

Wolfe's Puzzles

The Urth list — 12 messages, 8 voices, 10 Jul 2010

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/5658>

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Lee Berman — 10 Jul 2010, 05:51

A number of years ago my brother asked me for something new to read and I gave him BotNS. After he read it he told me he had "figured out the secret". I was a little intrigued (though not too hopeful) with what he'd come up with. He told me he had figured out that Dorcas was really Severian's grandmother.

Now I am no literary genius but, like some others, I thought that was pretty clear and not a puzzle. But since my brother is at least reasonably intelligent I must conclude that Dorcas'family status should be considered one of the puzzles of BotNS though perhaps a relatively easy one. I felt the same about the "puzzle" which suggests incest between Agia and Agilus though, again, I guess that wasn't obvious to everyone on first reading.

I think a somewhat harder one (pre-UotNS) is that Severian was the Conciliator. I did get that one...I think maybe on my second reading. But once I started searching online for answers I found there were many mysteries I was unable to solve that others had.

Notable among these is the Maid playing Holy Katharine identified as Severian's mother. I could never have gotten that on my own. There is nothing tangible in the text to "prove" this as fact but there is an appealing literary leap of faith to it which allows most of us (I think) to accept it as a reasonable working possibility.

I like the puzzles where there are competing theories. Wolfe openly invites us to solve the mystery of Hethor's mirrors. Borski reasonably argues that any mirrors big enough to summon a giant slug would be too big to carry around on a long journey, hence Hethor must be a shape-shifter. Andre-Driussi counter-argues for the more parsimonious and text-supported theory that the mirrors consisted of sail-scrapes from the ship, so even large ones could be conveniently folded up and carried.

Both Borski and Andre-Driussi are smarter and more knowledgeable about Wolfe and literature in general than me. Yet it took them some 20 years of pondering before they came up with those theories. I keep that in mind as I occasionally purvey my own feeble theories and mystery solutions.

Last year I participated in an online Wolfe book-of-the-month club; specifically each of the 12 Sun series books was read over the course of a year. I was very pleased that Mantis (Andre-Driussi) participated and I took as full advantage as I could to pick his brain during the course of it. A shame he (and Borski) don't participate here anymore (that I know of). I saw Son O' Witz there but no others from here that I recognized. Is Roy C. Lackey now our eldest statesman? Maybe Tony Ellis or Dan'!

Anyway, the group came to one puzzle that none of us could make heads nor tails of, including Mantis, (at least I inferred that from his silence). It regarded a series of numbers, arranged in a pattern which was found on the Seal of Pas.

5553 8783 4223 9700 34

2221 0401 1101 7276 56

SEALED FOR THE MONARCH

I am no cryptographer type but I gamely gave the puzzle a few days of intense thought and effort. I mostly tried combinations of adding the numbers together, since Silk makes the sign of addition over them (and various other things) I tried working in base 9 since that might be in use in Viron math. No luck. I could not come up with an answer.

The best I could come up with is that it might be a cool solution if the 9 groups of 4 numbers could be manipulated into letters to spell out GENE WOLFE (since he often puts wolf[e]s into his stories. But I couldn't find a way to do that. Perhaps someone else can or come up with some other good solution.

I guess another 9 letter solution could be Typhon-Set, the evil, bisexual Egyptian god of desert wind and drought, after whom the Greek multi-headed monster Typhon was patterned. His Persian cognate is the god/demon Pazuzu, which could be the source of the (nick)name "Pas".

(I reject the explanation of derivation from "Pan" and "pastoral" as a false, too easily given clue. How is Typhon like a frolicking pipe-playing goat god?)

Anyway, I also searched this Archive for solutions to the Seal of Pas but didn't find anything. Did I miss something? Is there a known solution out there? I truly hope Wolfe has enough respect for his readers to not have made this an unsolvable snipe hunt to make idiots like me play pointlessly with numbers and letters for hours upon hours.

With that assumption, my point (aside from random story telling) is that there are some easy puzzles in these stories but some really, really difficult ones also that take smart people many years to figure out (or are never figured out at all). But the mere presence of these complex puzzles and the occasional appearance of an interesting solution keeps me inspired.

