we know and they probably know that he is guilty of murdering Marsch, so he deserves to be where he is.

These then are the grosser details and the initial loop the loops, twists, and sudden retroviruses contained within 5HC.

=mantis=

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William H. Ansley — 15 Jun 1998, 00:39 · follows m.driussi

We start the next one, "'A Story,' by John V. Marsch." We think, oh, wasn't he that anthropologist from Earth who blundered into the truth in "The Fifth Head of Cerberus"? Neat, now we get a new tale from a character that was relatively minor.

I just reread 5HC because of the recent and ongoing discussion. This was an enjoyable experience since Wolfe gives you so much to discover upon rereading, as everyone on this list well knows.

In fact, there seem to be as many mysteries about 5HC as there are about the whole BotNS. I think this may be mainly due to the fact that in 5HC Wolfe means to leave many mysteries unsolvable; I mean it's all very well (and very true) to say that when Wolfe leaves something unsaid it's important, but there is just so much left unsaid in 5HC that I cannot believe we are supposed to be able to unravel all of it or even most of it.

In 5HC, "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" turns out to be the simplest part of the novella trilogy. (I imagine some may not agree.) Certainly it is the part best able to stand on its own. (Anyway, it is the only part that did.)

Among the many mysteries in "'A Story' by John V. Marsch"/"V. R. T.", albeit a very minor one, is Marsch's name. While it seems that his name must be John V. Marsch I don't think we can be sure. That his last name is really Marsch seems almost certain. The name we know him by in "Fifth Head" is Dr. Marsch (although this is really VRT as psuedo-Marsch--presumably he is pretending to be someone real however). And his first name is probably John. After all, outside of Wolfe's writings, John is a very common first name. But, doesn't it seem odd that his first name is John when we find out (in "A Story") that John means 'a man' and is the first name of all male hill people [1]. (Of course again, we have to keep in mind who, most likely, is writing "A Story.") And what about the middle initial; could the "V." stand for Victor?

You may be saying, "What rot!" (Yes, you are. In those very words. I can almost hear you. [2]) But it really is very hard to confirm Dr. Marsch's full name. We never get to "read" any of Dr. Marsch's cards; we only get to hear what other people (Number 5, R. T.) call Marsch after they read the cards and they just say "Dr. Marsch".

The only place we see "John V. Marsch" (aside from the title of the second novella) is when (in "V. R. T.") a mention is made of a passport in that name. But "it may have been tampered with"!

Presumably, the St. Croix "authorities" have contacted Earth (and more specifically Columbia University) to get Marsch's bona fides and therefore found out that there really is such a person. But we are never told this definitely by a person we can trust.

In any case, if the original Marsch didn't have a middle initial (or had a different one) and VRT/Marsch started to use V, it might not have been questioned.

Enough! I just am trying to show by this too prolonged example that almost nothing seems certain in 5HC.

(5) The boy as Marsch was arrested for the murder of Number Four, which he didn't commit. The authorities know it, too. But we know and they probably know that he is guilty of murdering Marsch, so he deserves to be where he is.

I would say "they POSSIBLY know that he is guilty of murdering Marsch." They seem to be sure he is a spy and not who he says he is but it seems to me that they think (at least some of "them," some of the time) that he was always a spy, even before his trip to the back of beyond and he was the same person before and after.

William Ansley

[1] Are there any other fans of "The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai Across the Eighth Dimension" who think that some person behind this film must have read 5HC? For those who haven't seen it, all of the "good aliens" in it are named John Something-usually-silly (John Palooka, John Yaya, John Smallberries, etc.).

[2] I admit I am getting a little silly here, but not as silly as a couple of posts by Robert Borski.