

The leatherskin

The Urth list — 12 messages, 6 voices, 16 Nov 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3573>

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Don Doggett — 16 Nov 2002, 21:27

Howdy all,

One of (imho) Wolfe's first tricks in SS to give us the impression of Blue as an alien world is his introduction of the leatherskin, a terrible creature with three (gasp!) jaws. It is the only really alien creature in the book (even the neighbors are four limbed humanoids). Or is it? Here's a more mundane (sort of) explanation: The leatherskin is a sort of evolved shark. Yes, a shark. Its three jaws are really three rows of teeth. To someone like Horn, or Silk, who has probably never had any previous experience with salt water creatures, these rows could very well appear to be three jaws. Sort of the way people with no experience with horseback riding might have seen the first horsemen as centaurs. Sharks also have extremely rough skin. Just a thought (a scary thought - a shark that can climb into your boat. Ugh.)

Don

Charles Reed — 18 Nov 2002, 15:43 · follows Don Doggett

Hello Don.

I'd like to respond to your idea about the "alien-ness" the animals of the Blue/Green system. You say that the leatherskin is "the only really alien creature in the book," but I think you're mistaken. ALL the animals we encounter on Blue are very and extremely alien to anything that existed on the Whorl. It's just that settlers, where possible, have given the alien animals names that reflect the only animal names they know.

For example, there's a beast on blue that is rather large, lives in the forest, and has a very long snout. Instead of making up something new, they start calling it an elephant, despite the fact that it has eight legs. It's much easier to do that than try to create a new taxonomy. Every settler knows what a real elephant is, and this new creature of Blue is similar enough in appearance that when somebody says "elephant" everybody immediately knows what is being talked about. Similarly, there's a creature that lives in the river that is at least vaguely reptilian, probably looks like a log floating in the water when still, and might eat you if you fall in, so instead of making up something new, they call it a crocodile, even though these new crocodiles are obviously not the same animal as the "real" crocodile whence their name derives ("real" crocodiles don't have eight legs).

That's not to say that some Blue animals don't get new names. Some animals are so different that they're not reminiscent enough of a Whorl animal to inherit a Whorl name. In those cases, the names given are very utilitarian and descriptive in nature -- such as "leatherskin."

You're also forgetting the inhumis, and the great variety of alien beings on Green, which were pretty much mentioned only in passing. Still, some of their descriptions bear little resemblance to anything we ran into on the Whorl.

Blue is an alien world. The evolution of land-based life on Blue for some reason favored octopedal locomotion rather than quadrupedal locomotion, as was the case on Urth and subsequently in the Whorl. In fact, I can't think of a single animal we meet that is native to Blue that does not have eight limbs, and that includes the departed Neighbors.

Wolfe is an extremely surprising writer, and is often subtle -- sometimes subtle to point of being frustrating -- but I really don't regard him as being "tricky." I tend to take his (and his narrator's) explanations at face value until there is a reason to do otherwise. Sometimes there is such a reason, but I don't think this is one of those times.

Charles

Don Doggett wrote:
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Don

William Ansley — 18 Nov 2002, 20:04 · follows Charles Reed

At 01:27 PM 11/16/2002 -0800, Don Doggett <harlekin at earthlink.net> wrote:
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Don,

I don't agree that Horn mistook three rows of teeth for three jaws. Horn says that the jaws clashed shut like "the slamming of double doors." [p. 61 of the hardcover edition of OBW]. I don't see how this can be interpreted to mean anything other than two separate, hinged jaws closing against a third fixed one.

In any case, a shark with at least *six* limbs [1] is as alien to Earthly evolution as one with three jaws, in my somewhat informed opinion (I was a genetics major in a previous life).

William Ansley

[1] Way back on October 18, 1999 I argued that the leatherskin has twelve legs and no one has bothered arguing with my conclusions yet.

What I said then:

The leatherskin, one of the largest I have ever seen, stood with six massive legs and half its weight on the starboard gunwale, over which silver water cascaded. [OBW (hc), p. 62]

If this creature has only six legs and all of them are on the starboard gunwale (rather a tricky balancing act in the first place), then how can the gunwale be only bearing half its weight?

Dan'I Danehy-Oakes — 18 Nov 2002, 20:24 · follows William Ansley

Actually, since first reading that scene, I've always envisioned the leatherskin as some kind of lobster ... possibly one with a slightly softer shell, possibly one that has molted recently; as for the three jaws, consider this from Thomas Huxley:

"... when I turn to the forepart of the body I see, at first, nothing but a great shield-like shell, called technically the 'carapace,' ending in front in a sharp spine, on either side of which are the curious compound eyes, set upon the ends of stout movable stalks. Behind these, on the under side of the body, are two pairs of long feelers, or antennae, followed by six pairs of jaws folded against one another over the mouth..."

Six pairs of jaws?! Okay, that's a bit of overkill... but perhaps Horn doesn't see them all...

Don Doggett — 19 Nov 2002, 06:57 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

----- Original Message -----

From: "William Ansley" <

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Then Blattid says:

"Actually, since first reading that scene, I've always envisioned the leatherskin as some kind of lobster ... possibly one with a slightly softer shell, possibly one that has molted recently;"

Sounds good to me. Lobster anyone? There's plenty for everybody.

James Wynn — 09 Jan 2003, 17:06 · follows Don Doggett

William Ansley heroically proffers:

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Crush blunders forward:

Ok. I think I have an understanding of what a leatherskin looks like.

The leatherskin is giant dugong with six pectoral flippers and a manticore's jaws.

The reason "half its weight" was on the starboard gunwale was because its massive tail-end was dangling in the water.

