

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MARGINS OF SCIENCE FICTION

GENE WOLFE: IN SEARCH OF LOST SUZANNE: A LUPINE COLLAGE

Mischievous Gene Wolfe's ripping yarns—Wolfe is, in many respects, a good old-fashioned storyteller—are often also baffling, but scrupulously fair in their subtle deployment of clues and cues. Or so we tell ourselves hearteningly, bashing through thickets toward the masked designs and methods of his delicious fictions. Enigma can seem Wolfe's *raison d'être*. Added to narrative sleight-of-hand is the rich color of this erudite engineer's cultural apparatus. His vocabulary is notoriously arcane, where naming the odd or specialized is called for, yet decently plain when straight-speaking is proper. Sf critics of the stamp of Peter Nicholls, Thomas M. Disch, and John Clute gnawed at his multi-volume masterpiece *The Book of the New Sun*. He has an intimate knowledge of history and place, of Dickens and Proust. The opening scene in his first triumph, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, begins: "When I was a boy my brother David and I had to go to bed early, whether we were sleepy or not." It is no accident that the overture of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (variously translated as *Remembrance of Things Past* and, more faithfully, *In Search of Lost Time*) begins: "For a long time I used to go to bed early." This is not learned dog; it is relaxed cultivation.

But beyond such knowingness, Wolfe is, as I say, a trickster and a tease. Two entire email lists, run by Ranjit Bhatnagar and archived on the Internet, have been devoted to unknitting the mysteries of his work, especially *The Book of the New Sun* and *The Book of the Long Sun*. Find them at <http://www.urth.net/urth/> where you can read or subscribe to the URTH list, which has been tempted ever and anon toward the smaller mysteries of Wolfe's short fiction. One of the

more alluring stories is “Suzanne Delage,” a kind of epiphany or Proustian madeleine that works in reverse, for it dips into Lethe and soaks up evidence of absurd forgetfulness. Here is the start, compressed:

As I was reading last night—reading a book, I should explain [...]—I was struck by a certain remark of the author’s [...] *that every man has in the course of his life some extraordinary experience* [...] but [...] he has forgotten it. [...]It] at last occurred to me that there has, in fact, been one thread of the strange—I might almost say the incredible, though not the supernatural—in my own history.

It is simply this: living all my life, as I have, in a town of less than a hundred thousand population, I have been dimly aware of the existence of a certain woman without ever meeting her or gaining any sure idea of her appearance. (Wolfe, *Endangered Species*, 362)

The woman is Suzanne Delage, daughter of a dear friend of his mother (with whom Mom hunted for colonial quilts), his own forgotten school class-mate. He is reminded of this odd fact by a fleeting encounter he’s lately had with “a girl of fifteen or so [...]. Her hair was of a lustrous black, and her complexion as pure as milk; but it was not these that for a moment enchanted me, nor the virginal breasts half afraid to press the soft angora of her sweater, nor the little waist I might have circled with my two hands. Rather it was an air, at once insouciant and shy, of vivacity coupled with an innocence and intelligence, that were hers alone” (367), “the very image of her mother at that age,” a friend’s wife tells him, “—Suzanne Delage.” (Ibid.)

What can this tale mean? The denizens of the URTH list took its scent and were off, led by the scholarly, droll and fearsomely ingenious Michael André-Driussi, author of a major work of Wolfean or Lupine scholarship, *Lexicon Urthus*. I here collage and condense this discussion, with permission of the participants. The recommended warm-up for the event is, naturally, a (re)reading of Gene Wolfe’s very brief story.

