

Cloning and science generally in the Book

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 07 Oct 1998

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Peter Stephenson — 07 Oct 1998, 10:12

Maybe this is obvious, but I don't think the phrase "grown from the body cells of exultant women" has to imply cloning as we know it. Nothing else is quite as we know it; I can well believe body cells take on their own life on Urth. Even being prosaic, if genetics is (was) sufficiently advanced there's no need why the genetic information has to be unchanged in the offspring. On the other hand, there's no reason why SBear's growth hormone shouldn't come into the picture.

I think it's another case where deciding too definitely between apparently distinct options doesn't really reflect the way Urth is depicted --- certainly in Severian's own account, but maybe it goes wider. `Science' is something a bit fluid, which can be twisted into apparently magical, but still actually logical, shapes. This goes for space travel, black holes, drugs, pretty much everything.

Or to put it another way: what we would think of as the `underlying' logical explanation of something is really an emergent phenomenon in Wolfe's writing, even if we assume (which is, I think, usually correct) that it's hiding there somewhere: the imaginative effect is the fundamental one. For example, spaceships are like sailing ships
apparently because they're sailing on some cosmic wind, but
actually mainly because it's a nice idea.

Quite a lot of authors on the SF/fantasy border try this sort of thing, but it's very hard to get right; any rational explanations, if given, tend to sound silly, and they're often avoided completely so that the SF element is very marginal (I'm thinking here of Colin Greenland's `Harm's Way', which is essentially the British Empire in space). Wolfe gets away with it partly through the deliberate vagueness on Severian's part as to what is actually going on (in this example, as Wolfe himself points out in an appendix, he doesn't even bother distinguishing between seaships and spaceships). If Wolfe had Jack Aubrey on the quarterdeck saying `I believe we may scandalize the topsheet, Mr. Pullings', much of the sense (as opposed to the real logic) of an underlying scientific explanation would be lost. There is, in summary, some highly creative tension between the feeling that there's a logical explanation for everything, and the (deliberate) absence of that explanation.

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