

Gene Wolfe"s "The Fifth Head of Cerberus"

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Jerry Leichter — 03 Nov 1983, 16:04

"The Fifth Head of Cerebrus" consists of three stories, each of which could more or less stand alone - the second, with the same title as the book, was originally published as a novella. (I read it in one of Terry Carr's collec- tions; I don't know where else it might have appeared.) The stories take place on one of two twin colony worlds; their common thread is a single charac- ter, a visiting Earch scientist, who is an incidental character in the first story - come to think of it, I guess THAT's the previously published one, the narrator of the second (which is actually a re-telling of a myth told by the conjectural (? - but the reason for the "?" is deep in the story) native residents of one of the planets, and the central character in the third.

The book develops slowly. If you really want to get the absolute most out of the first story, read it a little bit at a time over a matter of a couple of days.

Overall, it's a marvelous book. It's beautifully written, much of it being in Wolfe's typical "take some hackneyed style and do something totally unexpected with it". Thus, the first story is very much in the Gothic tradition - terrible family secret, etc.

By all means, give it a read.

-- Jerry