From: Michael André-Driussi, 13 July 1997

How many people have discovered the secret origin of “Suzanne Delage,” a quiet little story in *Endangered Species*? I figured something out (largely by accident, as per usual) and asked a lot of people if they’d spotted anything intertextual (it really is a needle in a haystack) and then (when none of them had seen it) told them what I’d found:

She spoke to me of myself, my family, my social background. She said: “Oh, I know your parents know some very nice people. You’re a friend of Robert Forestier and Suzanne Delage.” For a moment these names conveyed absolutely nothing to me. But suddenly I remembered that I had indeed played as a child in the Champs-Élysées with Robert Forestier, whom I had never seen since. As for Suzanne Delage, she was the great-niece of Mme Blandais, and I had once been due to go to a dancing lesson, and even to take a small part in a play at her parents’ house. But the fear of getting a fit of giggles and a nose-bleed had at the last moment prevented me, so that I had never set eyes on her. I had at the most a vague idea that I had once heard that the Swanns’ feather-hatted governess had at one time been with the Delages, but perhaps it was only a sister of this governess, or a friend. I protested to Albertine that Robert Forestier and Suzanne Delage occupied a very small place in my life. “That may be; but your mothers are friends, I can place you by that. I often pass Suzanne Delage in the Avenue de Messine. I admire her style.” Our mothers were acquainted only in the imagination of Mme Bontemps, who having heard that I had at one time played with Robert Forestier, to whom, it appeared, I used to recite poetry, had concluded from that that we were bound by family ties. She could never, I gathered, hear my mother’s name mentioned without observing: “Oh yes, she belongs to the Delage-Forestier set,” giving my parents a good mark which they had done nothing to deserve. (Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, Chapter Two, 381-382)

From: Alice Turner, 14 July 1997

Hooray for you! I love it! I had already picked up the MP connection from the first sentence of *Fifth Head*, as I'm sure you did too, from the French names on Ste. Anne, and from Phaedria, who is described almost exactly as Albertine is and with whom the relationship is similar. So I looked through *Fifth Head* to find the Delages without success—it didn't occur to me to go to the source.

From: Michael André-Driussi, 15 July 97

Yeah, that Suzanne is cryptic. Talk about embedded! Talk about sneaky! (Who knows—maybe the German-language version has a citation or some notes that give it all away!)

For me, it really was luck. I mean, I'd already read just about all the Wolfe there was, then I was reading Proust (a project which literally took me a few years) and one day, "Huh. Suzanne...that sounds familiar...." If her name wasn't in the title I probably would have missed it!

From: Jim Jordan, 15 July 1997

Is there a fantasy element in "Suzanne Delage," and if so, where is it? The story feels like *Peace*, so it is probably a ghost story, but how so?

From: Michael André-Driussi, 15 July 97

The *Peace*/Proust aspect is probably the fact that the narrator is sitting/lying in the old house he's lived in all his life, casting his mind about in nostalgia and detective work.

The "fantasy" element that occurs to me is the Wolfe favorite of reincarnation—Suzanne's daughter looks exactly like Suzanne did at that age. This isn't fantasy in the hands of most authors, or in our everyday minds when we use such analogies, yet Apu Punchau = funeral bronze = ("second") Severian...

Which does tie in nicely with the Peter Pan/communist, identity hijacker/history erasures complex of "The Changeling."

From: Michael André-Driussi, 22 July 97

More about "The Changeling":

If Peter Pan looks eight years old in 1964, then his year of birth would be 1956. Papa is worried that he will leave the Palmieris soon since the family fiction is becoming unsustainable—Mama has to claim to have given birth to Peter when she was in her fifties, now. [...]

If Peter Pan has determined that it is time to change families, it might be that he is going to set himself up as the son of crazy Pete—we can imagine the townsfolk saying, “Little Pete looks just like his dad at that age—look at this fourth grade photo from 1944.” (Shades of “Suzanne Delage,” oooh...)

From: Peter Westlake, 06 May 1998

The fantastic element? I had wondered that when I first read it, so I read it again, twice. On the first reading, nothing. But on the second pass, I came across a sentence that gave me the most extraordinary sensation I’ve ever had while reading: it “caught my gaze” in the most literal sense imaginable. Does anyone know what I mean? Or am I imagining the whole thing?

07 May 1998

I’ll start with a couple of hints.

