

TIDDAOSAOS

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 11 Feb 2003

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Fernando Q. Gouvea — 11 Feb 2003, 13:29

I've gotten myself into doing a short "book seminar" on "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories" at my college. It's six one-hour sessions, and students get credit just for coming, so it'll be crucial to make it interesting. I expect a lot of "I don't get it" comments, so I want to be ready with interesting things to say about the stories. Any pointers anyone might have to comments on the stories would be welcome. (I already know to search the Urth archives, of course.)

In the first session, we'll probably be looking at the first three stories, "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories", "Alien Stones", and "La Befana". Luckily, these are not as difficult as some of the stories that come later in the book.

On re-reading "Alien Stones", I did find myself wondering about one thing: if the aliens are some form of artificial intelligence, why do they have star charts that the captain can inspect? Wouldn't any such charts simply be kept as software? Is this just a slip of Wolfe's imagination (Homer nods again?) or is there something I'm missing?

Fernando

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Discovering the Church is apt to be a slow procedure but it can take place
if you have a free mind and no vested interest in disbelief.
-- Flannery O'Connor

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Michael Straight — 11 Feb 2003, 16:24 · follows Fernando Q. Gouvea

On Tue, 11 Feb 2003, Fernando Q. Gouvea wrote:

In the first session, we'll probably be looking at the first three stories, "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories", "Alien Stones", and "La Befana". Luckily, these are not as difficult as some of the stories that come later in the book.

I may have mentioned this in the archives, but I only got the meaning of the quote from scripture at the end of "Alien Stones" when I re-read the story following the Clinton scandals.

The woman asks "Where is my husband?" The alien replies, "What is meant by 'is'? By 'husband'?" I didn't properly attend to these statements the first time, but the "What do you mean by 'is'?" made me laugh the second time.

So I remembered it when at the end Daw ponders the quote, "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection." Which explicates the alien's problem: Where is your husband if he's dead? If he's dead, is he still your husband? (And it's probably also Daw starting to wonder if/when it's OK to start putting the moves on her.)

Also, one of my favorite lines in the story: "His religious beliefs permitted any degree of self-condemnation, though they caviled at the application of the same terms to any soul except his own," strikes me, now that I type it, as the sort of thing Chesterton would have said to criticize "Calvinists" (I use the quotes because Chesterton was prone to unfairly tarring Calvinists (or his ideosyncratic conception of them) with a pretty wide brush).

I still don't quite understand who Wad is. A computer simulation designed to elicit responses from Daw which are taped to be used later in the training of a real cadet? But there seems to be some closer connection. Is Wad somehow a digitized version of Daw when he was young? That seems beyond the technology in the story. And if the humans have AI that good, you'd think the idea of a ship run by computerized beings would have been less foreign.

The best explanation I can think of for the starcharts (and it's not very good) is that the Alien's "simulation" of the woman's husband might mean they are in the habit of incarnating themselves in some sort of bodies which would use the charts. You have a similar problem with the existence of hatches and passageways in the ship.

-- Rostrum

Brett M. Grace — 11 Feb 2003, 18:05 · follows Michael Straight

Right, the mystery ship's construction is a bit incongruent with the presumed needs of its crew, for several similar reasons (another example is Daw's pointing out the use of guide wires rather than bunks for sleeping purposes, which rely on a primate sleeping reflex to keep sleepers in place--what's the point?) Were there any details which suggest that the ship really was designed to support AIs? I can't recall at the moment. If not, I infer that Daw's conclusion about the ship is true, that it was originally built by, or for, humans... or human-like beings. Perhaps the cube is a kind of ghost ship, whose original inhabitants have vanished, to be replaced by the opportunistic visitors.

I add "or human-like" above because the AIs treat this as a first contact. But perhaps they merely mean a first contact with Daw's civilization, as opposed to the other human civilizations that exist in this universe. A corollary hypothesis would be that the AIs simply eliminated their creators and masters, the original crew. (Maybe some nice contrasts with the use of AI on Daw's ship here?)

I suppose the ship could also be an elaborate rat maze to conduct tests on the primates who find it, in which case, these difficulties can be waved away. I don't really care for that theory, however.

Personally I found the story to be a bit unsatisfying for some reason I can't quite put my finger on. Loved "Tracking Song" although I understood it less, or maybe not at all!

BMG

Michael Straight wrote:

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-- Rostrum