

Tracking wolves

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 27 Aug 1997

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Ron Crown — 27 Aug 1997, 10:45

Vacation and the start of a new semester have kept me away from several weeks, but catching up with the discussion on "Tracking Song" has been sehr interessant! (sorry, vacation was 2 weeks in Germany). Let me toss in my own 2 cents (or less) worth and see what others make of it. In the interview Gordon quotes in her book, Wolfe mentions T.S. as a "pivotal" story for him, because, for one thing, he is proud of "the primitive inventions no one ever actually invented...[the] uninvented inventions [!] of the stone age." If we take this at face value, it will save us from pouring through reference books of pre-Columbian artifacts trying to identify, say, the weapon used by the Wiggikki or even the sail-sledge mode of travel (which I see as a possible, albeit, exotic mode of travel suited to a fable of this type, cf. the sand-ships in Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*), assuming evidence for any such artifact would have survived in other than some plastic-art form. More importantly there is a little piece of evidence that hasn't been mentioned so far that of just the type that Wolfe likes to plant and that may be of some significance (I think). Did anyone notice the gesture used to signify "yes," i.e., touching the chin with the finger is used by three different "tribes," the Wiggiki, the Pamigaka, and Cim Glowing? (pp. 171, 184, 189 in the Orb edition). Does this perhaps signify a common (human?) origin? I propose this because guess who else uses the same gesture--the robots (p. 212). But where did they get it from? Not from observing the tribes, they can't survive (long) on the surface and have probably never been aboveground. From their (human?) builders? If this is true, then this suggests that the tribes are perhaps devolved from a common human ancestor, maybe in a genetic experiment gone wrong scenario as suggested by Sgt. Rock (I think). What's more, there is another science fictional allusion (I think) on p. 213, namely, Asimov's laws of robotics! The cyborg Min try to get the three robots to stop deconstructing Mantru's palace but "they will not obey us," i.e., the Min are not human so Law #1 does not apply (robots must obey commands from humans) and when the Min try to stop the robots by attacking them, "they defend themselves" (Law #3). This makes Roller's use of the finger to chin gesture (and the gesture itself perhaps) more significant, the machine uses it responding to Cutthroat's summons "to do as I said." It's almost like taking an oath. This solemnity/significance of the gesture is perhaps what accounts for its survival for so long among different tribes, albeit sometimes maybe in watered-down form. Finally, if this is a totem-story (and Wolfe so identifies it in the Gordon interview), it is surely of significance that Cutthroat begins his sojourn with the Wiggikki (wolves) to whom he bears a physical likeness according to Eggseeker (p. 184) and ends it with one of them (Crooked Leg, AHA, no one has mentioned the significance of that wound!) and then follows the return of the Great Sleigh (as I take it) and its winged being (although Whiteapple, a Pamigaka is there at the end, too). Since this is a totem-story, the natural interpretation of the winged being is that it is a bird (it's a bird, no, it's a plane, no, it's, it's...pphhhht, a bird <g>). As wolves are winter symbols, birds are spring symbols, as Wolfe says, the spring thaw has arrived, the world is being reborn, in the wake of man comes...man reborn. Obviously, I'm taking the story in more of a straightforward science fictional sense, or more accurately perhaps as an animal fable with science fictional elements. In other words, what we would expect from Wolfe, something sui generis that doesn't fit neatly into any predetermined category. This makes more sense to me than the two scenarios suggested by mantis, the shamanistic dream voyage or the "Dead Man Walking" (sledging?) trek (although

there are certainly elements in the story to support such readings). The biggest mystery remaining for me is exactly where does Cutthroat come or rather (since I think it's likely he comes from the Great Sleigh) how did he get to where he is and why? Unless this is intended as some type of allegory of finding one's way in the world without really knowing "woher" or "wohin" (where from and where to)? BTW, I've got several Native American dictionaries coming through interlibrary loan (our library didn't have very much); I'll let you know if anything turns up on any names.

And now, step up and have at!

Ron Crown