

Birds, rats and other matters

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 May 1998

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Dan Parmenter — 12 May 1998, 07:55

From: "William H. Ansley" <wansley at warwick.net>

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.

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.

Yes, I've been a "smart rats" man for a while now. How many of you read the book MRS. FRISBY AND THE RATS OF NIMH by Robert O'Brien as a youth? I did and it blew my mind. One of its central plot points is that the rats who've had their intelligence bumped up (second generation Algernon biotech, this time it "takes" and can be passed on) spend time in a reasonably good personal library in a mansion and learn enough to start building their own civilization. I have no idea if Wolfe knows the book, but the idea of intelligent rats taking up residence in a library seems like a close fit, unless they both refer to some other thing that I've totally overlooked!

And how about those two and three level homes?

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.

And while we're on the bird topic, how about this bit from CLAW, Ch. 18:

"The wheeling birds traced their hieroglyphics in the air, but they were not for me to read."

Severian is musing on these very hawks and how they cannot have learned to build nests based purely on instinct. There had to have been a time when the birds didn't have the instinct and there was a "first nest". This may also fall under Wolfe's defenses of Lamarck-style evolution. So in the context of birds gaining new skills, he then gives us a passage that may be metaphor (the random pattern are hieroglyphics in some vague sense) or may be description (the birds are communicating, possibly in a way more sophisticated than the birds of our time).

From: m.driussi at genie.geis.com

Re: Hethor as cannibal survivor. Interesting! Feeding sick pets--one continues to wonder: where does he keep these pets; how does he transport them; if both questions are not answered with "he

teleports them in via some obviously very small and portable magic mirrors"? Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner as well as possibly The Wandering Jew?

Gollum?

And now, a hypothetical sketch of Severian the Cruel.

Finding the Old Autarch, he kills him with OEdipal glee, fulfilling the Vodalarii vow. But then he turns against Vodalus, now that Severian is autarch.

And when does he become a sailor?

No drowning, no fairy godfather, no dog, no Thecla. No softness, no love, just a savagery approaching that of Jenghis Khan; created from his feelings of rejection from/abandonment by parents, compounded by the nature of his upbringing.

I suppose, but I think I prefer the idea that the first Severian was a near miss. The same events, but perhaps a bit hollower. I like to imagine that he left the guild, had his stay in Thrax and perhaps even freed Cyriacca and did one or two nice things, but never really renounced being a torturer. He became Autarch, failed to bring the new sun and so instead, named a new Autarch (or maybe Baldanders simply took over) and became a sailor (a nice alternative to being unmanned) for a while and was eventually buried near his childhood home.

So they show Sev2: here is your mother, here is your aunt, here is your grandmother, here is your sister; here is a dog; here is your father, here is your grandfather, here is your fairy godfather; here is a very bad girl that your grandmother warns you against, and here is the good girl next door.

He also made some friends (can it be any coincidence that Jonas begins with the first letter "J", just like Jughead, the "universal pal". I suppose Agia is Veronica and Dorcas is Betty then, with Reggie as Vodalus and Big Moose as Baldanders).

D