

Blue beasts from the stars?

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 26 Mar 2001

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William Ansley — 26 Mar 2001, 23:05

Although the "spider hypothesis" is tempting as a reason for the octopedalian nature of Bluvian life, here is another possible source. The passage below is from a book that Gene Wolfe may well have read as a youth or young man. It is by one of the "big three*" of fifties SF. I am sure some of you will recognize it or at least will realize you have read it before when you see the title of the book below. It is presented in the text as a quotation from a journal, hence the quotes within the block quote:

"This planet is a fair imitation of good old Terra, which is a relief after the last three, since we can hit dirt without suiting up. But evolution must have been playing double-or-nothing here, instead of the four-limbed arrangement considered stylish at home practically everything here has at least eight legs . . . 'mice' that look like centipedes, rabbitlike creatures with six short legs and one pair of tremendous jumping legs, all sorts up to things as big as giraffes. ..."

There is a race of intelligent beings on the planet referred to above with a highly advanced technology, more than two eyes and limited shapeshifting ability.

The book is The Star Beast by Robert A. Heinlein, copyright 1954. Unfortunately, the eight-legged intelligent race in this book (the Hroshii) are about as large as a rhinoceros and look like a cross between a rhino and a triceratops. They also have two arms, in addition to the eight legs, although they don't grow their arms until relatively late in life, so they are not really a good fit for the Neighbors at all.

But, I still have to wonder if the eight-legged fauna on Blue isn't at least in very small part a nod to this book, which I am not ashamed to admit I remember very fondly from my youth. I suppose this really is just another of my attempts to guess what Gene Wolfe read in his formative years, aside from the Oz books.

William Ansley

*For those who wish to know, the "big three" of 1950s SF that I am thinking of are Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke.

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.