

Why so much synchronicity?

The Urth list — 12 messages, 9 voices, 19 Aug 2006

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/4692>

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junk06 at amalar.com — 19 Aug 2006, 21:16

I'm rereading (started with BOTNS this time, then back to Shadow).

I've read many theories on Severian's genealogy. Assuming all (or even most) of those theories are true, why does Severian end up meeting practically every single relative he has? He almost can't walk down a street without running into one.

It's not just relatives. Even as the narrator keeps mentioning how incomprehensibly populated Nessus is, he keeps running into people he knows. He even runs into people he knows out in the wilderness sometimes. Synchronicity abounds.

Meets man in library, meets same man years later racing down a street. Meets man digging a grave, meets same man years later in a boat. Has childhood friend, meets him again years later in the middle of a vast ocean. Meets man in library, meets him years later in another library across the country. etc etc etc for probably a dozen more examples

Why? It smells of ham handedness, as someone mentioned recently. Anyone have theories as to why so many coincidences fill the series?

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes — 19 Aug 2006, 21:39 · in reply to junk06 at amalar.com

On 8/19/06, junk06 at amalar.com <junk06 at amalar.com> wrote:
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I have two.

1. I'm pretty sure Wolfe is an admirer of Dickens. Dickens's plots are utterly coincidence-driven. (E.g., the fellow who catches Oliver, but not the Dodger, turns out to be his grandfather...) This doesn't bother his fans.

2. These are all signs of Divine Providence (or the guidance of the Hier*s, aqastors, etc.) to make sure that Severian fulfills that destiny (of which he already had some presentiment)

Dan'l Danehy-Oakes, writer, trainer, bon vivant

<http://www.livejournal.com/users/sturgeonslawyer>

"Shovels are essential to the fantasy genre.

However, they are primarily used by the authors rather than the characters." -- Stephen R. Donaldson

Jesper Svedberg — 19 Aug 2006, 21:56 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

2006/8/19, Dan'l Danehy-Oakes <danldo at gmail.com>:

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I would also suggest that it serves to make the narrative seem dream-like.

// Jesper

don doggett — 20 Aug 2006, 05:05 · in reply to Jesper Svedberg

An even simpler explanation is that the narrative is written in the first person - It is essentially a fictional memoir. In "real life" Sev surely meets plenty of shmoe's not worth mentioning. That's why he doesn't mention them. It's selective recording, and because Severian is being selective, it is probable that he (the character, not Wolfe, though Wolfe also of course) is trying to communicate something indirectly. What that is is up for what is apparently eternal debate. :)

Don

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don doggett — 20 Aug 2006, 05:15 · in reply to don doggett

It's worth mentioning that this sort of synchronicity doesn't happen nearly as much in the Long Sun books, which are third person, twice as long, and more - what's the word?- pictorial?

Then when we return to a first person style with Short Sun, everything becomes claustrophobic and intimate again. imo, fwiw, lol, etc.

Don

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Adam Thornton — 20 Aug 2006, 05:35 · in reply to junk06 at amalar.com

On Aug 19, 2006, at 2:16 PM, junk06 at amalar.com wrote:
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Perhaps Severian has been back and forth through time and reincarnated so many different ways that, actually, Every Single Person On Urth is one Severian or another.

We are all Severian!

Adam

Bob Miller — 20 Aug 2006, 09:23 · in reply to don doggett

Well, we do know that this type of synchronicity does happen irl as well. The most obvious example I remember is Winston Churchill's memoir of how he got into Sandhurst. When he was taking the entry tests, 19th century of course, the applicant had to fill in a map of One of the "countries" (colonies?) of the British Empire--random and almost always different each year. The future Sir Winston wrote the names of all applicants on little pieces of paper and drew one at random from a hat. Divine Providence? Or Fortuna's action? I know what my opinion is. And this is the kind of thing Wolfe would know and use.

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// Jesper

Bob Miller — 20 Aug 2006, 09:29 · in reply to Dan'l Danehy-Oakes

My own is that life is also full of these "coincidences", the result of a possibly ham-handed Divine Providence. i.e., life and history are full of incidents of such incredibly low probability that "no author would dare" use them.

On 8/19/06, junk06 at amalar.com <junk06 at amalar.com> wrote:
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Tony Ellis — 20 Aug 2006, 15:16 · follows Bob Miller

Junk06 wrote:
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And Bob Miller:

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Absolutely. Wolfe uses synchronicity because it's realistic.

As Dan'l says, Wolfe is a Dickens fan and Dickens put a lot of coincidence in his novels - but **why** did Dickens do that? Because that was how he saw the real world. A crazy place where unlikely things happened all the time. I suspect that Wolfe, who ended up married to the little girl who once lived next door, has a similar world-view.

In any event, while the modern convention in novel-writing is to shun coincidence like the plague, it really is just that: a convention. And if there's one thing Wolfe enjoys in his writing, it's flaunting those.

Tristan Davenport — 20 Aug 2006, 17:50 · in reply to Tony Ellis

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It may be that Wolfe is following a genre convention rather than flaunting a mainstream one. One of the pearls of wisdom I obtained from the Clarion writer's workshop was a rule that coincidence can propel a plot, but not resolve one. Having read about a quarter of Wolfe's oeuvre, I'd say his writing is pretty consistent with this rule. (e.g. Sev can stumble upon Vodalus in the cemetery, but when he eats the previous autarch's brains, he's gotta want it.)

Then again, I've only read about a quarter, or less, of Wolfe's work. There's plenty of room still for him to flaunt that convention as well.

Tristan Davenport
tristan_davenport at hotmail.com

junk06 at amalar.com — 20 Aug 2006, 20:25 · follows Tristan Davenport

From: "Dan'l Danehy-Oakes" <danldo at gmail.com>

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From: "Jesper Svedberg" <jsvedberg at gmail.com>

I would also suggest that it serves to make the narrative seem dream-like.

I would agree it's probably a literary device, and that it definitely gives the mood that something very strange is going on. However, I have a theory along the lines of Divine Providence.

I like to think the coincidences are a side effect of the time manipulation on Severian's behalf that is contrary to the natural flow of time. This produces some sort of disturbance in time, causing people to get caught into the disturbance, like swirling around in the eddies of a river.

Even the hierodules often seem surprised to see him. It's like they are walking merrily through time and and now and then..."Look, it's that guy again!"

Jeff Wilson — 21 Aug 2006, 04:20 · in reply to junk06 at amalar.com

junk06 at amalar.com wrote:

It's not just relatives. Even as the narrator keeps mentioning how incomprehensibly populated Nessus is, he keeps running into people he knows. He even runs into people he knows out in the wilderness sometimes. Synchronicity abounds.

My impression is that Nessus is underpopulated, with five standing buildings per inhabitant.

Meets man in library, meets same man years later racing down a street.
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etc etc etc for probably a dozen more examples

The Eata coincidence I'll give you, but the others you likst are hardly that. My impression of the time passing is also much shorter for the rest; Thecla's imprisonment might be a year long, and Severian's exile seems barely to last the summer. It makes sense to me for Racho to be stationed near the citadel, for Hildegrin to continue his resurrection business in the corpse-rich area of Nessus, and to meet a library janitor elsewhere in the same library.