

Seven American Nights

The Urth list — 6 messages, 5 voices, 09 Apr 2003

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3916>

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Christopher Culver — 09 Apr 2003, 02:14

I recently read "Seven American Nights" and think it is one of Wolfe's finest - and most chilling - works. I've long been unhappy that Wolfe has shown little interest in minority characters (and his black orderly in THERE ARE DOORS, quite the stereotype, makes me cringe), but I feel Wolfe's use of an Iranian protagonist was sincere and accurate. Who knows, though, how different Nadan would be had Wolfe been writing two years later after the Islamic Revolution when American bias against Iran really took off. I also find ironic Wolfe's clever reversal of an inhabitant of a developing country coming to America for sex tourism and drug tourism instead of vice versa, as Wolfe could have observed in the sixties and seventies when hippies were making escapes to Afghanistan and Goa.

Still, I've got several questions about the novella:

1) What caused the "genetic damage" in America? At one point Nadan makes a reference to artificial hormones used to grow cattle more quickly, so I at first assumed that it was caused by food which treatment unbeknownst to the population slowly caused damage, like mad cow disease today. But later on Ardis says the course of some rivers has changed, which could be consistent with a thermonuclear attack. Also, the Arab world is clearly superior in this novel, perhaps because Europe has been wiped out in a Cold War shootout, though apparently Rome is still around.

2) So, Ardis is the creature Nadan shot, right? But I don't understand why she wants to take him to the interior. It can't be she is one of the mutants from the interior, since her normal parents live in Washington... unless she is pretending to be their daughter, or they too are mutants. Why would Ardis want to take him into the interior?

3) The police are clearly conspiring against Nadan, so could the entire population be evil mutants like Ardis? But Nadan doesn't say there was anything abnormal about the three prostitutes who came to his hotel room.

4) What is the secret under Mt. Rushmore? Could it be the command center of the current government, as South Dakota is remote and barren enough to escape a nuclear strike?

5) Whence the two plays mentioned in the novella? "Mary Rose" was clearly originally "Rosemary" in tribute to Wolfe's wife, but is it or the "Small Planet" play obviously based on any real work of literature?

I find SAN's very prototypical of The Book of the New Sun and Wolfe's other works of the 1980's. The tone of narration seems similar to that of Severian, and the protagonist's shooting of a person he later sleeps with is like Severian the Autarch's attack against Gunnie in the dark. The possibility that the entire plot comes from the ravings of a (in this case drug-inspired) lunatic is like THERE ARE DOORS.

Christopher Culver <christopher_culver at yahoo.com>

Andy Robertson — 09 Apr 2003, 18:59 · follows Christopher Culver

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

From: "Christopher Culver" <christopher_culver at yahoo.com>
To: <urth at urth.net>
Sent: Wednesday, April 09, 2003 3:14 AM
Subject: (urth) Seven American Nights
I recently read "Seven American Nights" and think it is one of Wolfe's finest - and most chilling - works. I've long been unhappy that Wolfe has shown little interest in minority characters (and his black orderly in THERE ARE DOORS, quite the stereotype, makes me cringe),

Odd. Wolfe is quite honest about the importance of race in human behaviour. I mentioned that passage to an e-friend who had been in a mental institution staffed by blacks, and he told me this was entirely typical behaviour for the black orderlies. The violence was in fact far worse than this, and it was specifically, aggressively, racial in nature

For another literary treatment of this type of racial bullying read ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST

hartshorn

William Ansley — 09 Apr 2003, 19:19 · follows Andy Robertson

Both are real plays: "Mary Rose" by J. M. Barrie (1920) and "Visit to a Small Planet" by Gore Vidal (1957). I had to read "Planet" in High School, so I knew it was a real play and automatically assumed the other one was, too. But I think you have put your finger on the reason Wolfe was familiar with "Mary Rose" and decided to use it in SAN (aka 7AN).

William Ansley

At 04:14 AM 4/9/2003 +0200, you wrote:

5) Whence the two plays mentioned in the novella? "Mary Rose" was clearly originally "Rosemary" in tribute to Wolfe's wife, but is it or the "Small Planet" play obviously based on any real work of literature?

William Ansley — 10 Apr 2003, 16:36 · follows William Ansley

[I am posting this for Dan'I. -William Ansley]

Still unable to post to the list. Grrrr.

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That may well be part of it, but he might have known about it for other reasons -- we know he's a fan of at least one other work of J.M. Barrie's ("Peter Pan"), after all.

--Dan'I

Alex David Groce — 11 Apr 2003, 06:30 · follows William Ansley

Both are real plays: "Mary Rose" by J. M. Barrie (1920) and "Visit to a Small Planet" by Gore Vidal (1957). I had to read "Planet" in High School, so I knew it was a real play and automatically assumed the other one was, too. But I think you have put your finger on the reason Wolfe was familiar with "Mary Rose" and decided to use it in SAN (aka 7AN).

If I recall, Vidal's "Visit to a Small Planet" isn't quite the play that's in the story. I think "Mary Rose" on the other hand, doesn't seem changed. Can anyone confirm my memory that the Vidal play is changed?

"And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:32

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StoneOx17 — 11 Apr 2003, 16:36 · follows Alex David Groce

I just got around to catching up on the Urth list, and I saw the questions about Seven American Nights. Nobody's answered many of them yet, so here are my answers.

1) What caused the "genetic damage" in America? At one point Nadan makes a reference to artificial hormones used to grow cattle more quickly, so I at first assumed that it was caused by food which treatment unbeknownst to the population slowly caused damage, like mad cow disease today.

Gene Wolfe used to be an engineer working in the food industry. With this connection, the reference to the cattle hormones, and Nadan's dream of the never-staling bread (which Robert Borski likens to a corrupted version of the Eucharist in an interesting set of posts that appeared here a while ago), I am convinced that food additives are to blame.

(and quoting out of order)

I also find ironic Wolfe's clever reversal of an inhabitant of a developing country coming to America for sex tourism and drug tourism instead of vice versa, as Wolfe could have observed in the sixties and seventies when hippies were making escapes to Afghanistan and Goa.

...

Also, the Arab world is clearly superior in this novel, perhaps because Europe has been wiped out in a Cold War shootout, though apparently Rome is still around.

Nadan may be from Iran because of Wolfe's inspiration from Montesquieu's "Persian Letters," a book from I have read only the four "troglodyte" letters {because of their connection to "Peace"}. "Persian Letters" has a set-up similar to Seven American Nights, with a Persian tourist visiting and commenting on early 18th Century France.

2) So, Ardis is the creature Nadan shot, right? But I don't understand why she wants to take him to the interior.

My take is that Ardis and Kreton (her lover) have a "business" that involves taking rich tourists to the interior, robbing and killing them.

3) The police are clearly conspiring against Nadan, so could the entire population be evil mutants like Ardis? But Nadan doesn't say there was

anything abnormal about the three prostitutes who came to his hotel room.

Borski's theory, which I subscribe to, is that it wasn't the police who searched Nadan's hotel room, but one of the actors (I forget his name, but the one that didn't show up that night) conspiring with Ardis and Kreton.

4) What is the secret under Mt. Rushmore?

Is there one? I've been assuming that was just a rumor, but I can't really say.

Borski's posts are definitely worth looking up. I'm not sure I agree with everything he says, but I'm convinced he has identified the missing night.

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0205/871.txt.shtml>

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0205/889.txt.shtml>

<http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0205/922.txt.shtml>

Stone Ox