

Urth syllabus

The Urth list — 8 messages, 5 voices, 21 Apr 1998

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m.driussi — 21 Apr 1998, 19:12

Reply: Item #3038987 from URTH at LISTS.BEST.COM@INET00#

Dan,

Re: Funes from FICCIONES, right--that's another Borges/BOTNS touchstone (re: Severian's memory). And folks often remember "Circular Ruins" (if I'm getting that title right) with regard to "The Tale of the Student and His Son" in particular; then there's the "Library of Babel" as the Library of Nessus, and Master Ultan as Borges himself. (FICCIONES has some kabbalah in it, too, if I remember right.)

Borges looms big ("Borges on the scale of Tolkien" does seem quite apt). Charles Dickens looms big. Jack Vance's DYING EARTH (and all antecedents) looms big. Robert Graves looms big.

David Langford at long last has convinced me that the apparatus of the Matachin Tower is the same as that within Kafka's "The Penal Colony." But is Sidero also Calvino's THE NON-EXISTANT KNIGHT, or is that finally a stretch too far? A tangent with no payoff? A hunt that brings nothing to the table?

If we were to arrange a syllabus for a thirteen week introductory course (assuming participants have already read TBOTNS and URTH one time through already), and that participants could read one or two books a week, what would the two-dozen or so books be, and in what order?

=mantis=

Dan Parmenter — 22 Apr 1998, 12:44 · follows m.driussi

From: m.driussi at genie.geis.com

Borges looms big ("Borges on the scale of Tolkien" does seem quite apt). Charles Dickens looms big. Jack Vance's DYING EARTH (and all antecedents) looms big. Robert Graves looms big.

Maybe I tried to read DYING EARTH at the wrong time in my life, but it never totally grabbed me, though I can easily see its impact on Wolfe. Has Wolfe ever mentioned Brian Aldiss' HOTHOUSE (aka THE LONG AFTERNOON OF EARTH) or STARSHIP (aka NONSTOP if I'm not mistaken)? The latter especially seems to resonate in the LONG SUN books, it being one of the great "generation ship" stories and featuring a "priest" in a prominent role. HOTHOUSE lacks any specific comparisons other than a future with a dying sun, but there's something of the same melancholy.

Wolfe actually made less obvious use of the eidetic memory thing than Borges did in "Funes". Borges seemed especially interested in the idea that his person with a perfect memory had absolutely no ability to make abstractions (he assigns names to individual numbers, etc.) though Wolfe did echo the notion of how the memory of a memory can be different from the memory itself, which also seems to reosnate a bit with C.S. Lewis who talks at some length

about how he learned to experience joy in the abstract by remembering how he had felt recalling a happy memory.

Which brings up C.S. Lewis as a possible syllabus item. Wolfe is apparently a fan and has even suggested that the posthumous DARK TOWER is a fraud, but one wonders how his engineer's mind must have cringed at certain things. Apparently he's also a fan of VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS (which I'm reading right now) though, so scientific accuracy may not be the most important thing for him. That's another of my "easy" descriptions of Wolfe - the theology of Lewis expressed as hard science fiction. And the only thing I ever read prior to Wolfe that gave me that feeling was James Blish's A CASE OF CONSCIENCE which I've come to think of as almost an essential counterpart to Lewis' OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET due to their differing takes on a "sinless" race.

D

Michael Straight — 22 Apr 1998, 13:53 · follows Dan Parmenter

On Wed, 22 Apr 1998, Dan Parmenter wrote:

Maybe I tried to read DYING EARTH at the wrong time in my life, but it never totally grabbed me, though I can easily see its impact on Wolfe.

As an aside, I've just recently given Vance a try. I adored THE DYING EARTH, liked but was lukewarm about EYES OF THE OVERWORLD, and was bored by the short-story collection THE AUGMENTED AGENT. Given those reactions, can anyone recommend some other Vance I might enjoy as much as THE DYING EARTH? (maybe just e-mail me rather than the whole list)

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Which brings up C.S. Lewis as a possible syllabus item.

Another theme from Lewis that appears in the LONG SUN books and the SOLDIER books and I think in the URTH books too, comes from Perelandra where Ransom asks where the miracle from God is to counter the infernal "miracle" of Satan's agent in Perelandra. Ransom realizes that he is, himself, the miracle, the help God has provided.

This sounds almost exactly like Silk's statement of his comission from the Outsider--"I am to expect no help because I *am* help." Latro receives a similar response when he remarks on the possible danger of the task given him by one of the goddesses: "If a child could have done it, I would not have chosen you."

Although not expressed quite so explicitly, I think the way in which Severian is tested bears some resemblance to this theme, but I'm not sure I can defend that assertion before I do some long-overdue re-reading.

-Rostrum

m.driussi — 22 Apr 1998, 21:46 · follows Michael Straight

Reply: Item #5968886 from URTH at LISTS.BEST.COM@INET02#

Dan,

I don't recollect Wolfe mentioning NON-STOP or THE LONG AFTERNOON OF EARTH. (I keep meaning to make a big ol' list of every book that Wolfe ever mentions in passing in his own essays or interviews. Someday, maybe.)

Re: Funes memory as different than Severian's. Right, I'm glad you mentioned it because that's what I was thinking myself. But I was thinking that the treatment was more like that of Proust rather than C.S. Lewis. (Speaking of whom--it is somewhat surprising how very similar A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS [1920] and OUT OF THE SILENT PLANET [1938] are. I'd like to read an essay addressing this in depth.)

I'm not sure how much Wolfe is a fan of A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS (I mean this literally rather than as a euphemism for "I know he hates it"). In a letter he once told me he thought it was a particularly grim Protestant Pilgrim's Progress. Now Harold Bloom loves A VOYAGE TO ARCTURUS to death, and this fact is somewhat disturbing to alga!