First, why do we see Suzanne’s daughter? I think she’s there to tell us what Suzanne looks like. I would have been surprised if she had been a tanned redhead, for instance. We don’t meet Suzanne herself because that would be too much like the Stoppard parody of *Waiting for Godot*—“there he is now”. It would undo the plot.

Second, the narrator wonders if Suzanne belongs to any cliques. I think she belongs to at least two: the Pie Club, and one other group of people, mentioned in the story.

Final hint: what’s the problem with looking for Suzanne in the picture of the Pie Club?

Here’s the sentence, and in particular the phrase, that still gives me the shivers:

Suzanne is listed among those “Unable to be photographed”.

And the girls in the Pie Club photo are too loosely grouped to be identified easily. But I bet they wouldn’t have looked that way at the time...when you could see Suzanne.

From: Craig Christensen, 8 May 1998

I read "Suzanne Delage" again last night and when nothing unmistakable jumped out at me, I re-read it with the story's opening statement in mind. The narrator was struck by the passage he had read which stated that every person has probably had at least one event so momentous and unassimilable that he has wiped it from his memory. I took that to mean that the narrator had not only met Suzanne in his past, but that she was very important to him. I read the "Unable to be photographed" to mean that Suzanne was pregnant then and that the young lady he saw was his own daughter.

The vampire angle never occurred to me.

From: Adam Louis Stephanides, 8 May 1998 16:03:03

I hate to pour cold water on your theories, especially since this story has always mystified me. But if, as you seem to be implying, Suzanne is some sort of supernatural being who doesn't show up in photographs, I think the narrator would have heard about it and remembered it, along with the entire town. And if Suzanne had been absent from the Pie Club photo, instead of just unidentifiable, wouldn't the narrator have noticed that the caption contained one too many names? I think "loosely grouped" means only that the girls are posed as if in the middle of cooking, rather than lined up in rows as is usual.

The best I've been able to do is: if Suzanne's daughter had really been as strikingly beautiful as the story's next-to-last paragraph describes, then the narrator would certainly have noticed Suzanne. Ergo, the daughter is really not so remarkable, and the flowery prose of the description reflects the sentimentality of a lonely middle-aged man. But if that's all there is to it, it is not much of a story. And the way Wolfe writes it, it feels to me that there should be some greater payoff.

From: Peter Westlake, 09 May 1998

> "the narrator would have heard about it."

I did wonder about that myself. But as Craig has just reminded us, the story starts with the narrator reading about the idea that everyone has had some truly extraordinary experience and forgotten all about it. Mirrors might be more of a problem.

Looking again, I see that the narrator isn't quite certain of the name of the Pie Club. So maybe Craig is right and it is the "Pudding

Club” instead! Suzanne’s daughter is only about fifteen, so that would mean the story takes place only about sixteen years after high school, and we are told the narrator has retired; but “much sooner than most men,” so it might still work.

One more small bit of evidence for the supernatural theory, and the vampire theory in particular, is the way the narrator’s mother is so exhausted by her trips with Suzanne’s mother, but is always so keen to go again. Not much to go on, I admit.

Another theory is that Suzanne never was at the school, and her mother didn’t die while the narrator was at college, but rejuvenated herself and then invented a high school career to account for her appearing on the scene in her teens. Then we really *do* meet her at the end. I’m not entirely convinced by this, though.

From: Peter Stephenson, 09 May 1998

I absolutely agree that “unable to be photographed” is a chilling phrase, coming from Wolfe. I don’t necessarily think that means there is any “obvious” supernatural explanation. Wolfe is an expert at straining the bounds of reality so that it still makes perfect sense the way it is. I continue to read the story as I first did: that there is some “non-obvious” supernatural explanation, that the narrator’s reality is warped in some way that he simply doesn’t ever see Suzanne. The whole universe is conspiring that they don’t meet—even by bending the laws a bit. That’s what I find chilling. I think (please contradict) this is the naturally Borgesian explanation.

From: David Lebling, 9 May 1998

I like the “universe conspiring against them” explanation, though immortality and vampirism are fun, too.

