

Latitudes

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 24 Aug 1999

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/1759>

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Roy C. Lackey — 24 Aug 1999, 00:30

SBear wrote:

Hallvard lived in the Caribbean, "South" of Central America. Keep going "North" and you pass through the jungles, through Ecuador, and on "North"

towards the Antarctic icecap, which **must** extend further than it does now. The ice at the other pole stretched right down into Britain during the ice ages, and that was with the Sun at full strength.<<

I realize that your usage of "North" and "South" in what I quoted above is intentionally wrong, meant to convey Severian's presumed confusion over left and right, and does not reflect upon your own knowledge of geography. I will just point out:

Both polar icecaps will have expanded on Urth in Severian's time, due to the failing sun, and both the Northern and Southern Temperate Zones will have shrunk in the direction of the tropics.

The Caribbean is in the tropics, roughly between 10 and 20 degrees north latitude, "north" as reckoned both by the compass and the sun. The equator crosses Ecuador, and all of the Caribbean Sea and West Indies are north of the equator. The jungles you refer to in your scenario would be in Central America and the northern part of South America. That well may be so, but the jungles also extend to equivalent latitudes south of the equator. The bulk of the Commonwealth lies south of these jungles. Lake Diuturna lies at the northernmost limits of the Autarch's dominion, and is far north of Nessus.

To put it in perspective; Kingston, Jamaica (Northern Caribbean) is roughly as far north of the equator as La Paz, Bolivia (South America) is south of it.

Even if Severian couldn't tell north from south, other characters can. As Dorcas told him, repeating what her father had told her about bloodbats, "they lived in the north, in the steaming forests at the center of the world." (II, XXVIII) Or, having asked the herdsman for directions to Lake Diuturna, (II, XXIX) the herdsman told him it was "to the north and the west" and that he would have to pass through the stone town: "Try to pass through by day, with the sun over the right shoulder by morning and later in the left eye." Those directions are absolutely correct for someone traveling in a northwesterly direction.

Finally, to remove all doubt on this issue, read Hallvard's "humorous" story in the "These Are the Jokes" chapter of OTTER, wherein he says: "In winter the sun does not shine upon our isle at all. For a time the sky grows light, and then we know it is about noon; but the sun himself does not appear." Hallvard's home isle is in the far south, close enough to the South Pole to be subject to the days-long Antarctic night, far from tropical waters.

I challenge you to find a

single instance of his following instructions and not getting lost.<<

Last two pages of SHADOW, chapter V, Rudesind directed him to Ultan. He followed directions and found him.

Chapter V, CLAW, Agia, in the fake "Thecla" note, gave directions to the mine, which he found without trouble.

Chapter XXI, CLAW, the "cowled figure" (Inire) directed him to the grounds of the thiasus. He found it without difficulty.

Roy

Peter Westlake — 24 Aug 1999, 09:33 · follows Roy C. Lackey

At 00:30 1999-08-24 -0500, Roy C. Lackey wrote:

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How far, I wonder? How big do we think the Commonwealth is? It does seem a bit cramped, I agree.

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No, the only thing I think he has wrong is Left and Right. Compass directions pose no problem for him. I suggest that "North" means the opposite in the time of the Commonwealth to what it does today. I'm sorry I didn't make that clear; my excuse is that I wrote about this once some time ago, and probably thought I had explained it when I hadn't. You have to make allowances; I'm only a bear!

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So they are. Of course, I could always claim that this is consistent with a reversed N and S and a mistaken L and R, and that the herdsman shares Severian's L-R confusion because he is really himself time travelling again, but I don't think it would fly ;-)

Finally, to remove all doubt on this issue, read Hallvard's "humorous" story in the "These Are the Jokes" chapter of OTTER, wherein he says: "In winter the sun does not shine upon our isle at all. For a time the sky grows light, and then we know it is about noon; but the sun himself does not appear." Hallvard's home isle is in the far south, close enough to the South Pole to be subject to the days-long Antarctic night, far from tropical waters.

That does seem pretty conclusive. Hardly consistent with a cooling world, though? How come there's any unfrozen water that near the Pole? You said yourself that the icecaps will have expanded.

I challenge you to find a single instance of his following instructions and not getting lost.<<

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Ah.

Still, I can still say that he gets lost as often as not, and suggest that he just can't tell left from right, rather than having them consistently backwards.

SBear.

Tony Ellis — 24 Aug 1999, 14:48 · follows Peter Westlake

SBear wrote:
Ah.

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than having them consistently backwards.

Again with this "Severian gets lost" thing! :-) People have been raising this one for years, and I've never really understood why.

Severian gets lost because getting lost is a great plot device, and a time-honoured one. If heroes always kept to the path like they were told an awful lot of stories out there would be (a) shorter, and (b) duller. Do Jeff Goldblum and his buddy stay on the path in American Werewolf in London? Do Bilbo and the dwarves stay on the path in The Hobbit? And look at the complete hash Jason and Odysseus made of a simple piece of marine navigation.

Not only does Severian manage to follow directions plenty of times, as Roy has shown, but when he does lose his way there always seem to be mitigating circumstances, such as delirium on the way to the lazaret, or Idas's duplicity on board the Ship. Why saddle Sev with some sort of rare direction-losing brain disorder on top of all his other peculiarities?

Jason Voegele — 24 Aug 1999, 10:35 · follows Tony Ellis

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What we mustn't forget to realize, though, is that it's in Wolfe's nature to take a standard plot device and give it a twist. In fact, much of Wolfe's work seems to work on the level that movies like "The Last American Hero" or "True Lies" work--simultaneously spoofing the genre while attempting to validate it. A plot device is rarely just a plot device, and the very presence of such a device in a Wolfe novel suggests that something deeper we should be searching for.

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I've always taken this apparent (but, yes, arguable) inability to tell left from right to be related in some way to the corridors of time. No hard evidence at this point, but whenever Sev gets lost I can't help but think he's lost in four dimensions instead of just three.

Jason Voegele