

Rats write?

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 11 May 1998

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William H. Ansley — 11 May 1998, 00:30

Quite a while ago in this list there was a discussion about the rats in Ultan's Library and whether they really could write. In looking back over the archives, it seems that more people took this as a metaphor for rat manure than took it literally. I want to join the literal camp and I have some "new" evidence to back my position up.

The quote in question is:

Some of the shelves were disordered, some straight; once or twice I saw evidence that rats had been nesting among the books, rearranging them to make snug two- and three-level homes for themselves and smearing dung on the covers to form the rude characters of their speech.

Shadow, ch. 6, p. 42, Orb ed.

Since Severian mentions rat dung directly, I don't see how the "rude characters" made of it can be a metaphor for it as well.

My new evidence? In _Sword_, (ch. 2, p. 17) we have this:

But the truth is that there is a wildness more vicious (as we would know better if we were not so habituated to it) in certain domestic animals, despite their understanding so much human speech and sometimes even speaking a few words...

Now, this is hardly definitive; perhaps he means talking birds which (unlike Oreb) don't know what they are saying, although those are not among what are generally understood to be domestic animals. Neither are rats, for that matter, although rats are as bound to (and, to some extent at least, shaped by) man as domestic animals are. And if domestic livestock has been, in some cases, genetically engineered to speak, it is not terribly unlikely that this genetic material might be transferred to rats via viruses or transposons.

A more serious objection is that it is a huge leap to go from speech to even rude symbols representing it. But rats are mighty adaptive!

There is also this passage from _Claw_, ch. 27, p. 383.

Occasionally, moths vastly larger than any I had seen before passed from tree to tree. Their figured wings were as long as a man's arms, and they spoke among themselves as men do, but in voices almost too high for hearing.

Now, I really don't know quite what to make of this. I tend to interpret it (metaphorically!) as meaning that the moths were communicating in moth speech just as men talk in human speech, but it certainly could be taken to mean that the moths were talking in human speech and that Severian could understand them. I prefer not to not to believe the latter version.

William Ansley