

Tracking Song

The Urth list — 9 messages, 6 voices, 29 May 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3285>

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Robert Borski — 29 May 2002, 06:05

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Cutthroat, of course, is our protagonist's name, his nom de tribu being conferred upon him by the Wiggikki because he has "a reddish-brown birthmark on my throat from one side of the hair behind my neck to the other." As for his real name, Cutthroat claims he doesn't remember it. But notice how "cutthroat" is also a synonym for "murderer." As for the birthmark, it likely symbolizes the unspecified mark God places on Cain so that no one will murder him. This "mark of Cain" aspect is reinforced later when Longknife tells Cutthroat, "You are under an enchantment. That is good for you." "Why is that?" Cutthroat asks. Responds Longknife: "No one will kill you. When an enchanted animal dies, the spell runs up the weapon, seeking a new home."

Cutthroat is recording the progress of his quest to catch up to the Great Sleigh. "I want to leave a record of what has happened to me, so that if someone comes for me, and finds me dead, he will understand. I feel that someone may, though I do not know why. And I want him to understand." This person who Cutthroat/Cain senses is looking for him is God, and he knows why--he's killed Abel--just as he clearly does not want to be understood. ("Am I my brother's keeper?")

Cutthroat also finds that he can speak the language of the animal tribes, "though badly." This makes sense in the postlapsarian world. In the Garden the beasts of the wild and the field all spoke a single language understandable to Adam. A generation later, after the diaspora from Eden, that same ability by his children has begun to deteriorate.

When Cutthroat encounters the Pamigaka, a hoe is extended to him, an action Cutthroat believes is "clearly a ritual gesture of some kind." Cutthroat asks about being allowed to leave in peace, but is then told by Eggseeker, "I would rather that you teach us your wisdom. Will you teach wisdom?" Because the name "Cain" means "smith," and considering the extended hoe (an implement also harkening back to Cain's days as a tiller of the soil), this appears to be an appeal to be taught metalworking (or perhaps gardening) skills.

Cain is the founder of the first city and his children will also be metal workers, with direct descendant Tubal-cain being described as "an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron." This may help explain why Cutthroat is able to bond with Roller, Dragon, and Bug, and get machines to help him. (The underground city of metal has apparently been built by Mantru or his ancestors--Mantru being Cutthroat's symbolic twin.)

At one stage Cim Glowing asks Cutthroat, "Suppose that when we catch up to the Great Sleigh,

they believe you have murdered one of their people?" While in another passage Cutthroat wonders similarly: "Surely, if a crewmember were missing by some accident, the fact could not go unnoticed for long. The Great Sleigh would reverse its course, or a rescue party would be sent back along the track. As nearly as I could tell, neither of these things have occurred. It may very well be that I have been exiled for some crime, or that, as Cim Glowing hinted, I have stolen these clothes and, with them, an identity to which I am not entitled."

This, I posit, is exactly so: Cutthroat/Cain has murdered "Abel" and has been exiled as a consequence.

Later, Cutthroat describes his travails in the metal city as "wanderings," while Cutthroat's uncertainty about the 8th day is blamed on perpetual dusk. "There is no day here, and no night," perhaps signifying he has finally (and punningly) come to the land of Nod. Certainly Nod is being alluded to when Cutthroat sources his original home, "To the east, from which I came." (Nod--meaning 'wandering' or 'homeless'--lays "east of Eden.")

Vampires are in at least one tradition (and several role-playing games, I believe) held to be the descendants of Cain and Lilith. So it makes sense that Cutthroat encounters him, although they are more likely the offspring of Mantru-Cain rather than Cutthroat. (Another tradition makes the wicked angel Samael the father of Cain; perhaps this, along with the horned staff, reflects Mantru's true paternity.)

