

BotNS Review

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 07 Mar 1998

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CRCulver — 07 Mar 1998, 23:31

Fellow Urthers,

I'm writing a review of the Book of the New Sun and Urth of the New Sun for Porchnus, the e-zine of the America Online Religion and Beliefs forum. The review will center on religious themes in the BotNS. I'd appreciate any and all suggestions from those of this list who are certainly more knowledgeable than I concerning Wolfe's writings.

Thanks,

Christopher R. Culver <crculver at aol.com>
<http://members.aol.com/crculver/index.html>

Peter Stephenson — 09 Mar 1998, 09:13 · follows CRCulver

CRCulver at aol.com wrote:

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There are some apparent references to Severian as Christ, which should probably be seen in the context of references to Severian as lots of other (in the broadest sense of the words) mythological heroes: King Arthur, Faust, Theseus, Romulus ...

I just spotted one possible one reading Shadow the other day: in the chapter Terminus Est, Severian, having left the citadel, comes to a bridge, where he is brought before the lochage (a word of classical origin, according to the Lexicon) with the words `This is the man'. This sounds like a reference to Christ before Pilate. He doesn't get asked `what is truth'. He also describes himself in this sequence from the guild's full title as a `seeker for truth and penitence', which may be related. The whole idea of Severian as both hero and torturer has more vaguely religious overtones.

The part where he goes through Thrax holding the Claw aloft recalls `I am the light of the world', but I may be thinking more of the Holman Hunt painting than the biblical quotation. Obviously, the Conciliator has heavy Christ-like associations, which I can't really do justice to.

A clearer reference is the episode when he is taken by Typhon up Mt. Typhon and shown things he shouldn't be able to see. This must be a reference to Christ in the wilderness being tempted by the Devil, where he is shown all the countries in the world and offered them as a reward.

I'm sure there must be other such. I hope someone can wax lyrical on the relationship of the Pancreator, the Increate, the Conciliator, etc. etc., which I've never quite got straight.

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Jim Jordan — 12 Mar 1998, 00:30 · follows Peter Stephenson

At 11:31 PM 3/7/98 -0500, you wrote:

[Posted from URTH, a mailing list about Gene Wolfe's New Sun and other works]

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Thanks,

Christopher R. Culver <crculver at aol.com>

What I should warn you against is trying to see Severian's story as a gospel allegory. Now, Silk's story IS pretty much a retelling of the gospel narrative, but I'm not at all sure Severian's is. From Wolfe's standpoint, Severian is a "Christ figure" in the sense that all Christians are. That is, his life is an application of what Jesus Christ accomplished. Jesus saved the world from sin and damnation; all Severian does is provide new warmth. Jesus said His followers should show compassion to all men by giving out cups of cold water to those in need. That's what Severian does, in essence.

Now, to be sure, Severian is a very talented man. We are not all Bachs, not all Rembrandts, not all Severians. But those who have great talent are called to do great things. Remember, though, that part of what Wolfe was trying to do is to fill out that part of Lewis's *Great Divorce* in which he sees a small crack in the ground of heaven that is the universe, and also hell. So, we are constantly reminded that Urth is just a little world in a huge cosmos, and that the Commonwealth is just a little kingdom on the Urth (about the size of Delaware, or smaller). Severian does not save Briah, but only Urth.

I'm not trying in the least to diminish the religious overtones of the Severian Quintet, but only trying to put them in context. As a human being fulfilling a human destiny under God, Severian is not only Christ-like, but also like Apollo and like other human figures (and figures of human history and imagination). He is acting as a soldier in a much larger conflict between demons and angels (advocates of entropy, death, and advocates of transfiguration, new life).

Jesus saves souls; Christians are supposed to save lives. With that in mind, you can see allegorical similarities between the Severian narrative and the gospels, but don't let them run roughshod over everything else.

Some thoughts:

1. The idea that a tiny country has the key to saving the Urth may relate to the call of the Jews to bring forth the Messiah to save the world.
2. Compare Nessus to Jerusalem, at least in having named gates.
3. The spaceport towers are also like a Cathedral, with a perverted monastery (torturers), convent (witches), and sanctuary (sacrifices; beast tower), and a cemetery associated with it.
4. Note the sacramental aspects. Numerous kinds of baptism early on, numerous kinds of eucharists as we go (many are perverse distortions).
5. Remember that you are in Byzantium, not in Judaism, in Medieval Western Europe, or in a Protestant or Enlightenment or Pagan culture.
6. You asked how to interest people in these books. Well, the Severian narratives are Wolfe's

best but hardest stuff. You really need to have a SF background to "get" a lot of it, and most people don't. One thing to do, however, is find some of the really wonderful and stunning passages and quote them, such as the one about symbols making people instead of the other way around. (Duggan has that quotation at his website.)

Just a few thought. Good luck. You're going to need it.

AND, we EXPECT you to post it here also!!

Nutria