The “extraordinary thing” is that he has no memory of ever meeting this woman whose life is parallel to his, yet it is beyond the realm of possibility that he never saw her or met her. When he merely glimpses her daughter, who looks just like her, he’s bowled over. He *must* have seen and been bowled over by Suzanne at some point in his earlier life.

You could erect an edifice of supposition: who has kept these star-crossed lovers apart for their entire lives? What eventuality does their non-meeting prevent? Is their never-to-be-born child a new Hitler, an Anti-Christ?

This, I think, is the Borgesian reading of the story.

Or maybe she’s just a vampire....

From: Alice Turner, 9 May 1998

I tend to go along with Adam's explanation here, but I don't agree that it diminishes the story. I think there is something powerful and poignant about a middle-aged man's shock of realization that his entire life could have been entirely different, had it not been for the coincidences of fate. I think you're all looking too hard for a fantasy element. The godfather of this story is Proust (and for once that is proven, not conjectural), not Kafka or Borges. The flavor of regret is bittersweet.

From: Adam Louis Stephanides, 9 May 1998

I don't know how Borgesian it is, but there's a story by Henry James based on that very premise: that (as best I can recall) there are two people who somehow never meet, despite their moving in the same social circles and having numerous opportunities to do so. The kicker is that after one of them dies, the deceased one's ghost frequently visits the other, and they more or less fall in love. I don't know if this is relevant to Wolfe's story; I suspect not (and I certainly don't believe that Suzanne Delage is dead and the girl the narrator meets is her ghost!).

I suddenly realized that there was indeed "evidence" for this. We are told that Suzanne could not be photographed because of an epidemic of Spanish influenza. It seems possible that this could have been the 1918 epidemic, which did kill a lot of people. And the narrator certainly seems to be in love with the "daughter." But I still don't believe it.

From: Adam Louis Stephanides, 10 May 1998

> "I took that to mean that the narrator had not only met Suzanne in his past, but that she was very important to him."

Lying in bed this morning I came to the conclusion that this was correct and developed a reading of the story. It explains the text; it is consistent with Wolfe's method in other works such as *Peace* and *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*; and on this reading the story is worthy of Wolfe.

As in other works by Wolfe, the narrative seems ordinary on the surface but, when you study it carefully, anomalies appear. First, why is the narrator so obsessed with the "certain remark" he reads, to the point of lying awake trying to remember something

extraordinary that happened to him that he has forgotten(!)? And what he comes up with—never having met Suzanne—is not, despite his claim, all that “strange—I might almost say...incredible.” (362; page references to the Tor hardcover, in which the story runs from 361 to 367). By implication, the town’s population is close to 100,000 (362), and the high school is a large one (364). Later in the story he states that if he had ever danced with Suzanne “the years have so effectively sponged the event from my memory that no slightest trace remains” (366). Together, these suggest that something has indeed happened to the narrator which he has not merely forgotten but repressed, and that his non-meeting of Suzanne is what psychoanalysts call a “screen memory”: a false memory covering up a repressed event.

If so, there should be traces of it in the narration. And there are. He tells us that if he had met Suzanne as a child, “I would no doubt have soon come to both love and hate” her (366). This is certainly possible, but why does he say there is “no doubt”? Then, it is odd that he thinks he might have danced with a girl as beautiful as Suzanne apparently was and casually forgotten about it. But it is the description of Suzanne’s daughter that is the real giveaway. Firstly, we have this sudden outburst of poesy in a narrative that has up till now been completely prosaic. Secondly, he claims to have observed in her “an air, at once insouciant and shy, of vivacity coupled with an innocence and intelligence that were hers alone.” But he only saw her for a few seconds as she “walked quickly past” him! How could he have possibly perceived all that? This passage is in reality not a description of the daughter, but a repressed memory of Suzanne herself bubbling up, triggered by seeing her daughter.

Confirmation comes with his friend’s wife’s reply: ““But of course you know who she is, don’t you?”” (367). If he really did not know Suzanne, why should his friend’s wife assume he will recognize her daughter? He did know Suzanne well enough for the friend’s wife, an acquaintance but not a friend herself, to remember it, although he—consciously—does not.