Then there's Cutthroat's mysterious association with Ketin. Ketin (or rather his wife Ketincha) is encountered early, when Cutthroat first finds himself with the Wiggikki tribe. Describing the giantess, Red Kluy tells Cutthroat, "She is Ketincha--you saw her. We're lucky her husband wasn't around. You should see Ketin. They used to have a son, but he's gone away." Later, Longknife tells him, "You are not a man. Hair grows on your face, and you must cut it off. I followed you tonight. I think that you are cousin to Ketin." Cutthroat protests that he has never even seen Ketin, to which Longknife rejoins, ""You remember nothing--why should you not forget your cousinship? Like you, he leaps very far, though he is big and you small. I think that you are cousin to Ketin."

Ketin, I submit, is the symbolic equivalent of Adam--which makes Cutthroat (or possibly dead brother Abel) the son who's gone away. In less scientifically-astute times, the bones of dinosaurs were often thought to be those of our primordial ancestors; Cutthroat, still a young man or perhaps an adolescent, is smaller than his symbolic father--plus, like Mantru, he's committed evil deeds and has perhaps therefore shrunk.

The Adam-Ketin link is further strengthened by onomastic evidence. 'Ketin,' in Kurmanji--a language spoken in the Tigris-Euphrates river valley, the traditional site of Eden--means "to fall." Furthermore, there is in the name Kenites--signifying the tribe of metalworkers founded by eponymous Cain--the nested name Ketin. And just as there are two versions of Cain, there may (also like the moons) be two versions of Adam--a symbolic one; fallen Ketin, lost father-guardian of Eden--and the commander of the Great Sleigh. (Ketin does not recognize Cutthroat when they meet, so their relationship must be symbolic.) (Note too how Cutthroat has "fallen": not only, as he alleges, from the Great Sleigh, but metaphorically as the first murderer.)

As for the commander, when Cutthroat finally does reach the Great Sleigh--literally the technology of heaven if we accept that the space people are terraforming the world in question to make it more habitable, perhaps even after a long nuclear winter--the last entry he records has Cutthroat "regaining" his memory. "I know who you are," he says. "The small planet is round, and you have come back, and the time for talking into this black box is over. I am going to talk to you face to face. Who is that tall man with you? I think he has...wings?"

But far from being an avian symbol of regenerative spring as Joan Gordon suggests, the winged creature with commander Adam (the "you" being addressed by Cutthroat) is much more likely a forbidding presence, who will not allow Cutthroat to reboard.

God, of course, has other plans for Cain.

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Robert Borski — 29 May 2002, 06:07 · follows Robert Borski

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James Jordan — 31 May 2002, 23:20 · follows Robert Borski

Fascinating as always, Borski. A couple of thoughts -- and I have not reread the story before bringing these up.

Man-tru(e) seems a pretty obvious name. Which makes me wonder who he is symbolically. Cain, a true "fallen" man, or some kind of Adam figure, the true-man fallen, and perhaps responsible for the winter?

The fact that the Great Sleigh circles the planet reminds me a lot of the Ship of the Severian Quintet. Symbolically the same. But I guess that's obvious....

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Sleigh. "I want to leave a record of what has happened to me, so that if someone comes for me, and finds me dead, he will understand. I feel that someone may, though I do not know why. And I want him to understand." This person who Cutthroat/Cain senses is looking for him is God, and he knows why--he's killed Abel--just as he clearly does _not_ want to be understood. ("Am I my brother's keeper?")

Not sure here. God gave the mark to protect Cain against someone who, finding him, might kill him. Wolfe's stories can be light or dark, or ambiguous (duh!). Cutthroat is pursuing the Sleigh. Is he pursuing salvation, however dimly? Unlike Cain, Cutthroat does not go away and stay away and set up his own city (his own Garden of Eden). Rather, he is pursuing the symbolic Church/Heaven. This might be more of a "redemption of Cain" variant, offered by Wolfe. My guess would be that Cutthroat's pursuer, to whom he addresses his recording, is God. He is the One who will come for Cutthroat after he is dead.

