

Singleshot: To William

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 07 Aug 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/2772>

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Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 07 Aug 2001, 09:38

This is interesting. When I read the above title, I said to myself, "No, that's not it. It's 'The Sound of Distant Thunder'." But I thought I had better confirm the title before I posted anything. And I couldn't. The actual title is "A Sound of Thunder"

You're right, and you're even approximately right (in footnote) about the source of my confusion, though to me "the Delicate Sound of Thunder" is a Pink Floyd live album -- didn't know there was a related concert film.

What makes it interesting is that it seems that Dan'l* and I are not the only ones who misremember the title slightly.

I'd almost bet that it's appeared under variant titles. I _know_ that "distant" is in there somewhere 8*)

... Apparently Hollywood is thinking of turning "Thunder" into a film, which raises some questions: Will the film get made?

In Hollywood that's always a big question.

If it does, will it bear as little resemblance to the original story as _Total Recall_ did to the Philip K. Dick story "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale" that it was based on?

Dunno. I'd keep in mind that Bradbury
(a) has had better luck in this regard (viz. _Fahrenheit 451_, etc.)
(b) has, unlike PKD, a Hollywood "rep" (through his own film work), and
(c) is regarded as a "real writer" by the Dreaded Bicoastal Litererary Establishment.

Will any of us care either way?)

Some of us, yes.

Anyway, here's the flaw. If you kill a mouse or any other animal** in the past, you will wipe out all of its descendents, perhaps many billions of mice, if you are far enough back in time. But will this cause an avalanche of changes to thunder down the corridors of time? I don't think so. More of the descendants of all of the other contemporaneous mice will live and the mouse population will be virtually (or even absolutely) unchanged, so the mouse predators and those who prey on them will see no difference.

So far so good. But.

First of all, we're talking a little longer ago than mice. But let that pass; let us assume that we're talking about the small mammals, some of them pretty mouse-like, that existed

contemporaneously with the later Age of Reptiles.

We really don't know much about them. Let's assume for convenience that the population was actually pretty large, so your argument about mice being interchangeable has some validity.

But only some. In fact, comes the Yucatan Smash, the population of these whatever-they-are's is going to be greatly reduced in a very short time. Did you kill the ancestor of one of the survivors? If so, then you've significantly changed the genepool with which the local area will begin when that big meteor hits the Restart button. In fact, even if you didn't, by removing one competitor for resources and its descendants, you've rearranged the pattern by which other critters disperse and gather -- some other little mammal will eat the stuff your mamal didn't, and so be somewhere else at a certain time; matings will change; etc. A somewhat-different set of cute li'l mammals will be in the right places to survive when the hammer falls. Which means a somewhat-different set of genes to start evolving into the Age Of Mammals[tm].

Hell, there are birds back then, too. Though I admit it's unproven, chances are that some of them eat those mousey things.

I repeat: what you are dismissing as the "crushed butterfly" theory is just the fact that actions have consequences, and the consequences are unpredictable.

No. There is no guarantee that killing that butterfly in 6,000,000 BC will cause Dan Quayle to be elected President in 1996. But there's no guarantee that it won't. The Earth is a chaotic system, meaning "unpredictable sensitivity to starting conditions," where "starting" means "whenever you decide to start monitoring." History may be conserved. Or it may not be.

And the greater the change, the less likely it seems that history will be conserved. Kill the young Hitler and WW2 (including some form of anti-Semitic pogroms) will probably still happen, though somewhat differently. Maybe there will even still be some sort of Holocaust, and things will look fairly similar in 1945.

(On the other hand, a somewhat-saner Fuhrer might fund research that leads to the discovery of the Bomb by Germany [or, who was it that wrote a story in which the Germans didn't get the bomb but figured out how to use radioactive dust as a weapon of terror? Anyway...], or have the sense not to attack Russia and Britain and certainly not to attack both.)

But even if they look fairly similar in '45, will they look that similar in '95? What difference will it make if Anne Frank is captured earlier and her diary never discovered? What difference will it make if Niemoller never makes his famous statement about "when they came for so-and-so"? What difference will it make if the Jews [and Gypsies and homosexuals and anyone else the Nazis don't like] are only imprisoned and mistreated but not systematically gassed?

I suspect the answers are "very little, fairly little, and a great deal." But I don't know. And I certainly don't know about 2195; perhaps the Diary of Anne Frank will yet inspire a world-changing religious movement. (What if the Catholic Church were to take it into its collective heads to canonize her as a martyr? It is not, actually, inconceivable.)

The problem is that you're thinking of "crushed butterfly" as an absolute; it isn't. It allows for the likelihood that some changes will leave history pretty much unchanged. (A hawk was going to kill that mouse in ten minutes anyway, and that particular hawk is actually quite well-fed, so its life is unaffected by missing this one meal.)

And, of course, there's the third theory, which nobody seems to have mentioned but which Wolfe (who is, after all, the nominal topic of this list and so has to be mentioned now and then, somehow) seems to subscribe to in all his timetravelling, or at least in the Lupiverse -- that if you travel back in time, you can't really change anything, because what you're doing back there you already did back there because if you hadn't you wouldn't be here to go back there and do it. Or something like that. (Except for the whole business about earlier versions of Severian, which seem to imply that maybe it is possible in the Lupiverse-of-discourse to change history, but let's not get into that, for purposes of this discussion.)

History will be conserved***, but at least some of the individuals involved will be different and the details will very probably be different as well!

I tend to think history is mostly details. Archimedes getting killed because some soldier didn't recognize him (or didn't follow orders), that sort of thing.

So, Pullman's alternate world which is so completely different from ours in so many ways but still has a recognizable Oxford in it and a John Calvin, still in a prominent, church-related role, strikes me as being just plain silly.

With that, I agree. And to me it is a significant flaw in the book.

--Dan'I

William Ansley — 08 Aug 2001, 22:50 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

At 9:38 AM -0700 8/7/01, Dan'I Danehy-Oakes wrote:
First of all, we're talking a little longer ago than mice. But let that pass; let us assume that we're talking about the small mammals, some of them pretty mouse-like, that existed contemporaneously with the later Age of Reptiles.

I could address some of your other comments in your reply to me and I may do so later, but I feel I have to address your implication that either I or Ray Bradbury believe that mice were contemporaneous with dinosaurs.

I am sorry if my previous message was confusing. In it I quoted from an article about a possible movie based on Ray Bradbury's story "The Sound of Thunder." The passage from the article I quoted was mostly a quotation from the story itself. So the stuff about mice was by Bradbury. It was part of a lecture given to the time travellers before they set off on their dinosaur hunt to explain why it was so vitally important that they stay on the path (a metal walkway levitating over the surface of the ground). The butterfly didn't get crushed until quite a bit later in the story and wasn't discovered until the end.

So Bradbury didn't think mice were contemporaneous with dinosaurs, even if my clumsy juxtaposition of passages from different places in his story made it seem as if he did. And I was just addressing Bradbury's text.

William Ansley