Rostrum,

Re: Vance, a reader who likes DE; lukewarm to EO; bored with AA.

Well you might favor Vance's serious fantasy over his comical fantasy and his science fiction. If this is the case, avoid all other Dying Earth novels and try the Lyonese trilogy. If you want to give the sf another try, the DEMON PRINCES series is a sort of James Bond as ninja in space; PLANET OF ADVENTURE series is Vance's Barsoom. If you want sf with a dash more fantasy, go with the award winners: THE LAST CASTLE and/or THE DRAGON MASTERS (but I don't recommend you read them back to back, nor do so with SON OF THE TREE/HOUSES OF ISZM; these pairings are thematically a tad too similar. The better doubles, IMHO, would have been SON OF THE TREE/THE DRAGON MASTERS and THE LAST CASTLE/ HOUSES OF ISZM). And EMPHYRIO is another surprisingly-like-TBOTNS book.

(There is a ton of Vance fiction out there and just about everybody ranks 'em differently. I myself like the recent NIGHT LAMP and most recent PORTS OF CALL, fwiw.)

=mantis=

William H. Ansley — 23 Apr 1998, 00:38 · follows m.driussi

I would say that _The Jungle Books_ belong on this list, and perhaps other Kipling, although I am not familiar enough with Kipling's other works to make any specific suggestions.

Lewis Carroll's _Alice_ books are a possibility, although I think they may have more influence on some of Wolfe's other writing than TBotNS. But there does seem to be a definite resemblance between Father Inire and Lewis Carroll himself.

This is even more true of Frank L. Baum's _Oz_ books. "The Eyeflash Miracles" and, to a lesser extent, _Free Live Free_ make plain that Wolfe read and was fond of these books, but I am not sure how much influence they had on TNotNS.

On a semi-related note, I have been pleased to see that many of you Wolfe fans share my appreciation of other authors as well.

(I remember reading _Have Spacesuit, Will Travel_ long, long ago with great pleasure and I recall the scene in the "fake bedroom" quite well. Thanks for the reminder, mantis!)

But, one name I haven't seen mentioned in this list is Mervyn Peake. I enjoyed his

Gormenghast trilogy a tremendously. Although I don't recall that his writing was especially "lupine," I think there are some resemblances in atmosphere and scenery to Wolfe. Also, his short story, "Boy in Darkness" which is closely related to the _Gormenghast_ trilogy seems to use definite Christian symbolism although I have never understood what Peake means by it.

William Ansley

m.driussi — 23 Apr 1998, 14:09 · follows William H. Ansley

Reply: Item #2062352 from URTH at LISTS.BEST.COM@INTERNET#

William Ansley,

Re: Mervyn Peake, Gene Wolfe has mentioned Peake's trilogy, saying words to the effect that there was a bit of Steerpike to Severian . . . hmmm, I can't find that line, but here is one from an interview of Wolfe by Roert Frazier that ran in "Thrust No. 19" (1983):

"You didn't mention Peake's Gormenghast series, but I have read them too, and I suspect TBOTNS is more like them than it is like [C.S.] Lewis' work, or Tolkien's" (p. 8).

Re: Lewis Carroll, right, the consensus seems to be: As Borges is to Master Ultan, so is Lewis Carroll to Father Inire.

Re: Kipling, I would use stories from The Jungle Books in examining tales from the brown book--I have done so in the essay on the brown book in NYRSF (Feb. 1993).

=mantis=

Derek Bell — 25 Apr 1998, 17:07 · follows m.driussi

In message <199804221644.JAA02069 at lists1.best.com>, Dan Parmenter writes:

Wolfe actually made less obvious use of the eiditic memory thing than Borges did in "Funes". Borges seemed especially interested in the idea that his person with a perfect memory had absolutely no ability to make abstractions (he assigns names to individual numbers, etc.)

I think the subject of A.R. Lurias' _Mind of a Mnemonist_ had a simliar experience, though the example given was that of the how he experience courthouses. (He was a journalist covering cases and he had trouble thinking of a general courthouse though he easily memorised individual courthouse layouts.)

I'll suggest _Mind of a Mnemonist_ as a non-fiction book to add to the hypothetical syllabus. I wouldn't be surprised if someone nominates a book by Oliver Sacks!

Derek

William H. Ansley — 26 Apr 1998, 22:52 · follows Derek Bell

I have just finished rereading PEACE for the fifth or sixth time. I think it will always be my favorite Wolfe novel; perhaps only because it was the first of his I read. I suggest that PEACE be made part of the Urth syllabus. It is more accessible than TBotNS, because of its semi-autobiographical nature it provides something of an insight into Wolfe himself and it seems to prefigure so many of the ideas that occur in TBotNS (as well as many of Wolfe's other

works) even if only in embryonic form.

For example, the following two passages are (to me at least) very evocative of TBotNS.

"...that this planet of America, turning round upon itself, stands only at the outside, only at the periphery, only at the edges, of an infinite galaxy, dizzily circling. And the stars that seem to ride our winds cause them. Sometimes I think to see huge faces bending between those stars to look through my two windows, faces golden and tenuous, touched with pity and wonder..."

PEACE, p. 7, paragraph 2. Orb edition

"... men of stone stalking through the long grass like statues walking, like telamones on their way to assist Atlas, dead men become their own grave markers..."

PEACE, p. 156, paragraph 3. Orb edition

By the way, I just bought the Orb large format paperback edition of PEACE because I can't find my old mass-market paperback copy. I read my old copy many times, perhaps even more than I claim above. And I am certain that there are some changes in the text between what I recall from my old copy and the Orb edition. These are very minor changes that may well be typo corrections, if they are real. Does anyone one know if the Orb edition was edited?

William Ansley