

Genetics & Spatial Dyslexia

The Urth list — 4 messages, 4 voices, 09 Feb 1998

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Tony Ellis — 09 Feb 1998, 13:54

09/02/98

14:45

Genetics & Spatial Dyslexia

Re South America

I find such a dramatically changed S. America hard to reconcile with some of the other details we're given, which suggest a generally untraumatised continent. In particular there is the Stone Town, which has apparently survived from our own early history. I do seem to recall a passage to the effect that Apu-punchau's power may have kept his house intact, however.

David Lebling:

Also, someone asked about the name Legion. It's biblical, isn't it?
From the story of Jesus casting the demons from a man into a herd of swine.

Yup, Mark Ch.5 V.9: "Call me Legion, for we are many." One of the Bible's more disturbing passages.

Raster wrote:

David_Lebling at avid.com goes for the Gould:

On the question of whether evolution stops when civilization is achieved; I doubt it. If you buy into "punctuated equilibrium," you will see that species go through long periods with nothing much happening, then a rapid burst of evolution, and so on.

...

Punctuated Equilibrium, as I understand it, requires that a small subset of a larger population be reproductively isolated...

Precisely. Our sprawling Urthian society effectively precludes Punctuated Equilibrium. You may or may not be born with, say, superior athletic ability as a result of a "rapid burst of evolution", but that genetic contribution will always be lost in the ocean of more mediocre genes (such as my own) a few generations down the line. In the isolated communities Raster describes, however, that ocean is a mere pool, and with no one caring for the slow and the weak the genetically advantaged are very big fish in it. It's all a question of lebensraum - Mien Gott, I mean living space, living space.

Re The Rats in the Walls:

I have always taken "crude writing" to be a metaphor for rat-shit. It's very much the kind of punning, yet thought-provoking imagery that appeals to both Wolfe and Severian.

Re Severian's spacial dyslexia

Severian may well be spacially dyslexic. Take another look at the Typhon sequence. Severian, looking out the left eye of

west-facing Mount Typhon, sees a battle ... to the northeast?

Severian sees a lot things he couldn't possibly see from that vantage point. "'No mountain is so high... a man could never see as far as I do now.'" Severian is looking out of mighty Typhon's eye, and can see whatever Typhon wants him to see.

Another supporting detail: how many times is Severian given precise directions to reach some place, but gets lost anyhow?

Severian explains this phenomenon quite simply, saying of his perfect memory when he gets lost on the ship "...it did me no more good than when I had tried to follow the directions of that lochage of the peltasts whom I met upon the bridge of Gyoll. No doubt Idas had assumed I knew more of the ship than I did, and that I would not count doors and look for turnings with exactness." (TUOTNS IV)

And don't forget the time Severian brilliantly deduces the location of Terminus Est from a very partial exploration of the Hypogeum Apotropaic. That doesn't sound like a man with spacial dyslexia to me.

Christopher R. Culver:

There has been recent talk of the part of the BotNS concerning polychrome, though many have wondered where it is. I have found in in _Shadow_, the chapter called "Baldanders" or the one right after it, paragraph 14.

At last! Thank you, Christopher. (Trust me to be out by twenty-odd chapters and three volumes...)

Tim Powers: an imaginative and highly enjoyable fantasist. Like Wolfe he's extremely generous with his imagination: where other writers build a whole novel (or series of novels) around just one "clever" idea, Wolfe and Powers pull them out of your pocket like conjuror's scarves (now where have I heard that before?) in an endless, colourful stream. I recommend all the titles David recommends.

Mark Millman — 09 Feb 1998, 12:50 · follows Tony Ellis

I'd like to make a contribution to the evolutionary argu- ment, if I may.

tellis at futurenet.co.uk wrote:
Raster wrote:

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Ach, ja. The flip side of the coin is that the driving engine of evolution--the cause of the differential reproductive success that shifts the genetic makeup of a population--is the environment. Technology as practiced by humans tends to mitigate or eliminate environmental stresses, including but not limited to disease, famine, and predation. For example, the fur parkas of traditional circumpolar peoples maintain a micro-climate similar to that of east-central Africa next to their skins. (I'm told they're actually warmer in winter, with all that insulation, than they are in summer, when they wear less, and lighter, clothing.) Apes--chimps, at least --will apparently care for ill or injured members of their bands, but nobody's suggesting that evolution is very likely to stop for them (other than the stoppage that extinction would cause) because they have virtually no technology. Obviously, the more advanced a technological system is, the more likely it is to succeed in protecting people from their environments. The man-apes of the mines, assuming they weren't specifically designed for the purpose of guarding the works, were clearly a group whose technology wasn't up to protecting them from the environmental hazards--though those hazards do in this case seem to have been more severe, and harder to guard against, than most, as they very possibly involve heavy-duty radiation and all kinds of otherwise toxic substances. The level of technology at which Severian--and through him, we-- see them is fairly primitive, as indicated by the club that he brings out of the mine. Even if they entered the mines at a level of technology consistent with, say, well-armed rebels hiding from the government (could Severian have seen the descendants of his followers from Mount Typhon, just as Jonas saw the descendants of shipmates in the antechamber?), the stresses of life in the mines could have caused them to lose, piecemeal, their technology, possibly accelerating their physical evolution. So even a small group of individuals, given favorable conditions, might not undergo any noticeable change in the genetic makeup of the population (leaving aside such complications as genetic drift--basically random change in a very small gene pool due to the comparatively large contribution of each individual), while a much larger population, given sufficient environmental pressure, could change rapidly. Punctuated equilibrium suggests what it does in part because it assumes that environments don't change continuously; but when a population's environment does change, it's likely to change rapidly and substantially, even dramatically.

Sorry to be so long-winded my first time out!

Mark Millman
(If this were the Whorl, I'd ask you to call me Nacre,
but, of course, it's not.)

Jim Jordan — 09 Feb 1998, 15:15 · follows Mark Millman

Just a note:

Wolfe is a vocal Lamarckian, and so the impact of environment on genetics, and the inheritance of acquired characteristics, is very much part of his thinking, and must be taken into account in reading his future history books.

Nutria

Charles Dye — 10 Feb 1998, 09:11 · follows Jim Jordan

"Tony Ellis" <tellis at futurenet.co.uk> counters my guesswork:

Re Severian's spacial dyslexia

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Sure. Even so, it irks me.

Another supporting detail: how many times is Severian given precise directions to reach some place, but gets lost anyhow?

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As an even simpler explanation, it should be pointed out that Idas has an interest in misleading Severian. But the same thing happens on other occasions, too. Who is misleading him in the twisted alleys of Thrax? Not his memory, surely? Proves nothing, but I find the pattern interesting.

And don't forget the time Severian brilliantly deduces the location of Terminus Est from a very partial exploration of the Hypogeum Apotropaic. That doesn't sound like a man with spacial dyslexia to me.

The Hypogeum Apotropaic is **symmetrical**, like the villa Triste-le-Roy. Sounds to me like an easy environment for a dyslexic detective, although I'll admit that I know little about the subject.

Another odd piece that seems to fit the same pattern: Does Severian ever tell us which leg, left or right, is injured at Orithiya? It seems to me that he falls into a "good leg, bad leg" orientation, almost as if that's easier for him. And which cheek does Agia lay open?

(For the record: Caesar Claudius, bum left leg. King Jesus, dislocated left leg I **think**, might be mistaken. Patera Silk, broken right ankle. Severian? I think left, but my reasoning is extremely indirect.)

raster at highfiber.com (trying to say "dyslexic detective" five times fast)