

historical/literal or figurative consistency in the Urth cycle

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 29 Apr 1999

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Jonathan Laidlow — 29 Apr 1999, 11:54

The recent discussion about the presence of Christianity in BotNS has been very interesting. I think it is correct to draw on textual evidence over and above evidence from Wolfe the author - authors are notorious for changing their minds and changing their intentions. What Wolfe says and thinks of the BotNS now may be very different to how he thought of it both before it was written and after. This also makes it interesting to look at 'Long Sun' as a reworking of some of the themes of BotNS.

On a more serious note - the debate has centred on making Urth into a consistent fictional world by attempting to locate our own history into an early stage of the time frame. This posits a realist interpretation of the book which I cannot agree with. I have always read the Urth sequence as a kind of metafiction - a book about stories and the way stories are told. Last month Robert Borski pointed out in an 'Undine' post that the tales from the Brown book are all confections of familiar stories. The same is obviously true of the sequence as a whole, with Christian mythology as another 'old' story that is part of the fabric of Urth.

I feel that the SF Encyclopedia is right to suggest that Wolfe is some kind of modernist writer - one of the effects of Severian's narrative stance (his supposedly infallible memory) is to point out the unreliability of narration to actually create a realist world. Sev is a storyteller, and the Urth cycle is, in the words of Clute/ Nicholls and the other Encyclopedists, ' a fabulation is any story which challenges the two main assumptions of genre sf: that the world can be seen; and that it can be told. We have chosen to use the term "fabulation"' [And a note against confusion - this doesn't mean that Wolfe is some kind of post-modernist who doubts everything - as a modernist Wolfe perhaps believes that the world cannot be adequately reproduced in textual form in any literal sense]

I don't believe that Urth can be seen - it is not a realist narrative in the sense that it creates a realistic image in your head - I don't believe I can picture Sev or anything else from the cycle in my head in any pictorial sense. What it does is play with old narratives, conflating them and changing them to present something new. Perhaps what I'm saying is that Sev's world is figurative rather than literal
- it represents something, it does not present something.

What that something is, to my mind, changes every time I read it. I noticed two days ago the passage in Urth where Sev as Autarch reminds us that his name is 'Legion'. We have here conflation at work - for Sev is also the Conciliator - a christ figure, but he is in some way also a devil and a destroyer. While this cannot map exactly onto any strict Christian reading of the text, we have instead a reminder of two of the major figures in Christian theology, where Sev is put into similar textual positions to both Christ and Satan, without being either.... As Nick Gevers said last time, 'Sev is a reiteration of a messianic pattern encountered previously on Urth or Earth'. I would add that the whole cycle is a reiteration of the stories (history, myth,

fiction, theology) of Earth.

So, the discussion over whether Christianity ever existed on Urth is to me, a non-starter. Urth is never presented as a literal continuation of Earth history, but a post-historical, mythological point where Earth's stories retell themselves in exciting ways.

Jonathan

Visit Ultan's Library - A Gene Wolfe web resource

<http://members.tripod.co.uk/laidlow/index.htm>

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