(FWIW, I think my own best, unique contribution is probably not this Father Inire stuff, which I am still trying to refine, with help from y'all. I like best my ideas about time travel structures in BotN, which I've posted about at least a few times in the past.)

James Wynn — 10 Jul 2010, 06:09 · in reply to Lee Berman

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Ouen is the Scottish form of Eugene. I just did a search and found out someone pointed this out 12 years ago.

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Pan is the only god to die within historical time (see Plutarch's Lives), like Pas.

u+16b9

brunians at brunians.org — 10 Jul 2010, 07:04 · in reply to Lee Berman

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These are not random numbers.

I would be shocked if they did not solve to something.

What that is solution is, I have no idea.

Several of the numbers are qabalistically interesting: if I were to try solving this puzzle I might start there.

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Gerry Quinn — 10 Jul 2010, 08:24 · in reply to Lee Berman

From: "Lee Berman" <severiansola at hotmail.com>

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I can't honestly remember whether I figured that out, or picked it up from internet discussion.

Now I am no literary genius but, like some others, I thought that was pretty clear and not a puzzle. But since my brother is at least reasonably intelligent I must conclude that Dorcas'family status should be considered one of the puzzles of BotNS though perhaps a relatively easy one.

I felt the same about the "puzzle" which suggests incest between Agia and Agilus though, again, I guess that wasn't obvious to everyone on first reading.

Surely Severian caught them in flagrante in Agilus's death cell? That makes it about as much of a puzzle as whether Baldanders likes catamites.

I think a somewhat harder one (pre-UotNS) is that Severian was the Conciliator. I did get that one...I think maybe on my second reading. But once I started searching online for answers I found there were many mysteries I was unable to solve that others had.

This one came immediately to me, I think.

Notable among these is the Maid playing Holy Katharine identified as Severian's mother. I could never have gotten that on my own.

There is nothing tangible in the text to "prove" this as fact but there is an appealing literary leap of faith to it which allows most of us (I think) to accept it as a reasonable working possibility.

I have never seen any real reason to believe this.

I like the puzzles where there are competing theories. Wolfe openly invites us to solve the mystery of Hethor's mirrors. Borski reasonably argues that any mirrors big enough to summon a giant slug would be too big to carry around on a long journey, hence Hethor must be a shape-shifter. Andre-Driussi counter-argues for the more parsimonious and text-supported theory that the mirrors consisted of sail-scrap from the ship, so even large ones could be conveniently folded up and carried.

See also 'The Sister's Account' from 'Procreation', in which "a crumpled little mirror" is opened up until it is "as large and smooth as a pier glass". The narrator uses it to travel between universes. This story is copyright 1983-4, so approximately contemporaneous with _BotNS_.

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this an unsolvable snipe hunt to make idiots like me play pointlessly with numbers and letters for hours upon hours.

I take the view that it is essentially random. It is a fundamental point of algorithmic information theory that almost all numbers are. Why should this number, essentially a barcode for one not especially important storeroom, be special?

I don't see it as a 'trick' to make them random, because logically they should be random. Of course I cannot tell whether they are in fact random. [There is also an important theorem that strings - or numbers - above a certain length cannot be *proven* to be random!]

With that assumption, my point (aside from random story telling) is that there are some easy puzzles in these stories but some really, really difficult ones also that take smart people many years to figure out (or are never figured out at all). But the mere presence of these complex puzzles and the occasional appearance of an interesting solution keeps me inspired.

Agreed.

- Gerry Quinn

Thomas Bitterman — 10 Jul 2010, 12:52 · in reply to Lee Berman

On Sat, Jul 10, 2010 at 1:51 AM, Lee Berman <severiansola at hotmail.com> wrote:

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Some facts:

They are not SSCC-18 barcodes - the check digit is incorrect.

They are not credit card numbers - they fail the Luhn test.

The sum of the digits of all the 4 digit numbers and the sum of the digits of all the 2 digit numbers is the same: 9.

