

Fairy Tale logic? Bah!

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 02 Nov 1999

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Ouroboros — 02 Nov 1999, 21:15

No, no, no, no. Wolfe does not use "Fairy Tale logic" in TBOTNS. While Wolfe is not a speculative SF writer in the tradition of Asimov, Hienlen, or Verne, the New Sun books and 5HC are quite rooted in technical scientific theories -- possibly, more so than those writers. Sure, he presents mythological elements in these stories. And, granted that Severian's healing/resurrection powers seem mystical and their rationalization are the heart of the most difficult puzzles in the New Sun. But most (possibly all) of the characters and situations are surely rationalized, and many are based on solid modern scientific theories.

Typhon/Piaton

<<<the two-headed Typhon must be an uncomfortable arrangement for the Typhon head, which is presumably situated on one of Piaton's shoulders>>>>

This is not the way I visualize Typhon at all. For one thing, since Severian at first supposed that Piaton had been grafted on to Typhon, Typhon's head must be in the natural location. Both Typhon's and Piaton's heads are connected to Piaton's spine so Typhon's brain can control the voluntary muscles and Piaton's the involuntary. The picture here is Piaton's neck growing out of the base of Typhon's neck like a strange boil. When Piaton's head is removed it will leave only an ugly scar just as Typhon claimed.

Baldanders, Abaia, Erebus

The nature of these "giants" has been explained by Wolfe. They are men who, seeking immortality, have used a logical method of continuous growth. Remember that when our bodies stop growing, we grow old and die. When our brains stop growing we start losing 10,000 brain cells a day. Continuous growth equals immortality.

Father Inire's Mirrors

Quantum tunneling is the theory behind Father Inire's mirrors. It is also how Severian brings the New Sun. And it's the theory behind the "word written in the sand" analogy in URTN. Finally, since quantum theory

views all matter (and other energy) as waves rather than only particles, it is behind the many Severians. Severian exists in all his many incarnations at once, and only in a relative sense does he exist locally (I realize I'm treating quantum theory trivially here).

Much of what's going on in TBOTNS was suddenly clear to me when I read somewhere that Wolfe first got the idea for New Sun story when he read an article called "The Creation of Universes Out of Nothing" in Physics Letters. It allegedly theorized about how the universe could have been created by quantum tunneling. I have not been able yet to find this article or any corroboration that Wolfe was inspired by it. Yet, after I found out what QT was, the knowledge seemed indispensable to understanding the books.

The following site gives a good overview of quantum tunneling for the layman. http://www.zebu.uoregon.edu/~js/glossary/quantum_tunneling.html.

Now quantum tunneling of macroscopic objects has not been observed to my knowledge, but the theory is sound and many physicists believe it is possible. Far fewer believe it is feasible for interstellar space travel, but if it were, it would permit instantaneous rather than merely faster-than-light travel. So the mirrors can hardly be called magical in a real sense, and Father Inire's explanation is NOT gibberish.

Now you skeptics are probably wondering why if it is so important Wolfe didn't discuss QT in the appendices. The only answer to that I can give is what Severian would say: "it is a profound mistake to believe that we must know such things to be influenced by them."

-Ouroboros

Michael Straight — 03 Nov 1999, 09:25 · follows Ouroboros

On Tue, 2 Nov 1999, Ouroboros wrote:
No, no, no, no. Wolfe does not use "Fairy Tale logic"

I agree with this. When I think of "Fairy Tale logic" I think of George MacDonald (e.g. "The Golden Key" or _Phantasties_) which has a very different feel from what Wolfe is doing.

Quantum tunneling is the theory behind Father Inire's mirrors. It is also how Severian brings the New Sun.

On the other hand, I view this as somewhat equivalent to Dr. Crane's theory about Silk having a stroke. It still leaves too much unexplained. How can QT explain the New Sun being attached to Severian, or being "birthed" by an act of intercourse?

I agree that Wolfe wants us to read TBOTNS as SF rather than fantasy, yet I think he's also saying that this universe (Severian's as well as ours) may contain wonders that are inexplicable.

He strings us along with clues and partial explanations so that instead of thinking, "Oh, this is magic" and dismissing it, we keep thinking "Surely there's an explanation for all this...isn't there?"

If we are unsurprised by a butterfly pulled out of a rainbow (AGIA: "Aw, Severian, that trick never works!") I don't think it is because we've decided Urth is a fantasy world where magic "works," but Wolfe has made us believe that such a thing could really happen--either because there is a "scientific explanation," or because there really are miracles.

-Rostrum

Tony Ellis — 03 Nov 1999, 18:30 · follows Michael Straight

Yes. As usual I'm joining the debate after all the clever stuff has been said, but count me in as a member of the NOT-fairy-tale-logic camp, too.

One of the games TBOTNS plays, as we've said many times, is to take existing fantasy cliches and give them an entirely new spin. One of the best ways you can do that is to give a scientific explanation to a classically "fantastic" event.

We've all become so accustomed to thinking of Typhon as Autarch, Satan, and mysterious link to the Whorl that it's easy to forget exactly how we first encounter him. As Sev says, it's as if a constellation has taken on human form. Typhon is a two-headed giant. An ogre. A troll. Because that's what heroes meet when they're wondering in the mountains. The twist is, this troll is bio-engineered.

The explanation of Father Inire's mirrors is important for the same reason. Magic mirrors are a fantasy cliché - the idea that travel-by-mirror could actually work is something new and thought-provoking. To complain that the explanation is pseudoscience is unsporting - any and every SF story that features FTL travel or hyperspace or whatever is using pseudoscience, and few if any describe how it works with the marvellous, opaque eloquence of that passage in Torturer.

Rostrum wrote:

How can QT explain the New Sun being attached to Severian, or being "birthed" by an act of intercourse?

I'll concede the first point. I can think of several explanations, as it happens, but since I'm opposed to arguments that have to write their own Wolfe fiction to work, I'll agree that some miracles may be just that.

But I've never agreed with this thing about the New Sun being created by Sev and Apheta making love. That's just symbolism. The New Sun was created deep within the world of Yesod, and someone pressed the "go" button when Apheta and Sev happened to be getting it on. Because of his mystic link, Sev felt it come into being. Simple as that.

Ron Hale-Evans — 04 Nov 1999, 16:15 · follows Tony Ellis

At 06:30 PM 11/3/99 +0000, Tony Ellis wrote:

Yes. As usual I'm joining the debate after all the clever stuff has been said, but count me in as a member of the NOT-fairy-tale-logic camp, too.

Well, if we are to take Wolfe at his word, he is quoted in _Lexicon Urthus_, p. 159 as saying in an interview, "I view The Book of the New Sun as science fantasy -- by which I mean a science-fiction story told with the outlook, the flavor of fantasy. There are _no_ fantasy

elements involved -- no "magic" in the fantasy sense...." (emphasis in original).

From the lupine mouth. The interview is dated 1983. I suppose we can claim that Wolfe was misleading the interviewer, or that he later changed his mind, but...

Ron H-E

Ron Hale-Evans: [rwhe at apocalypse.org](mailto:rwhe@apocalypse.org) ... <http://www.apocalypse.org/~rwhe/>

Center for Ludic Synergy: <http://www.ludism.org/>

Kennexions GBG artgame: <http://kennexions.ludism.org/>

Hexagram-8 I Ching Mailing List: <http://www.apocalypse.org/~rwhe/hex8.html>

Positive Revolution FAQ: <http://www.ludism.org/posrev/>