To sum up: the narrator did know Suzanne, who may well have been as extraordinary as he describes her daughter as being, and did “love and hate” her. He later “sponged the event from his memory”: either because he “considered himself so mundane,” or because the end of the affair was too traumatic, and he made himself “mundane” as a reaction. Since then he has led the “dull” life he describes.

I have to admit, when I first read Mr. Westlake’s post I thought he was saying Suzanne was not a vampire but a fairy or something of the sort. In that case, I have some other objections. “Her

complexion [was] as pure as milk” (367) does not, to my mind, describe a vampire’s pallor; and the entire description does not feel vampiric to me. And the vampire theory doesn’t explain why the narrator never met Suzanne, or forgot meeting her, since his wife’s friend did not forget.

From: Peter Westlake, 11 May 1998

> “The flavor of regret is bittersweet.”

That *does* make a lot of sense. In fact, I shall enjoy reading that version of the story very much even if another explanation proves to be the true one, just as I enjoyed reading “my” version. So do you think that never seeing Suzanne is sufficiently odd to fit the notion at the start of the story? Actually, I suppose it is, and the narrator hadn’t called it to mind before he read the idea.

It certainly is a powerful and poignant story, and at the moment I think you’re right.

From: Peter Westlake, 11 May 1998

I do like Adam’s theory, even though I don’t believe it is the one the author intended. It does fit the text pretty well, but I think it isn’t quite strongly enough implied. At least, I *think* I think that.

I would prefer her not to be a vampire. It just seemed to fit, and to be reasonably Wolfeish.

Not meeting her would just be a coincidence, as it is in Proust; it starts the narrator looking through his yearbooks, and reveals the subtext to the (possibly over-imaginative :-) reader, though not to the narrator.

Of the theories I’ve heard so far, I like Alice’s the best. It makes most sense of the structure of the story—with Suzanne’s daughter appearing at the end, a very conspicuous part of the story. I do wonder how many other readings there are, though—we haven’t had the one yet in which the Pie Club is really the Pudding Club and they’re all off ill having babies at exactly the same time, like the women of Midwich. I’ll spare you that one, I think.

From: Peter Stephenson, 10 May 1998

> “a repressed memory of Suzanne herself bubbling up, triggered by seeing her daughter.”

You’re right that this is a key moment, and seems to be asking for a psychological rather than a fantasy explanation. Actually, it

recalls another part of Proust, towards the end, when he meets Gilberte Swann's daughter and recognises in her all the things he once saw in Gilberte. Maybe there's a really telling quotation in *Le Temps Retrouvé* (Time Regained) somewhere.

From: Craig Christensen, 11 May 1998

I looked for Spanish Influenza information, to date when the characters were in high school. Of course I was surprised to learn that the Spanish Influenza occurred in 1918 during the First World War. This certainly doesn't seem to be the correct period for the characters' high school years. Interestingly, several sites made the observation that the epidemic has been almost completely wiped from the world's memory.

I took this quote from:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/influenza/trackers.html>

Perhaps the 1956 quote by H. L. Mencken is the very quote that sparked the short story:

“Those learning for the first time of the devastating consequences of the worldwide 1918 Spanish influenza epidemic—or pandemic—typically respond with two questions: How could they have never heard of a world-wide scourge that killed upwards of 30 million people? And, could it happen again? [...] The epidemic is seldom mentioned, and most Americans have apparently forgotten it. This is not surprising. The human mind always tries to expunge the intolerable from memory, just as it tries to conceal it while current.”

I think that the mention of the Spanish Influenza is a major clue. The narrator has forgotten knowing Suzanne in the past; he hasn't simply failed to meet her. And his relationship with her was not minor, it was consequential.

I am willing to concede that the young lady may not be the narrator's daughter, but I still like the idea.

I have two questions. What is the reference to Hamlet? And why the long rambling description of quilt collecting? In such a compact story it must have significance.