Odd observations:

All 4-digit numbers have two digits that are the same. That seems unlikely. None of the digits in the two-digit numbers are doubled in the same row. Each 4-digit number is larger than the one below it. Subtracting the bottom 4-digit number from its corresponding top yields another set of 4-digit numbers, all of which have doubled digits.

My guess is that the 4-digit groups are the "product" code, and the 2-digit groups are checksums. This is similar to how lots of different encoding schemes work and makes sense in this context. It only gives one-bit error detection, so there may be another layer of checking I've missed. Maybe something having to do with the doubled digits.

As far as the product code itself goes, that might take a little more work. Wolfe was an engineer and did some robotics work, so maybe Gray or Huffman coding is being used.

I am no cryptographer type but I gamely gave the puzzle a few days of

intense thought and effort. I mostly tried combinations of adding the numbers together, since Silk makes the sign of addition over them (and various other things) I tried working in base 9 since that might be in use in Viron math. No luck. I could not come up with an answer.

It shouldn't be base 9. There is a 9 in the code, and base n doesn't use a symbol for n.

David Stockhoff — 13 Jul 2010, 01:16 · in reply to James Wynn

Is there a link to "pastor"? Typhon-Pas does lead his flock off Urth.

James Wynn wrote:

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Pan is the only god to die within historical time (see Plutarch's Lives), like Pas.

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James Wynn — 14 Jul 2010, 15:44 · in reply to David Stockhoff

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Well, "Typhon *drives* his flock off of Urth" is more accurate I think. He also drives them off the Whorl.

It is Silk (indirectly) and Patera Quetzal (directly) who *leads* the flock off the Whorl.

u+169b

Jack Smith — 14 Jul 2010, 20:56 · in reply to James Wynn

Pan means "all", as in pandemic. Scylla says that her daddy was "to be the god of everything--that's what his name meant." (LotLS, ch. 11)

On Wed, Jul 14, 2010 at 11:44 AM, James Wynn <crushtv at gmail.com> wrote:

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Lee Berman — 15 Jul 2010, 00:27 · follows Jack Smith

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He drives them off the Whorl using heat and drought. This was a big part of my suggestion that the name Pas is derived from the Babylonian god/demon Pazuzu as he and his Egyptian cognate, Typhon-Set, were gods of hot, dry desert storms, drought, crop failure etc. Pazuzu had a bird head and the bird theme is quite prevalent in Long Sun.

But now that the connection between Inire and Pan/Pas has come to light I am forced to reconsider the truth of the Typhon/Pan connection more strongly.

David Stockhoff — 15 Jul 2010, 01:40 · in reply to James Wynn

Fair enough. Shepherds do both.

James Wynn wrote:

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Jeff Wilson — 27 Jul 2010, 14:04 · in reply to Gerry Quinn

This is another old post come unstuck in the works:

On 7/10/2010 3:24 AM, Gerry Quinn wrote:
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Oh, no, there are huge amounts of correspondence here - you see how often the same digit appears in series, or in the same group? There are many parallels between the upper and lower lines, considerable amounts of consecutive digits and those separated by a single digit.

Overall, English has an entropy of just a little more than one bit per character; totally random digits have $\ln 10 / \ln 2$ or about 3.2 bits per of entropy per character. This number stream (based on the difference between consecutive digits) has about 2 - almost certainly some kind of selection going on here.

Or at least, this is what I gather from having taken Intro to Information Theory; I'll see if I can ask my prof about it.

Jeff Wilson - jwilson at io.com
IEEE Student Chapter Blog at
< <http://ieeetamut.org> >

Gerry Quinn — 27 Jul 2010, 14:40 · in reply to Jeff Wilson

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You can't say "almost certainly" for such a short string without applying some kind of statistical test.

That aside, there is the strong likelihood that even if the digits were not selected randomly, they do not mean anything in particular. Perhaps Wolfe felt that it would add verisimilitude to have a low entropy string, certain components of which would have from a restricted set indicating type or origin of items stored. That doesn't mean he has thought about what exactly they represent in a given instance.

- Gerry Quinn