Along the same lines, of course, is your last observation: Does the cherub stand to bar Cutthroat from the Garden/Sleigh/Church, or will he be welcomed?

As for the commander, when Cutthroat finally does reach the Great Sleigh--literally the technology of heaven if we accept that the space people are terraforming the world in question to make it more habitable, perhaps even after a long nuclear winter--the last entry he records has Cutthroat "regaining" his memory. "I know who you are," he says. "The small planet is round, and you have come back, and the time for talking into this black box is over. I am going to talk to you face to face. Who is that tall man with you? I think he has...wings?"

This looks very redemptive to me. Talking into the box symbolizes prayer -- he's been talking to someone absent, but who will come for him when he is dead. When Christ returns, we see him face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Certainly the Bible gives no hint of an ultimately saved Cain, and I know of no pseudigraphical literature that does. But it looks to me as if Wolfe might be playing that trick here.

But what do you think?

Nutria

Alice K. Turner — 01 Jun 2002, 04:56 · follows James Jordan

[Huge snip]

Certainly the Bible gives no hint of an ultimately saved Cain,
and
I know of no pseudigraphical literature that does. But it looks to me as
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Wolfe might be playing that trick here.
But what do you think?

But Ratty, way back when, someone, maybe you, silenced me on some rant by pointing out that Cutthroat is loved wherever he goes. By everyone. Even when he is menaced underground it is the immediate affection that everyone seems to feel for him immediately that saves him. How does that follow a Cain reading? The mark? If so, that needs a bit of explanation.

(Sorry I should look back in the archives, or even in the novella, but it's just too much....)

-alga

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 03 Jun 2002, 17:26 · follows Alice K. Turner

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bit of explanation.

Genesis 4:14

But the LORD said to him, "Not so; if anyone kills Cain,
he will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the LORD
put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill
him.

Okay, this is a little ambiguous ... the two statements may be taken as related in (at least) two different ways:

- 1) The mark effectively informs anyone who finds Cain that God will take sevenfold vengeance on anyone who kills him;
- 2) the mark in some way directly prevents anyone who finds Cain from killing him.

IF we read "Tracking Song" as a riff on Cain -- concerning which I remain not fully convinced -- then we'd have to conclude that Mr Wolfe had based his story on the second interpretation.

Michael Straight — 05 Jun 2002, 16:53 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On Mon, 3 Jun 2002, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes wrote:
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2) the mark in some way directly prevents anyone who finds Cain from killing him.

I don't see how that can be a plausible reading, given the bit attributed as a direct quote from God. If Cain is given some sort of divine protection that makes it impossible for people to kill him, it would be pointless to say that anyone who does kill him will suffer vengeance seven times over.

-Rostrum

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 05 Jun 2002, 22:07 · follows Michael Straight

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Well, yeah; but then God says a lot of things that seem kind of redundant over the course of the Bible, and especially in Genesis. This doesn't strike me as an insurmountable problem.

matthew.malthouse — 06 Jun 2002, 09:54 · follows Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

On 05/06/2002 17:53:10 Michael Straight wrote:

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Yup, not to prevent but warn against.

Typical God move, forbid something, threaten dire consequences for transgression, stick up

warning signs... and then wait until some smuck ripe for smiting goes ahead and....

So maybe Cain is shunned not for the murder of Abel but for the risk he poses. Self preservation wrapped up as piety and a small insight into the human psyche.

Matthew

James Jordan — 06 Jun 2002, 14:54 · follows matthew.malthouse

At 03:07 PM 6/5/2002 -0700, you wrote:

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You're right. But Wolfe may be spinning things a bit differently, as he clearly is by granting "Cain" redemption. Another note that might be worth looking for. God warns Cain that sin is crouching at the door, and he must overcome it. Sin is a beast, and this takes up from the serpent in Genesis 3 -- the Garden of Eden on the east side of Eden is the door into Eden. What might this have to do with Cutthroat's relationships with talking animals, and his fighting the beast within himself?

Nutria