From: Peter Westlake, 11 May 1998

The fact that everyone has forgotten that flu epidemic is certainly very suggestive. At the very least it's a nice coincidence, and a great find—thanks!

The Hamlet, at least, is easy: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio/ Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

I wondered about the quilts too. Misdirection? Some very subtle clue? They connect with the late eighteenth century, but I don't know what to make of that, if anything.

From: Adam Louis Stephanides, 11 May 1998

I think my theory is at least as strongly implied by the text as is Weer's ghostly state in *Peace*, which we know Wolfe intended.

The main problem I now have with Alice's theory is that it doesn't account for the strong indications that the narrator has indeed forgotten something. (I don't think you can say he has "forgotten" not having met Suzanne.)

From: William H. Ansley, 12 May 1998

I came up with my own theory, almost against my will. I doubt very much that it's what Wolfe had in mind (if he really had anything more in mind than a nod to Proust) but it does have the signal advantage of making the quilt-hunting significant.

But first a comment: it is very hard to tell when the "present" is for the narrator. On page 363 of *Endangered Species* (pb) he says, "There are a number of pages missing from the class picture section of the earlier book and I seem to recall that these were torn out and cut up to obtain the individual photographs many decades ago."

Assuming he is right about the time frame, this "many decades" poses problems. I would think that at a minimum it would need to be three decades, though "many" usually means more than this. Three is no problem. It would mean (if the pages were torn out of the sophomore yearbook right away) that the narrator could be forty-four (14 + 30) and that Suzanne would have had her daughter at the age of twenty-eight (44-16). Of course, if the pages were torn out of the sophomore yearbook "n" years after it was taken home, we have to add n to the above ages.

If "many" is four, we have Suzanne giving birth at the age of thirty-eight; if five, forty-eight. And "many" could certainly be a higher number than these!

I say the narrator did know Suzanne as a child and as a teenager. They fell in love and, perhaps, planned to marry. But the narrator's mother did find a "American Revolution times" quilt or embroidered blanket at some time before the narrator's senior year and probably after his sophomore year, in high school. It was infected with smallpox. It had been preserved because some colonists intended to use it to infect Indians. (I have read that colonists did this. I don't know if it is true but it seems plausible. Certainly many, many Indians died of smallpox and they almost certainly caught it from European settlers.) Perhaps a smallpox epidemic breaks out. Even if all the inhabitants of the town were vaccinated, it is likely that some would still be susceptible to the virus to some degree. But certainly Suzanne gets the disease and is dreadfully scarred. Other people who come down with it get milder cases and are not scarred noticeably. (This is consistent with what the *Encyclopedia Britannica* has to say about smallpox.) The source of the disease is discovered. The quilt/blanket is destroyed. Suzanne blames the narrator and his family and hates him. The narrator, horrified by Suzanne's appearance, no longer loves her. Or, perhaps, she is not so badly scarred, but he finds that he cannot love her now that she is no longer "perfect" and she hates him for this.

Suzanne can't be photographed because she is sick with smallpox or she refuses because of her scars. The narrator destroys the pages of the sophomore yearbook because he can't look at her old "pure as milk" complexion without being guilt-stricken. (The description of Suzanne's daughter, under my theory, is to let us know what a beauty Suzanne was, pre-smallpox.) Perhaps his own picture is missing because of endearments written on it by Suzanne, that he could no longer bear to read. He forgets all about the smallpox outbreak and so does the town. Suzanne becomes a recluse and so doesn't serve as a reminder. This also explains why he never saw her after high school.

In this context, the fact that the narrator (falsely) remembers a Spanish Influenza epidemic is significant because it was a pandemic disease outbreak that was totally forgotten in a relatively short time, as Craig Christensen's posting noted. This may be a hint that the town could forget its own epidemic.

The sentence: "On the other hand we are neither of us invalids, nor are we blind" also takes on new significance and perhaps some poignancy, since blindness is a common result of scarlet fever and invalidism could be caused by rheumatic fever or polio. Some part of the narrator that remembers is saying "It could have been worse, couldn't it?"

