

5th Head

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 22 Jun 1998

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Ranjit Bhatnagar — 22 Jun 1998, 12:59

After skimming over months of discussion, I finally got around to reading my copy of Fifth Head -- the receipt, still stuck in the book, is dated May 1988.

I had a year ago read "A Story" by itself -- it was reprinted in the anthology Future Primitive: The New Ecotopias (ed. Kim Stanley Robinson). Just as Quixote by Menard is a very different work than Quixote by Cervantes [gratuitous Borges reference], a story by Gene Wolfe (in Future Primitive) isn't like "A Story" by John Marsch (in Fifth Head).

When I read "A Story" on its own, in a book celebrating "primitive" ways of life, I took it as a reasonably accurate description of life and culture at a particular time and place. In Fifth Head, though, I could trace how Marsh created the fable around little scraps of dubious information he got from R.T. and V.R.T. -- or how V.R.T. assembled it from the tidbits he got from his mother.

Anyway, here are some tidbits of my own.

Is Marsch homosexual? Well, he does say (I believe this is from a taped prison interview)

"A scientist has needs like other men."

Heh heh.

Besides his green eyes, #5 several times comments on Marsch's disturbingly pale skin. Makes me think of a clammy swamp creature, but I can't find any significance to it.

Is there any hint in "V.R.T." of the folklore behind the Shadow Children in "A Story?" I can't think of anyone in Marsch's interviews distinguishing more than two kinds of abos (Hill and Meadowmere) -- nor any mention of telepathic abilities, addiction to a particular plant, etc. Maybe the author made 'em up entirely, inspired by the constellation.

Why was V.R.T. so sloppy in writing down memories of his own childhood on St. Anne in what was supposed to be Marsch's journal? (Unless, as Peter Cash just suggested, it's all a cover story for Marsch. I disagree, though, that Marsch may have killed Maitre. It seems clear that #5 got rid of Marsch -- by offending him with bizarre accusations -- in order to have some quality time alone with his "father". Of course, if it seems clear, it's probably false.)

Hmm. We're trying to tell the difference between real fiction and fictional fiction. I need to lie down now.

Ranjit

Tony Ellis — 23 Jun 1998, 09:59 · follows Ranjit Bhatnagar

Ranjit wrote:

Is there any hint in "V.R.T." of the folklore behind the Shadow Children in "A Story?" I can't think of anyone in Marsch's interviews distinguishing more than two kinds of abos (Hill and Meadowmere)

The Shadow Children are secretive even by Annese standards, and the colonists have a very shaky idea of who the Annese were, so you can't expect too much. But Mrs Blount does say "I used to play with the children, the little ones, you know." Now, is she thinking about Free People children, or another kind of Child? "Ma said they'd eat me... Anything to eat, they were always hungry."

M. Culot's grandfather's description of the Annese is also suggestive: "sometimes like a man, sometimes like old wood."

VRT also mentions seeing them when living in the outback with his mother, and their telepathic abilities "...and the Shadow Children of course came to steal by evening... there are never as many of them as they think, because some are only in the minds of the others"

adam louis stephanides — 23 Jun 1998, 15:40 · follows Tony Ellis

On Tue, 23 Jun 1998 Ranjit Bhatnagar wrote:

Is there any hint in "V.R.T." of the folklore behind the Shadow Children in "A Story?" I can't think of anyone in Marsch's interviews distinguishing more than two kinds of abos (Hill and Meadowmere) -- nor any mention of telepathic abilities, addiction to a particular plant, etc. Maybe the author made 'em up entirely, inspired by the constellation.

But then where did the constellation's name come from?

Why was V.R.T. so sloppy in writing down memories of his own childhood on St. Anne in what was supposed to be Marsch's journal?

On p. 230 (Ace edition) V.R.T. says he now thinks nobody may be reading his prison writings after all. It's only after this that he writes about his childhood on St. Anne.

--Adam