See the following link for my full explanation:

<http://www.urth.org/whorlmap/leatherskin.htm>

--- Crush

William Ansley — 10 Jan 2003, 04:08 · follows James Wynn

At 11:06 AM -0600 1/9/03, James Wynn wrote:

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Oh happy day! Finally, someone is arguing with my conclusions!

If I am to buy your argument, I have to believe that Horn doesn't know the difference between flippers and legs. Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he has never seen any creature with fins or flippers on the Whorl, so he calls all such appendages "legs." But, until you can show me a quote where Horn or some other former Whorl denizen talks about fish legs, I will remain doubtful.

--

cilluff1 at optonline.net — 10 Jan 2003, 14:39 · follows William Ansley

W. Ansley wrote, in response to Crush's leatherskin vision:

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Horn or some other former Whorl denizen talks about fish legs, I will remain doubtful.

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I always pictured the leatherskin as more of a gigantic, multilegged alligator or similar creature
(mostly because, as W.A. noted, the creature had "legs," not "fins," but also because of its
name, "leatherskin," reminded me of alligator skin leather products like cheesy cowboy boots).

As for how many legs, the quote is susceptible to both the six or twelve (indeed, or more)
legged interpretation:

"The leatherskin, one of the largest I have ever seen, stood with six massive
legs and half its weight on the starboard gunwale...."

I tend to think the leatherskin had more than six legs, simply because I think Horn would have
said something more along the lines of "all six of its massive legs" or such if six were the
creature's total. Of course, the quote is not exactly definitive, especially because it is not really
Horn but Gene Wolfe talking, and Horn's description really is just GW's choice of words for us to
know that the creature is multilegged beyond what we on Earth, rather than Urth, would think
normal.

My feeling that there are more than six legs also goes back to my alligatoresque vision of it, if
half the creature's weight were on the sloop then it probably had other legs still in the water --
an alligator's four legs are roughly evenly divided between front and back of the torso, with its
tail accounting for not much of the creature's weight relative to the rest. Similarly, in my vision
the leatherskin with half its body on the sloop would have legs still in the water.

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 10 Jan 2003, 16:42 · follows cilluff1 at optonline.net

Way back on October 18, 1999 I argued that the leatherskin
has twelve legs and no one has bothered arguing with my
conclusions yet. What I said then:

The leatherskin, one of the largest I have ever seen, stood

with six massive legs and half its weight on the starboard
gunwale, over which silver water cascaded. [OBW (hc), p. 62]

Well, I didn't exactly argue with your conclusion, but I'm pretty sure I came back with the suggestion that the leatherskin is some kind of crustacean -- my first thought was a lobster, but on more mature thought I suspect it of being something like a softshell crab. Except, of course, much bigger. And with twice as many limbs.

James Wynn — 10 Jan 2003, 17:29 · follows Dan'I Danehy-Oakes

BTW It occurred to me last night that manticores have ****horns**** with ****stingers****. Wolfe's leatherneck "had" a Horn with a deadly sting as well ... a harpoon.

-----Original Message-----

From: Dan'I Danehy-Oakes [mailto:ddanehy at siebel.com]
Sent: Friday, January 10, 2003 10:42 AM
To: urth at urth.net
Subject: RE: (urth) The leatherskin
Way back on October 18, 1999 I argued that the leatherskin
has twelve legs and no one has bothered arguing with my
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James Wynn — 10 Jan 2003, 15:54 · follows James Wynn

William Ansley responded to Crush:
Oh happy day! Finally, someone is arguing with my conclusions!

If I am to buy your argument, I have to believe that Horn doesn't know the difference between flippers and legs. Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he has never seen any creature with fins or flippers on the Whorl, so he calls all such appendages "legs." But, until you can show me a quote where Horn or some other former Whorl denizen talks about fish legs, I will remain doubtful.

Crush takes another whack at it:

Hmmm, I wouldn't want you to remain in doubt, so I'll make a feeble attempt to calm your disquiet.

My first inclination was to say, "William, William, you're troubling yourself over nothing. Flippers ****are**** legs for an aquatic mammal."

But then I remembered that Pausanias' "Description of Greece" is the inspiration for the leatherskin (I'm quite certain of this). Pausanias said the triton has "hands, fingers, and nails like the shells of the murex." So it is reasonable to assume the leatherskin would too.

So I must amend my description, The leatherskin does not have flippers. It has clawed "hands." Considering the leatherskin's apparent clumsiness in getting on the boat, I'm guessing it did not have "arms". The point is that it did NOT have true flippers.

-- Crush

James Wynn — 10 Jan 2003, 20:28 · follows James Wynn

One thing I've reconsidered:

The morphology of the "legs" seems to differ from the dugong's flippers in that the foremost claws (at least) are attached to jointed "arms" that permit them to be extended in front of the animal to some degree. This is clear because Horn's first view of the creature was its claws "scrabbling" for the gunwale with the head not in site. "Looking behind me, I saw great, coarse claws, each as thick as the handle of our ax, scrabbling for a hold on the port gunwale and rowling its wood like so many gouges. A moment later the head appeared and shot toward me." On Blues Waters, chapter 2 But it did not use its claws to impel itself at Horn because (I would guess) if its claws had such strength, it would not have had so much trouble getting on the boat. "The head shot toward" Horn because the leatherskin was impelled itself with its tail.

I don't think this undermines Pausanias as the original inspiration.

--Crush

-----Original Message-----

From: James Wynn [mailto:crushtv at HotPOP.com]

Sent: Friday, January 10, 2003 11:30 AM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: RE: (urth) The leatherskin

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Sent: Friday, January 10, 2003 10:42 AM

To: urth at urth.net

Subject: RE: (urth) The leatherskin

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