This could also explain Suzanne having a child quite late in life. She finally finds someone to love and marry despite her reclusiveness and disfigurement.

Now this is certainly not a supernatural explanation of the story, but I don't think that is required. It is certainly against all probability, and the survival of variola (smallpox) virus for hundreds of years might be considered a dislocation of nature.

I am aware there are a lot of problems with this idea; perhaps someone else can refine or build on it. Perhaps the fact that I find it at all convincing just demonstrates that I should get more sleep and do less email reading.

From: Damien Broderick, 13 May 1998

As I was reading this morning—reading the URTH list's digest on my computer screen, I should explain—I was struck by the deluge of posts, deliberately left unread until now, concerning the story "Suzanne Delage". It occurred to me to wonder about this thread. Living all my life, as I have, in a genre comprising less than a hundred thousand stories, I had not even been dimly aware of this particular tale. And yet it had plainly excited the witty and astute lupine readers here. I went as soon as it was convenient to my local library and found the copy of *Endangered Species* that, hardly opened except to read "The Cat," I had returned only a month before, and there belatedly met for the first time the enigmatic absence of Suzanne Delage. Or so it seemed, until, with a strange frisson, my first for the day, I noticed that this story had originally appeared in a collection entitled *Edges* (Pocket Books, 1980), co-edited by Mr. Wolfe's agent, Virginia Kidd, and her other most notable client, Ursula K. Le Guin. This was striking enough as a coincidence, for at that time I too was a client of Ms Kidd. Stranger yet was the fact that this volume, in which I had never previously encountered Mr. Wolfe's story, opens with a novella that I believe Mr. Wolfe might enjoy, entitled "The Ballad of Bowsprit Bear's Stead". As it chanced, I had written that story.

I turned for clues to Ms Kidd's introduction to the story. It proved immediately unreliable in a small way, not perhaps a startling discovery in a paperback original which had printed the closing sentences of my own story at the head of the italicized introduction to the next, Carol Emshwiller's "Omens". We are misinformed that Mr. Wolfe had been "working extensively on his tetralogy (*The Rock of the New Sun*)". Nevertheless, it is worth attending to Ms. Kidd's insidery comment:

“His short story hereunder is a den of iniquity; no one else could have written it.”

I think this is likely. It is less a madeleine than a reverse veronica, a kind of Turin test. Here are some incidental, glancing reflections:

Suzanne is not a vampire, I think, nor is she her own daughter and mother, not quite. I do think she might have no use for men. Is it implausible that those exhausting trips taken by Madame Delage and Mother, so eagerly repeated, were spent as often under the quilt as on it? Was it Mother who later scissored out the photos of the young woman who (perhaps)—like daughter, like mother, like grandmother, faithful mirror of the flesh—so resembled her lost lover? Why did the bitter old neighbor widow so detest Mrs. Delage? Had she been displaced in the beautiful friend’s affections (or those of someone looking quite similar—wait, wait for it) by other, younger women, Mother being merely the latest?

Why should this be the occasion of retrograde amnesia? The conjecture above might be the root of a complex Oedipal agony of (as it were) biblical proportions. As Adam noted of this confessedly (or avowedly) dull small-town dog: “‘extraordinary experience’ he refers to is not necessarily supernatural, merely a ‘dislocation of all we expect from nature and probability.’”

The provenance of the luscious, fifteen-year-old daughter of the absent Suzanne? Michael provided the key allusion to Proust, a writer for whom sexual evasions and masks were not unknown. But here’s another possible layering (if we are prepared to accept that Gene Wolfe is vatic as well as gnomic, the necessary premise for many of this list’s entertainingly over-interpretative hi-jinks). You all know, of course, that Ives Delage (1854-1920) was the French zoologist who (as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us) “developed a method for culturing sea urchins following artificial fertilization of the eggs with chemicals”. This might be irrelevant in the work of anyone with less interest in cloning and reduplication than Mr. Wolfe.

From: Adam Louis Stephanides, 13 May 1998

> “Spanish Influenza...certainly doesn’t seem to be the correct period for the characters’ high school years.”

