

Free will in BOtNS

The Urth list — 2 messages, 2 voices, 29 Jan 1998

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David Wells — 29 Jan 1998, 18:33

(apologies for the length of this - I'm rarely able to post here)

Recent discussions have raised this fascinating subject (Free Will in BOtNS), which has always intrigued me. The (apparently radical) manipulation of Severian's life by outside forces seems to me (an atheist determinist) a brilliant metaphor for the hardest test which life throws at us - the realization that some or all of our "Free Will" may be entirely illusory. But it sits uneasily with the view I would expect given knowledge of Wolfe's spiritual orientation. Especially as Severian's actions are judged for the salvation of all mankind(*) - this seems a bit of a cheat since arguably the judge was pulling the strings all along (I am trivializing the argument, but I'm sure you see what I mean).

In similar vein, I have often toyed with the idea of analyzing Severian's "deaths" through the series. There seem to be at least four types of (near-)demise:

- 1) Severian really dies in the timeline we are reading about, and neither supernatural intervention nor the Claw/New Sun can save him. (But the only time this happens(?) he is resurrected as an aquastor (eilodon? I can never recall the difference) so that he can save mankind after his own death...)
 - 2) Severian "really dies" in the timeline, but is supernaturally saved by the Claw/New Sun. (e.g. shot by the Big Gun in the Citadel, the avern duel)
 - 3) Severian nearly dies in the timeline, but is saved by the natural intervention of a supernaturally-well-informed being (e.g. saved by the Undine in Ch 1).
 - 4) Severian nearly dies in the timeline, but is saved by natural good luck/skill/heroism, etc.
- There are surprisingly few examples of this - given that such hero-escapes-from-peril stuff is the very basis of most "fantasy" fiction - but Severian's besting of Typhon is a spectacular example (also his escape from the notules and from death in battle, I guess). But I imagine that if Severian had failed to heroically survive these, they would have been "converted" to a type 3)...

But what really puzzles me is how the "Apu Punchau experience" fits into this...

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(*) I was initially completely wowed by the idea that Severian wasn't actually going to be "tested", but simply called to account for the actions of his life. What a fascinating concept. It took me an amazingly long time to figure out where this idea came from (yes, OK, stop laughing out there - but I simply don't think about religious ideas on a day to day basis).

CRCulver — 29 Jan 1998, 17:35 · follows David Wells

David Wells said:

But what really puzzles me is how the "Apu Punchau experience" fits into this...<

Apu-Punchau was the Severian of the first "iteration" of Briah, before the timeline was altered. (See _Citadel_ chapter XXXVIII, paragraph 5). I've never been adept at explaining temporal mechanics, so I hope you can get all you want to know out of the BotNS text itself.

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"Ignorance, that light of fools steers a wayward path"
-Brendan Perry