According to Krug’s *The Shaping of the American High School, 1880-1920*, extracurricular activities of the type the narrator

describes were found in that period; and I don't see any other details which are inconsistent with it. (The reference to a "fundamentalist church" might be a problem, since the term may not have been in use then; but this could be the narrator himself using anachronistic terminology.) This would mean, of course, that the "present" of the story was itself in the past when it was published, but I see no problem with that. In fact, the initial reference to "those somewhat political, somewhat philosophical, somewhat historical books which can now be bought by the pound each month" doesn't seem to really apply to the late-1970s publishing scene.

Good question about the quilt. I took it as furthering the characterization of the narrator as boring, as well as indicating a possible source for this trait in his mother's conventionality; but it may well have some more specific significance.

The "many decades ago" bit (363 in *ES*) is indeed hard to explain. To me "many" is certainly more than three, and even more than five—I wouldn't say that Wolfe had written many novels with Severian as protagonist—and as William points out, for Suzanne to be sixty-five now is already pushing the outer limits of probability (although Damien's theory would account for that). I use this to support my own theory: not only has the narrator repressed the events to the extent of suppressing that it was he who tore out the pages, but he pushes the tearing-out back in time to an impossible extent.

Assuming that the comment about the "den of iniquity" reflected inside information and not just the editor having nothing else to say, it confirms that there is *something* under the surface. While the Ives Delage cross-reference is indeed suggestive, though, I don't think I can buy the theory as yet; now if you could tie it in with those quilts....

From: Peter Westlake, 14 May 1998

> "Ives Delage."

Astounding!

I don't know which boggles the mind more—that this is a coincidence, or that it isn't. A bit like life on other worlds.

I see that Ives Delage died soon after the height of the Spanish Flu epidemic; but that way madness lies, I fear.

Here and Now:

The conversation lapsed, for the moment. Mr. André-Driussi suggested in passing his speculation that the small town in question is Cassionsville, the scene of *Peace* and several other short stories. I found the exercise enthralling, proving that readers remain, as always, monarchs of the text—and, equally, that the inexhaustible text baits us endlessly with unexplored possibilities. Or maybe just that Gene Wolfe is smarter and cagier than all of us combined.

BRUCE STERLING: *TOMORROW NOW:* *ENVISIONING THE NEXT FIFTY YEARS*

I think Bruce can be characterized as a journalist who likes working around the edges of the new, revolutionary ideas...he's full of manic energy. He's out there with a machine gun of ideas spewing bullets in all directions, and he tends to hit an awful lot of targets head on.

Charles Stross, *Locus*, August 2003

I once suggested that the first novel by Charles Stross's sometime collaborator Cory Doctorow was a prime instance of *blogpunk*, a tooth-grating neologism that deserves a non-fiction partner. If Bruce Sterling's futurist writing (I am explicitly not addressing his sf now) is a form of *blogpunditry*, his book *Tomorrow Now* really can be read only as an instance of this short attention span assemblage idea-tumble format. It is sassy, knowing, with short sharp jabs of wit and factlets, tied together (between, as it were, cool sips at the glass or hotlink twitches at the mouse) by a laconic, sardonic delivery that's more stand-up comic than Toffler Associates truffle hound snuffler nosing after the future shock drivers of social change.

His narrative device for holding this explosion inside one heaving skin is Shakespeare's seven ages of Man, from *As You Like It*: infant, student, lover, soldier, mature magistrate, aging scholar, senescent old dodderer. Within this cyclic trajectory, already warped considerably from Shakespeare's paradigm as well-fed, exercised, secure Boomers made 60 the new 40, his sharply observed anecdotes, *obiter dicta*, case studies and artful self-revelations tell us that *things will change* (and how! but not *how*, which is unknowable), yet *not that much*. Why, otherwise, regale us (fascinatingly) with a fifty-page digression on three insurgent thugs—Shameil Basaev, Khottab and Arkan? In a real blog, this would mark a week's abrupt